

*Alone: Chasers*

**Young Adult Fiction: novel and exegesis**

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## **Abstract**

*Chasers* (Phelan 2010), book one in the Alone trilogy, is my first novel written for Young Adults (YA). This was a new experience for me in my professional sense as a novelist, and standing alongside this exegesis, it sparked a journey into the world of the novel far beyond what I expected. In this exegesis I will try to touch on all the major findings that I discovered along the way, placing my thoughts alongside those of established practitioners, thinkers and academics. I will explore what it is that I have created and put forward the ways to understand it.

Within the scope of this exegesis is the documentation of the creative outcome and process of the artefact, and its affects and meanings to self: academically, professionally, and personally. Using auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner 2000) and Practice Lead Research (PLR) (Arnold 2012; Denzin & Lincoln 2011), I record and reflect on the journey from idea to publication and beyond, all the while examining what it is to be a commercially successful novelist with an academic eye for theory and meaning. Through this interplay between artefact and exegesis the road will be clear; every novel I have created has meant something to me, while *Chasers* means everything.

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## **Declaration by candidate**

This exegesis supports an artefact submitted to the Swinburne University of Technology in fulfilment of the requirements for the PhD in Creative Writing.

This work is presented, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original in its entirety, except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have never before submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree in this or any other institution.

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## **Table of contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Declaration by candidate</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Section 1: My journey through the methodology of auto-ethnography</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Section 2: The novelist, the artefact through Practice Led Research</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Section 3: The aesthetic and young adult fiction</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Section 4: Creativity and Commerce</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Section 5: What only the novel can say: notes on style, allegory, and symbolism.</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Conclusions: Via a Practice Led Journey</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Appendices 1 &amp; 2</b>	<b>104&amp;105</b>

## Preface

For my artefact I have written a novel, titled *Chasers* (2010), the first book in the *Alone* trilogy. This is the first novel I have written for a Young Adult (YA) audience and as you will see through my exegesis, the process and outcome of this PhD has been a journey of immense growth for me both as a professional writer and academic. This has already been published (2010, Lothian/Hachette) and re-published several times. I have submitted an early draft of the artefact that has not been affected by publisher's editorial practices.

As a practitioner of the craft, I have written as of this time: one non-fiction book, twelve novels, and have a further ten novels under contract with publishers. Yet no project, before or since, has meant more to me than this. Creatively, it has challenged me at every turn. The editing, publication, and promotion of the work, has been in turns enjoyable, frustrating, and tiresome. Academically, through the creation of the artefact and the companion exegesis that sits alongside it, it has been a selfish pleasure far beyond what I could have imagined from the set-out; how many authors get the chance – both the time and the excuse – to explain and explore in detail what it is, this new thing that they have created?

There are many firsts for me with this project. The foremost is the audience: this is a novel written for a teenaged readership, and I had constant considerations and limitations that came with that, as well as the thought that I had no control over my fiction's interpretation (Barthes, 1977). While I aimed to have this artefact a pleasurable and gripping stand-alone read, it is the first of a trilogy (the sequels fall outside the scope of this PhD).

It is through my writer's journal that I have been able to draw on data enabling me to reflect upon the discoveries made while researching, writing, re-writing, editing, publishing (and promoting) my artefact. My creative insights, practices, problems and delights are the core data for this exegesis. As a writer, I am not merely data, and neither is my artefact: it's my creative practices and methods that bridge the divide between the two components which amalgamate, inform, position, support, and complement each-other. My writer's journal provided the link between the exegesis and the artefact, as I recorded reflecting upon the writing, the reading, the thinking, and the processes involved in this project.

My exegesis explores these discoveries and places them, along with my artefact, as something much more than an insight into the creative process of a practitioner of the novel; they, together, show a clear contribution to knowledge that extends beyond the realm of the Creative Industries, they also highlight the significance of this very model of PhD by artefact and exegesis via taking the reader through my journey of Practice Lead Research (PLR). As a practitioner, this project has asked and answered many questions that from the outset I had not foreseen, yet like writing a novel and discovering a new created world on the page, so I have explored academic thought and arguments and positioned my new work in that discussion.

Producing this Artefact and Exegesis simultaneously has been an enlightening experience for me as a practitioner of the craft of novel writing, as well developing my scholarly credentials and application. This artefact, itself a commercially successful published novel (at the time of this writing we are on our 7th reprint in Australia, and the book is sold into over a hundred countries and translated into several languages), is so much stronger for this deep relationship that the creative has with the thetic. Indeed, without the thorough readings of the genre and literary theories that shaped me as a novelist and which I brought to bear in both the creation and the reflection and discussion herein, the artefact, as a commercially published book, would have been so much the poorer. For me it is clear that this project is more

than a new contribution to culture (as a novel and its background of creative insights could simply be), as the artefact itself would have been without this academic discourse; because of the two elements working together, that is the artefact and the exegesis that sits alongside it, it is a new contribution to knowledge in the field of YA literature.



## Introduction

*Chasers* (Phelan 2010), book one in the Alone trilogy, is my first novel written for Young Adults (YA). This was a new experience for me in my professional sense as a novelist, and standing alongside this exegesis, it sparked a journey into the world of the novel far beyond what I expected. In this exegesis I will try to touch on all the major findings that I discovered along the way, placing my thoughts alongside those of established practitioners, thinkers and academics. I will explore what it is that I have created and will put forward the ways to understand it.

Within the scope of this exegesis is the documentation of the creative outcome and process of the artefact, and its affects and meanings to self: academically, professionally, and personally. Using auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and Practice Lead Research (PLR) (Arnold, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I record and reflect on the journey from idea to publication and beyond, all the while examining what it is to be a commercially successful novelist with an academic eye for theory and meaning. Through this interplay between artefact and exegesis the road will be clear; every novel I have created has meant something to me, while *Chasers* means everything.

For the first time as a practitioner, this exegetical discourse enables me the time and space to go behind the curtain of my own work and see how it relates to other established practice and scholarly discussion - rather than only handing it over to the wider world and letting it go, as we do with novels. There is complete validity in that notion, as novelist and theorist Milan Kundera (2000: 96) attests “that is not only true of Proustian novel; they define the meaning of the very art of the novel.” The exegetical process also encourages me to consider in greater detail how a reader will experience my book. As Proust wrote, “Every reader, as he reads, is actually the

reader of himself. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book. The reader's recognition in himself of what the book says is the proof of the book's truth.”

From the outset I was aware that as a novelist I could have written *Chasers* with or without the academic scaffolding, exploration and accompaniment. Thankfully, selfishly, there is much more to this project than that, and this companion piece provides a new addition to knowledge, acting to open more creative and thetic doors for myself and the many who will follow me, whether practitioners or those in the academy. I knew that during the construction of the artefact I would make discoveries at every turn, and I know that my readers feel the same. While I had no real autobiographical intention with the story, I did aim for it to show “readers their own lives.” (Kundera, 2000: 94). I will talk later about reader feedback and critical reaction to *Chasers*.

To write a novel is to go to war. I war against cliché, (Amis, 2002) on a daily basis, always striving to push into new territory with my art. Indeed the novel, through its construction and publication and reception, is a war fought on many fronts, from the battles of blank page to getting publishing, I document here my writer’s journey.

That I gave *Chasers* a war-like setting was no accident: it suited the mode of this project perfectly, and the symbolism was multi-faceted and allegorical on several levels. Indeed, the age of the protagonist, Jesse, and the intended readers as a YA novel, was planned a symbolic representation of the wars that we all must go through during that formative age. From the outset I had worries that the subject matter may be too bleak for teens; perhaps I was constructing not a novel for teens but a novel for adults with a teenage protagonists. I am happy to say that, on the other side and post-publication, the novel and its two sequels have been well received by that audience and critics, evidenced by sales and reprints, and publications such as *The Australian*

saying “James Phelan knows his stuff, so the pace is nicely judged, and the twist at the end is a cracker” (May 22, 2010), and the *West Australian* saying it was “Its psychological, tense and the end comes out of the blue. Thank goodness - like all good modern teen fiction - it is the first in a trilogy.” (15 June 2010).

Here, within this exegetical framework, takes place a critical explanation and interpretation of my artefact. Hinging around the major themes of Globalism and Existentialism on the Aesthetic of the Young Adult (YA) novel, this exegesis includes a wide range of critical disciplines, all the while with relevant methodology applied and discussed. Also present is a textual criticism investigating the origins and creation of the artefact, including the narrative of myself as data (Muncey, 2010: 4); the study of the author and work as auto-ethnography; Practice Led Research (PLR); an examination of the text and its tradition and form as a novel; and the intended audience.

## Section 1: My journey through the methodology of auto-ethnography

My auto-ethnographic approach is that of a now well-established research method demonstrating that autobiographical experiences within the research can be analysed and interpreted so as to unpeel and unpack their cultural assumptions (Chang, 2008: 9). This notion of ‘unpack and unpeel’ became a study mantra of mine that extended into both *Chasers* and this exegesis – I was, at every turn, layering and checking and discovering and rediscovering as I explored this notion of looking deeper, of looking at ‘why’.

Autoethnography as a method of research involves “self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (Maréchal, 2010: 43) Using the methodology of auto-ethnography, this exegesis is as much informed and shaped by the artefact as it is by myself as author, and by my writing as practitioner. Through my reflective journal as a source of recording my authorial journey, I am able to see what it is that I have created in *Chasers*: a story born of creative necessity, an urgent task and a meaningful contribution to young adult literature and the broader cultural discussion that novels are in themselves.

This auto-ethnographic study recognises the impossibility of seeing ourselves as scholars as being either independent or unaligned; there’s very much the sense, constant and unshakable, that we come from a cultural discourse and we participate in that discourse. We undertake research in an area and/or pursue a certain line of investigation and research question because of our Western understandings. Disrupting the givens of such a discourse has been the object of much academic thinking since the middle of the 20th century. This is evidenced in critiques of postcolonial representations of the “other”, of what Gayatri Spivak calls Euroamerican domination of colonised countries, that impacts even today. In her

search of archives made by the Raj, she identifies that "...the willed autobiography of the West masquerades as disinterested history..." (2000: 208). For Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation" (2000: 742).

I played on this notion of self-awareness and awareness of self where Jesse describes to us the cover of the book *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 1922). This description is from my own experience of a 1980's version I received as a gift at Jesse's age: so he's describing the cover as I saw it at that age of 16 where: "It had a picture of someone wearing a yellow headscarf, sitting in a little boat among some water lilies. The boat might have been in a river or the sea. No, it would have to have been still water with the lily pads sitting there like that, undisturbed but for the passage of the boat. I tucked the book into my jacket's side pocket, the gun hanging heavy in the other, and pulled the hood up over my head." (110-111). At once Jesse shows interest in another time and place and culture, while juxtaposing it to his own experience at that time He shows us through the symbolism of the headgear that we are all the same and in this together, that life is perpetual, thus signifying a tiny peek through the fourth wall that this story may not all be what it seems on the surface.

My auto-awareness of self in context of my culture is a lens through which I clearly see my characters of Jesse (Australian), Anna (English), Mini (Taiwanese), and Dave (American), belonging to the same world that I know. They are all of them part of this Western culture, and they are in the very city that dominates and represents our core value system of capitalism and globalism: New York. I drew on my own experiences in that city, and I was able to see it as Jesse did: through Australian eyes. In this sense it is "associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography" (Maréchal, 2010: 43) as it foregrounds experience and story as an exercise in practice and research. It is no different when I write this paper to sit alongside my artefact, as this self-narrative in auto-ethnography involves more than storytelling: it leads to and

involves the analysis of such story telling and enquiry into self as data leading to new knowledge and/or new understanding of areas of known knowledge. Heewan Chang states that: “Stemming from the field of anthropology, auto-ethnography shares the story telling feature with other genres of self narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation.” (2008: 43).

Unpeeling and unpacking the private self, and the ways in which the private self has produced data through interactions, observations, research, analysis and interpretations provided me with insights into the modes of thought of the action and interaction that evolve from enacting the self as data. As Chang (2008: 50-51) expresses: “...auto-ethnographers enter the research field with a familiar topic (self)...all aspects of life can become a subject of auto-ethnography”. Constantly, as I reflected back to my 16-year-old self in creating Jesse, I saw this process as researcher, practitioner, and reader, via an “easy access to the primary data source from the beginning” (2008: 52). As auto-ethnographers not only reveal themselves in regards to self and others, but can transform both themselves and their readers in the process (2008: 52-3), I have found the journey fascinating in the creative phase, and satisfying in the lead-up and post-publication phase. I have been able to reflect on readers’ feedback: my own and from readers known (supervisors, friends, agents, editors), and unknown (all those who have sent me fan mail or spoken to me at literature festivals or events), that *Chasers* prompted.

The narrative of self inevitably leads to mining oneself as data. That this occurs within the academy means a shift in recognition of what makes knowledge and who is the storyteller in that process. It is this sense of narrative-self which has led to the dispersal of certainties within knowledge production in the academy (Sale et al, 2002).

By using the “I” as data and methodology, I have explored something of how the dynamism of the personal prism provides the academy with a rich data base of

knowledge about many aspects of the subjective academic narrative. Utilising what well-known auto-ethnographer, Carolyn Ellis defines as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (2004: xix), I show here as my working methodology that explores this researcher's personal experience, connecting my autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Looking through the prism of my creative artefact, I have both proposed to show how self-reflection, observation and analysis is important to the academy and have both proposed and practised my own methodology of this subjective academic narrative (Ellis, 2004). I am thus adding to Maréchal’s thinking that: “auto-ethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (2010: 43).

The personal within the academic is as unavoidable as the self in the novel. From its fledgling beginnings auto-ethnography was more narrowly defined as “insider ethnography,” referring to studies of the culture group of which the researcher is a member (Hayano, 1979). Today, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) point out, “the meanings and applications of auto-ethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition difficult” (449). Auto-ethnography embraces and foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity rather than repressing it. While ethnography tends to be understood as a qualitative method in the ‘social sciences’ that describes human social phenomena based on fieldwork, we as auto-ethnographers are ourselves the primary participant *and* subject of the research in the process of writing personal stories and narratives. Auto-ethnography “as a form of ethnography,” Ellis (2004) writes, is “part auto or self and part ethno or culture” (31) and “something different from both of them, greater than its parts” (32). To me this is also the very essence of the novel, which, however fantastical, cannot be devoid of the author’s thumbprint on the page, the echoes of their culture and all that that brings with it. I am in all of my characters as they are my product, and while I like to think they make plausible

choices and have their own voices, ultimately, it's all my – and the readers – construct.

In embracing personal thoughts, feelings, stories, and observations as a way of understanding the social context, as an auto-ethnographer I am also shedding light on my total interaction with that setting by making every emotion and thought visible to the reader. Through the first-person viewpoint of Jesse, who takes us along for his journey, the reader is presented with a world where that notion runs parallel (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008).

The relationship between myself as the author and Jesse the character will be further discussed later, for now I am focussing on auto-ethnography as the opposite of the theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods that are based on the positivist epistemology. Auto-ethnographers tend to reject the concept of social research as an objective and neutral knowledge produced by scientific methods, which can be characterized and achieved by detachment of the researcher from the researched. Auto-ethnography, in this regard, is a critical “response to the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by such research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse” (2008: 450).

Anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) posits auto-ethnography as a postmodernist construct, where the concept... synthesizes both a post-modern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question’ (2). It is in this sense, that Ellingson and Ellis (2008) see auto-ethnography as a social constructionist project that rejects the deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the



political (450-459). For me, this paralleled the very relationship that I wanted the reader to have with *Chasers*.

As auto-ethnography is a reflexive account of one's own experiences situated in culture (that is, in addition to describing and looking critically at one's own experience), an auto-ethnography is also a cultural practice. My sense of auto-ethnography acknowledges the researcher/practitioner and the reader as equally as important to the research. Portraying the performed 'self' through writing then becomes an aim to create an embodied experience for the researcher and the reader. This acknowledges the inward and outward experience of ethnography in experiencing the subjectivity of the author. Readers may experience the work of ethnography through reading/hearing/feeling (inward) and then have a reaction to it (outward), hopefully (my intent) emotionally, or at the least in terms of viability and believability. This use of collaborative approaches to writing, sharing, and analysing personal stories of experience, has been labelled “collaborative autobiography” (Lapadat, 2009). In my construction of *Chasers*, I drew not only myself, but that on other writers via how I saw them in their work, as well as the autobiographical details of family and friends via their shared responses and feelings towards my early text – therefore, the feedback that they were giving me, was their selves, their auto feedback, which in turn fed back into my work. The auto-ethnographer as storyteller then encompasses I/self and narrator character/Jesse as well as the reader.

My auto-ethnographic methods included keeping a writer's journal and paying very close attention to the narrative as it went through several drafts. I interviewed myself and readers and used that data to enhance the tone of *Chasers* while ensuring that it generated self/cultural understandings. This in-depth interviewing involved analysis of data and my interpretation as the researcher. It formed beyond a portrait of the 'Other' (person, group, culture, reader), it also highlighted 'I', as researcher, and constructed a portrait of the self and my cultural beliefs. Where auto-ethnography can also be “associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography” (Maréchal, 2010: 43)

in that it foregrounds experience and story as a meaning making enterprise, Maréchal also argues that “narrative inquiry can provoke identification, feelings, emotions, and dialogue” (45). For my practitioner self, that was a watershed, a kind of light bulb eureka moment – I had found that my methodology underpinning my academic framework was indeed present in a throughline between the artefact and exegesis.

Laurel Richardson (2000) articulates this as: “I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about a topic...form and content are inseparable” (923). For many researchers, experimenting with alternative forms of writing and reporting, including auto-ethnography, personal narrative, performative writing, layered accounts and writing stories, provides a way to create multiple layered accounts of a research study. This leads to not only the opportunity to create new claims but also the ability to do so in a compelling manner. As Ellis (2004) says: “auto-ethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot” (xix).

For me as a professional fiction author, this approach has been enlightening. According to Bochner and Ellis (2006), an auto-ethnographer is “first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller,” and auto-ethnography may depict “people struggling to overcome adversity” and show “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (111). Therefore, according to them, auto-ethnography is “ethical practice” and “gifts” that has a care-giving function (111). This is to me the very essence of being a novelist: what I have created and published so far in over a dozen novels is part of a broader cultural discussion and I hand each over (in exchange for money, granted) to the reader as a gift.

Therefore, auto-ethnography becomes a story that re-enacts an experience by which people find meaning and through that meaning add to their own ‘selves’. As an example of auto-ethnography occurring when a family member or someone close

dies, I have written this very scenario for Jesse. In this painful experience people may wonder how they will go about living without this person and what it will be like, and, over time, when looking back at the experience of someone close to you dying, one may find that through this hardship they became a stronger more independent person. With these realizations, the person has actually made sense of and has come to terms with the tragic experience that occurred. Through this auto-ethnography is performed. In meditation on my own experiences and thoughts on this, I created the scenario where Jesse would show us his way of coping – through denial, in the main part, and later in his journey in *Chasers* (2010), to acceptance “My broken friends... They had been with me the whole time, but only I had seen them after that day.” (245).

For me, Jesse’s story is all about his mind: his state of mind, and where he resides. Auto-ethnographic manuscripts might include dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and strong metaphors to invite the reader to ‘relive’ events with the author; these guidelines may provide a framework for directing investigators and reviewers alike. Ellis discusses how Richardson’s criteria mesh with criteria mentioned by Bochner who describes what makes him understand and feel with a story (Bochner, 2000: 264-266). He looks for concrete details (similar to Richardson’s expression of lived experience), structurally complex narratives (Richardson’s aesthetic merit), author’s attempt to dig under the superficial to get to vulnerability and honesty (Richardson’s reflexivity), a standard of ethical self-consciousness (Richardson’s substantive contribution), and a moving story (Richardson’s impact) (Ellis, 2004: 253-254). My authorial intent with *Chasers*, and Jesse’s journey, was to create an ethical war within Jesse’s mind, while creating a moving character study.

Auto-ethnography challenges the traditional social scientific methodology that emphasizes the criteria for quality in social research developed in terms of validity. Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes:

“In auto-ethnographic work, I look at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well as to research participants and researchers. To me, validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers- or even your own.” (124).

I constantly questioned whether Jesse would be seen as an unreliable (and therefore unsympathetic and unbelievable character) as I wrote about his condition of grief in dealing with the loss of his friends and his sense of feeling, and being, alone. Ellis (2004) emphasizes the ‘narrative truth’ for auto-ethnographic writings and, as Arthur Bochner argues, ‘that narrators believe they are doing so’ (Bochner, 2002: 86). We can judge one narrative interpretation of events against another, but we cannot measure a narrative against the events themselves because the meaning of the events comes clear only in their narrative expression (126).

Through this autoethnographic prism, I was able to distance myself from my creation and build another of the macro-themes: does Jesse’s journey reflect something that we can all relate to; is that one that we all care for; are we invested in him and his story, etc. To me the real question is what narratives *do*, what consequences they have, to what uses they can serve, what meaning can be derived. Bochner (2001) puts it that narrative is the way we remember the past, turn life into language, and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences, moving from concern with the inner veracity to outer pragmatics of evaluating stories. It was in that vein that my redrafts of *Chasers*, during the polishing and improving process where the language and tone I used came into an (planned) aesthetically pleasing construct for the reader, came to the fore. This was also sculptured by my belief, and it’s a wide one among practitioners that the work has the possibility to change the world and make it a better place. (Denzin, 2004).

This position fits with Clough, who argues that good auto-ethnographic writing should motivate cultural criticism. Auto-ethnographic writing should be closely aligned with theoretical reflection, says Clough, so that it can serve as a vehicle for thinking ‘new sociological subjects’ and forming ‘new parameters of the social.’ (Clough, 2000: 290). Though Richardson and Bochner are less overtly political than Denzin and Clough, they indicate that good personal narratives should contribute to positive social change and move us to action. (Bochner, 2000: 271). Through identifying with the mass of infected Chasers, seen from where Jesse meets the young boy by the East River, I hoped to plant a seed in *Chasers* that would show that we are all sharing in this world, that the masses are often those who fare the worst, because the few feed off them. All of it, something open to thought and discussion by the reader, and, I hope, further discussion and thought (however small) off the page and into the broader social fabric.

I see the benefits of auto-ethnography in the ways in which research of such a personal nature gives us insight into issues important in our culture: issues such as the nature of identity, race, sexuality, child abuse, eating disorders, war, news, journalism, communication, and the like, all them explored in *Chasers*. In addition to helping the researcher make sense of his or her individual experience, auto-ethnographies are political in nature as they engage their readers in important political issues and often ask us to consider things, or do things differently, e.g: “I bet it was terrorists” (Phelan, 2010: 17). Chang (2008) argues that auto-ethnography offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers because auto-ethnographic texts are engaging and enable researchers to gain a cultural understanding of self in relation to others, on which cross-cultural coalition can be built between self and others.

The early criticism of autobiographical methods in anthropology, according to Maréchal (2010), was about “their validity on grounds of being unrepresentative and lacking objectivity” (45). She also points out that evocative and emotional genres of

auto-ethnography have been criticized by mostly analytic proponents for their “lack of ethnographic relevance as a result of being too personal.” As she writes, they are criticized “for being biased, navel-gazing, self-absorbed, or emotionally incontinent, and for hijacking traditional ethnographic purposes and scholarly contributions” (Maréchal, 2010: 45).

Ellis mentions Laurel Richardson (2000: 15-16) who described five factors she uses when reviewing personal narrative papers that includes analysis of both evaluative and constructive validity techniques. The criteria are: (a) Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (b) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? (c) Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? (d) Impactfullness (sic). Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? (e) Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? I like to see *Chasers* as hitting all these marks, it was designed that way and I believe the execution, through rigorous re-writing and interrogation of worth and weight of content and form, culminates in a new and significant contribution to knowledge.

## **Section 2: The novelist, the artefact and Practice Led Research (PLR)**

I felt after writing three other published novels (Phelan, 2006-2009) that I had the writing skills to pull this artefact off: to make the implausible (the city-wide attack, the infected masses, the narrator interacting with dead friends) a possibility through storyline, narrated by my one character. After all, we are in the post-Kafka era where the frontier of the implausible is no longer under guard (Kundera, 2006: 161).

Writing a novel is solitary work; it is indeed, as Ibsen (1877) described it, to sit on judgement to oneself. As I have earlier established via discussion of auto-ethnography: all one's lived experience is data. This contribution to knowledge adds to a broader discussion that goes on in relation to creation of fiction and how can be read, critiqued and taught, and for that alone this journey has been more than worthwhile; it has been enlightening.

In looking back to my teens in order to mine the past, I looked for a series of truths that would translate into the fictional world I created. Believing in 'truth,' or rather 'truths,' does not equate with a belief in an objective truth, and today few would argue that their truth is universal. Were my memories of being sixteen accurate enough to be a foundation for my character of Jesse? The past is like that tower; it holds two truths, temporally rather than physically separated, each depending on the perspective of the observer. It may be that some perceptions in time obey an inverse law to those in space: distance, John Updike has suggested, makes for clarity (Updike, 1989).

As an adult reading signs that the child could not yet interpret or understand, and with the benefit of being on the other side of my teens, I could see childhood more clearly. Emotions that coloured interpretation of a past event, speech, or gesture may themselves require reinterpretation as a situation is revisited, and it is with this

conviction that I the practitioner speak, that there is always a direct coincidence between belief and truth (Foucault, 1983). On May 3, 1944, Anne Frank wrote “I don't believe the war is simply the work of politicians and capitalists. Oh no, the common man is every bit as guilty; otherwise, people and nations would have rebelled long ago! There's a destructive urge in people, the urge to rage, murder, and kill. And until all of humanity, without exception, undergoes a metamorphosis, wars will continue to be waged, and everything that has been carefully built up, cultivated and grown will be cut down and destroyed, only to start all over again!” (Frank, Pressler, & Massotty, 1991: 8).

So I had found a truth upon which my first novel for a Young Adult readership could be built upon; at least I prepared the ground into which the seeds could sown. In order to survive, keep sane, and shut out the noise Jesse, in a war-time setting, must find his own Secret Annexe, where he will have his own soliloquy with imaginary friends. All of this is owed to Frank's text, which I first read as a young teenager. The composition of *Chasers* was very deliberate, and lies in the art of the aesthetic itself. Composition refers to the act of composing, the resulting state or condition, and the object produced, the word having various relationships to painting, music, assemblage and construction - mostly describing the putting-together of material into arrangements or sets of relations. It is the ongoing adjustment of data, a kind of physics of perception/cognition, used broadly by Gertrude Stein to describe the *living-and-being* in a contemporary moment. Stein's notion of the composition is 'the thing seen by everyone in the living they are doing,' (1990: 516). She is suggesting that a commitment to the 'now' of experience, and the continual awareness of this experiential engagement, are the general conditions of critical thought, contributing to sense of self-in-world. 'A composition of the prolonged present,' says Stein, 'is a natural composition in the world.' (517).

Writing *Chasers* was a journey that took me back to the time of my adolescence as I imagined myself at the age of my characters and potential readers. As a work of



fiction, this novel stands alone amongst my other finished pieces as a journey of discovery as an artist and academic: it was written wearing both those hats, its outcome defying what Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009) put as “theorisation or documentation of the creative process risks subduing the creative fire.” (188).

For me, PLR takes a created work and interprets it again and again, in a drawing together the practice and research to illuminate and bring about new knowledge and understanding. Using practice-led research as a methodological framework for my exegesis, I reflect upon the creative process and explore scholarly conversations that are relevant to my writing. To me, this is constantly reflected back to the self, mindful of the notion Kundera (2000) puts: as soon as you create an imaginary being, you are confronted by the question: ‘what is the self?’ (23). PLR has enabled me to come full circle with this project of artefact and exegesis.

PLR presumes a process of the development and testing of knowledge which has an outcome in the production of works of art, design, performance and professional practices. For a practitioner-researcher, PLR addresses familiar themes with equivalent rigour (Jolly, 2010). From the outset I was writing a novel loaded with literary fun and symbolism that played on what I had learned through my previous literary studies, teachings, thoughts, and practice, combining all the depth, polish and breadth that is available to me further readings and understanding of literary and scholarly works.

The idea of writing fiction and handing it over to the reader for interpretation is both exciting and terrifying. Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* ends with uncertainty: “very little is discovered and the detective is defeated” (1984: 506). In *Chasers*, the character’s journey, and perhaps the ending, has a similar narrative value Jesse is alone from the first chapter to the last, with little achieved other than surviving twelve days in post-apocalyptic Manhattan. But in *Chasers*, is it true that “very little is achieved”? As to whether Jesse will go on surviving on his own, we are unaware –

that is, until the final pages in the published novel are turned and we see a cover image and release date for the pending sequel. For me, the title of “Alone” was perfect and unchangeable, and come to me loaded with literary meaning from an Edgar Allen Poe poem of the same name, of which more is discussed later. Looking at it in this light, I can say I as author knew that Jesse would be okay, and that I see his journey as a flat narrative value (he’s as alone from the first chapter as the last chapter), his personal journey is one of growth of self. I knew that Jesse would be alone, but that, as he admitted to us: ‘I was on my own but I was not alone’ (2010: 247).

I am keenly aware, through both several years of practice and feedback from readers about my own writing, that how *Chasers* is to be read is entirely up to the reader: although I am aware of the irony here where I am given the chance to reflect upon my own authorial intent. Barthes (1977) criticizes the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author's identity — his or her political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology, or other biographical or personal attributes — to distil meaning from the author's work. In this type of criticism, the experiences and biases of the author serve as a definitive “explanation” of the text. For Barthes, this method of reading may be apparently tidy and convenient but is actually sloppy and flawed: “To give a text an Author” and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it “is to impose a limit on that text.” (1977). I see through practice and through my own experience of being a careful reader that to give a reader a life is not to the detriment of the life of the author: it’s part of our transaction, as I aim to entertain and they, in turn, pay for my product.

Young Adult books as a genre are in an area defined beyond the age of the readership; it’s also in the marketing of the book as product, and this is an area I attempted to convey via my artefact and this broader discussion. The globalism inherent in my artefact is two- fold. It applies in the sense of an absence of national boundaries on the art of the novel, an art-scape with its place in its own history,

which as Milan Kundera describes as the history of literature is not a history of events but “the history of values” (2006: 16). The second meaning lies my authorial intent of the allegory within *Chasers*, which was written as a novel where the apocalyptic setting and sense of hopelessness amongst the masses is allegorical of the Global Financial Crisis, which was raging at full flight while the artefact was under construction. My model for such allegory was another book I had read as a young reader: George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945). That work, intended as an allegorical novella by Orwell, was published in England on 17 August 1945; according to Orwell, the book reflects events leading up to and during the Stalin era before World War II. Orwell, a democratic socialist was a critic of Joseph Stalin and hostile to Moscow-directed Stalinism, especially after his experiences with the NKVD, and what he saw of the results of the terrible influence of Communist policy.

From a construction standpoint, *Chasers* was seated in a real sense of a job as a working writer, at the same time as being a creative journey and an academic exploration of all I’ve learned of the novel. Theodore Adorno would see part of that as the capitalist notion of income as well as aesthetic pleasure, and argued that capitalism fed people with the products of a 'culture industry' - the opposite of 'true' art - to keep them passively satisfied and politically apathetic. Adorno saw that capitalism had not become more precarious or close to collapse, as Marx had predicted. Instead, it had seemingly become more entrenched. Where Marx had focussed on economics, Adorno placed emphasis on the role of culture in securing the status quo. Adorno suggested that culture industries churn out a debased mass of unsophisticated, sentimental products which have replaced the more 'difficult' and critical art forms which might lead people to actually question social life. (1973: 126)

## Setting and place

It was no intent of mine to write an Australian novel. Rather, the authorial intent of *Chasers* was that it be seated into an area of reading for young people and adults – for anyone, anywhere, who appreciated a good story. In this sense it is global. American political scientist Joseph Nye, argues that globalism refers to any description and explanation of a world which is characterized by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances; while globalisation refers to the increase or decline in the degree of globalism. (Nye, 2011). 30 Rock, or the GE Building at the Rockefeller Plaza, where my characters spend most of their time, and the name Rockefeller elicits imagery of capitalist globalism.

What is more of a globalised space than that created and occupied by the novel? Fielding, one of the first novelists to conceive the poetics of the novel, tried to define his art – it's *raison d'être* – by outlining how it should illuminate, explore and grasp 'Human Nature'. (Kundera, 2006). In his 2005 book *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World*, Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul argued that, far from being an inevitable force, globalization is already breaking up into contradictory pieces and that citizens are reasserting their national interests in both positive and destructive ways. I will further explore later this concept allegory and meaning in subsequent sections, but here it's worth noting that the fine line between art and commerce, of the created and the consumed, was a constant factor of discontent to this author.

The very purpose of my artefact as reflections on mankind, and on myself as a young man via my one "true" (alive) character, was at the forefront of my mind during construction of *Chasers* and is still present now while I sit here in consideration and critique of the finished outcome. It is very much a mystory – a model postulated by Gergory Ulmer (1989), who developed an idea that there is in academic writing the

self and the researched, the conscious intellectual semiotic and that arising from storytelling, which he describe as ‘mystories’. This puts under erasure claims to fact in writing, showing all writing to be both personal and mysterious, the my story and mystery.

As a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regarding human existence as unexplainable, stressing freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts, I can think of no better critique and methodology upon my artefact than the existential lens. Existentialism, a modern philosophical movement stressing the importance of personal experience and responsibility and the demands that they make on the individual, who is seen as a free agent in a deterministic and seemingly meaningless universe, can be seen in a long tradition of novels and their creators. To explore the doctrine that man, what forms his essence in the course of the life on the page as resultant from his personal choices, is at once exciting for a practitioner of the craft of the novel as it is worrisome – have I pulled off, within my artefact, all of what I intended to say? How will it be read?

### **What is Creativity to me?**

Questions of creativity and intent collide with critical vigour, all with an emphasis along my sightlines to man's creating his own nature as well as the importance of personal freedom, decision, and commitment. In *Tom Jones* – and Fielding wrote in 1749 – he was discovering, inventing for us, movements of character that would have the writer marvel at the “inexplicable”, the dumbfounding as he finds a character's behaviour wracked with “the most unaccountable of all the absurdities which ever entered into the brain of that strange prodigious creature man” (Kundera, 2006: 7). I aimed to develop that same sense of exploration of our nature in the novel.

We see through Jesse's soliloquy the steps by which we descended towards the ultimate crumbling of culture and its reason for being, all filled with that sense of character's foreboding wonder: what's left, and where do I fit in. Every novel created with real passion aspires quite naturally to a lasting aesthetic value, that is, to a value capable of surviving its author. Being a fiction writer is an odd job for an adult, constantly at 'play', exploring the imagination, mining all lived and absorbed experience, making things up and writing them down. I'd always wanted to be a storyteller but I thought you couldn't do that full-time as a teenager or a 20-something year old. I'd started a novel in 1995, during my high school Year 11, that would eventually become *Fox Hunt* (Phelan, 2006). By the time I'd finished high school in 1996, I had written the first twenty-five thousand words of the novel. Soon after, I had to ditch it – Tom Clancy got there first, using the exact same premise in *Rainbow Six* (1998) – so the final story ended up being completely different from that early idea. I kept my main characters, an investigative reporter as a protagonist as well as a buddy character, a kind of modern day Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, as I thought they had something that would work in a thriller series. I knew I wanted to create something that sought to seek truth in fiction, via a character who was an investigative journalist and being driven by little but that quest for truth.

Every novel created with real passion aspires quite naturally to a lasting aesthetic value, meaning to a value capable of surviving its author, and as Kundera said: "To write without having that ambition is cynicism: a mediocre plumber may be useful to people, but a mediocre novelist who consciously produces books that are ephemeral, commonplace, conventional - thus not useful, thus burdensome, thus noxious - is contemptible" (2006: 93). In 2008, my third Lachlan Fox thriller, *Blood Oil* (2008), was a dark exploration of where I'd seen our society go post-9/11, and decided that I needed a creative break before writing the fourth Fox novel. I'd always wanted to write a series for younger readers, and the timing felt right. I wanted to write something interesting, something I would have enjoyed reading as a teenager

and even now as an adult. I felt I was ready, to paraphrase Mark Twain to create a good story well told.

*Chasers*, written as a Young Adult (YA) novel, was accidental in the broader sense -- it wasn't a specific career move, it just felt like the natural thing to do. I don't think I've ever had a pre-determined career move -- if I have, that wasn't one of them. It was simply the format, the genre or classification of YA, that suited the story that I wanted to tell. That was the stylistic reason. For the self as writer, in the commercial world of publishing, I wanted a book that I could comfortably talk at schools about. Since the success of the *Harry Potter* and then *Twilight* series, the general talk and feel in and around publishing is that YA is the so-called “new black”, the hot genre, the area that’s succeeding in finding a large audience. I saw first-hand several friends who were achieving extraordinary sales figures writing for kids and teenagers -- and they loved pointing out the publishing feeling that their readership actually read, whereas adults didn’t. So going into writing for YA was a sound commercial decision, as far as such decisions can be made in any creative industry. For me as a practitioner, I felt I was finally a good enough writer to write a novel shorter than my adult thriller (aiming for 50,000-60,000 words rather than 80,000-90,000), while still packing the emotional punch and story breadth of the larger work.

I was conscious of wanting to write something that teenage boys would enjoy – there seems to be a lot of action/adventure novels out there but not many moving beyond this. I thought why not try and write something gripping that has a similar feel to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, *The Graveyard Book*, *Thursday’s Child*, *Life of Pi*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Siddhartha*, Grimm’s fairytales, etc. I figured that they were all cross-over stories: teenage boys would like them, but so would any other reader, which is kind of the inverse to many other novels out there that are targeted specifically at one group of readers.

What I knew my story must contain was truth. I did not want to produce “uplifting pictures”; I wanted to reach “into the soul of things. (Kundera, 2006: 128). It’s in the soul of all things human that we may see the truth of character and human nature, all contained in the fiction; via the novel we have a looking glass pointed towards the great enigmas of existence.



### **Section 3: The aesthetic and young adult fiction**

I knew with *Chasers* that whatever path I went down, I had to be super-excited about the creation of it. A barrier to this was that, after several meetings with publishers it became evident that they all wanted the same, formulaic things: a series for young boys, about young spies. If I can't reach that level of commitment and excitement to carry me through the hard graft of composition, I think then there'd be somebody else better to do justice to the story. This concept of writing to order, something I had no artistic interest in, proved an impossible task. I tried a few angles of what could be considered Lachlan Fox-Like: I had four 16 year old characters, and they would be a modern take on a Famous Five or Secret Seven type scenario, working for the United Nations and operating out of New York. I wrote novel outlines and a few sample chapters, and none of it rang true. While I loved reading as a teenager, I never really enjoyed reading teenage-packaged dragon or spy or vampire books – I chose to read adult spy and dragon and vampire books. Why water-down the themes for a younger audience? Why not attempt to raise the bar.

#### **Memories, influence and the aesthetic**

As I was writing I kept thinking about my favourite elements that have stuck with me from my favourite teenage books. I remembered things like Anne Frank talking to her imaginary friend Kitty in the form of dairy entries; Caulfield talking to his dead brother for support while crossing intersections along Fifth Avenue in New York; Bilbo's journey; Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer; Jem and Scout. All these characters and all that they did came flooding back to me, so writing this series has been a fun journey back in my memory banks to those early readings. As I was writing I realised that I was immediately engaged by the voice of Jesse, cared for him, and lost myself

in his story – they’re the three things I need to fall into place to know that the story is worth exploring until the end.

So, I took these four characters I had created for a spy world and instead put them in a New York subway carriage, and at the end of the scene I had the subway involved in some kind of accident. Only, it wasn’t an accident, it was an *attack* on the city. I imagined that they would be up against some kind of zombies, I invented a new virus (one that would be read as attacking the masses and having a few powerful preying on them), and the world as they knew it changed. Patricia Kennon (2005) looks at how dystopian young adult fiction looks at opportunities for growth for young adults: loss of parental control and adult surveillance results in the young protagonists’ forced creation and development of new concepts of community, family and ‘belonging’. Inherited hierarchical systems of individual identity and the larger social and political world are challenged during the characters' struggles for survival in these novels as the young protagonists display considerable courage, creativity and ‘heroic’ attributes in their efforts to survive and also to protect other younger children in their care. As such, these dystopian stories offer opportunities to explore gender role stereotypes and their reformulation by young people during situations.

I wondered about this dystopian YA fiction, and I applied that to the narrative itself, via the attack and the viral outbreak that created the chasers into zombie-like figures. Zombie myths arise throughout human culture, and they ‘warn against the illusion of the stable, self-possessed subjectivities and the belief that our reflection in the mirror projects an undisturbed, continuous, natural process called “I”’ (Thomas, 2010: 8). Zombie theory has been utilised within the academy as an explanation for economic decay within late capitalism as well as ‘missing bodies’ (McGlotten & Moore, 2013). Shaka McGlotten and Lisa Moore define zombie theory as cutting across disciplines so as to frame ‘the limits of consciousness and embodiment’ (2).

James Wierzbicki sees the most frightening aspect of the ‘modern zombie’ as being ‘the dazzling speed with which it spreads its condition among an otherwise normal population (2010: 10). He describes this as leading to ‘the embodiment of a nightmarish apocalyptic plague’ (12). He notes that ‘the concept of ‘zombie’ has appeared often in serious writings in such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, gender studies, sociology, medicine, computer science, international finance, philosophy, and literary theory’ (13). The Zombie undead, then, is a dominant metaphor for capitalism itself: ‘the zombie, which is not an individual monstrosity but merely a generalised manifestation of a widespread condition, is an apt metaphor for much that troubles us in recent times’ (14).

Late capitalism also engages Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry in a consideration of the usefulness of the zombie metaphor whose ubiquity ‘suggest the zombie’s continued cultural currency...that speaks to some of the most puzzling elements of our sociohistorical moment, wherein many are trying to ascertain what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism-if anything’ (2008: 86). They assert that ‘there is an irreconcilable tension between global capitalism and the theoretical school of posthumanism’ (87). Moreover, they discuss the loss of the subjective self (a central meme of capitalism and the way power works to subjugate others. Fear of zombies is central to fear of loss of self and cultural harmony that can also be expressed in economic terms as Daiki Asanuma discusses how ‘...the existence of zombie firms is one of the reasons for the stagnation of Japanese economy’, and applies Zombie theory to his paper. He concludes that allowing firms to have a living death affects all business networks. I loved this notion of the zombie (in my case, the chasers) colliding with corporate world.

Zombies as allegorical figures, then, are commonly called upon within theoretical discussions of late capitalism. They stand for a crisis within human self-understanding as well as social challenges and the dislocation of cultural boundaries. For Lauro and Embry, the zombie is an ‘appropriate stand-in for our current moment,

and specifically for America in the global economy, where we feed off the products of the rest of the planet, and, alienated from our own humanity, stumble forward, groping for immortality even as we decompose' (93). Caught between life and death, the zombie offers neither solution nor resolution to the negative effects of global capitalism. Today, rather than explicating the slavery mythology from which it arose, the zombie 'allegorizes the imperial, the colonial, the capitalist structure...' (97). The modern zombie 'now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system' (99). The zombie's virulence, then, arises from its need to 'transfer its burden to others' like the 'waste economy's operations (100).

There is a widespread use of the zombie metaphor and allegory in describing late capitalism, malevolent corporations (McNally, 2011), and the supine nature of the consumer (Sayers, 2007). The title for Henry Giroux's book encapsulates this: 'Zombie politics and culture in the age of consumer capitalism' (2011). The book aims to highlight social conditioning that makes living dead of consumerist citizens in late capitalist societies. Highlighting rather more direct violence embedded in zombie metaphors, Brian Jarvis writes 'to uncover less transparent links between normal desires which circulate within consumer society and monstrous violence' (2007: 326). Furthermore, and very dangerously, 'zombies are unrelentingly, unquenchably and indiscriminately hungry...once they have arrived among us, carrying 'some kind of virus', they metastasize rapidly, devastating cities, decimating populations' they 'are as much a trope as character or effect, and hence are available to be reworked and reframed in any number of ways' (Webb & Byrnan, 2008: 84).

Perhaps the strongest element of the zombie metaphor is the thought it evokes that there is an internal zombie in each of us. When the term is applied to capitalist consumption, we are all afraid of interrogating our complicity: 'an absence presence within' that calls out to be filled, and that places us 'between physical and symbolic deaths' (Webb & Byrnan, 2008: 88). For Jen Webb and Sam Byrnan capitalism

‘works as an analogue for zombiedom because it too is predicated on insatiable appetite, and the drive to consume’ (89). Whilst capitalism is a system of private ownership and corporate economics, ‘global capitalism is boundless and insatiable’ (91). In this way, it is comparable to excessive consumption by the majority that divides global society into ‘the few-too-few who have nearly everything and the many-too-many who are reduced to little or nothing’ (92). Like zombies, capitalism is all-consuming and leads us to lose the capacity to feel empathy and awareness of others as well as to lack insights into self.

In *Chasers* young adult Jesse is placed in what Jeffery Arnett calls a ‘grim world’ (2000: 267). He sees this as producing a generation who are pessimistic and cynical about their futures, yet who believe ‘that they will ultimately prevail in their personal pursuit of happiness, that their personal success is not only possible but inevitable’ and this ‘allows them to proceed with confidence through a world they regard as fraught with peril’ (2000: 284-5)

### **Finding the story**

There was no single eureka moment in deciding to write this story, it was all these little things coming together that formed the whole. I remembered a movie I enjoyed as a kid: *Red Dawn*. Made in the early 1980's, it had a high school group in class in a country town, just another ordinary day, and then they see troops invading -- literally dropping in out of the sky. The teenagers form a group of skirmishers, trying to survive while being a thorn in the side of their aggressor. It seemed like a great idea, of teenagers in a warzone, so I wondered how I'd do that in a fresh way. John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series seemed to have followed the concept too closely. My consideration remained: How to have that kind of sense of foreboding, of a worst-case scenario, in a way that hadn't been done. The virus I created was a fresh concept,

but with this first book I wanted more – I wanted it to really be about our narrator, Jesse, and how he could possibly cope in this extreme situation.

The angle I wanted to try was something that would either work or not - there'd be no middle ground. I kept thinking; could I start a series like this (ie reveal Jesse's grief is what had him keeping his friends "alive" in his mind) and have it accepted by publishers and librarians as a viable teenage read? I thought my story was worth the risk. I wanted to tell kids that dangerous things could be overcome. Tell them that they're not alone. Tell them that there are always options, there's always a way out, a way ahead. That you can go out and dream.

Any lingering doubt I had was squashed by Neil Gaimann, whose work I have admired for its creativity and has a erudite his way of talking about it, who said that that his daughter (who was 7 at the time read) had read the ms for his novel *Coraline* and loved it. Then he sent it to his agent and she read it and said "You can't be serious, this cannot be a children's book." and he said "Why not?" and she said "Well it's terrifying." So he replied "You have 2 daughters. Read it to them and get back to me." She phoned him a week later and said "They loved it -- they just saw it as an adventure." I think it comes down to adults forgetting story -- they're so used to be spoon fed dumbed-down facts on TV, CSI and Law and Order type stuff, that they've forgotten what a story can and should do.

My approach to writing fiction is to write fast and edit slow, and on day one of writing, I wrote the first few chapters: Jesse and his friends on the subway, the attack, what they saw, how they'd run, and how they got to 30 Rock. I went to bed that night wondering if this could be the story where my character could converse to his friends like Anne Frank's soliloquy to Kitty. This was where my character could do as Yann Martel's Pi had done on that lifeboat for all that time. I'd slept on this idea. It was a good sleep. The next day, I decided that this was it; this was that story, and the first

instalment would be all about what it meant to be truly alone. I thought then of Poe's poem, *Alone*:

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were---I have not seen  
As others saw---I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I lov'd, I loved alone.  
Then---in my childhood---in the dawn  
Of a most stormy life---was drawn  
From ev'ry depth of good and ill  
The mystery which binds me still:  
From the torrent, or the fountain,  
From the red cliff of the mountain,  
From the sun that 'round me roll'd  
In its autumn tint of gold---  
From the lightning in the sky  
As it pass'd me flying by---  
From the thunder and the storm,  
And the cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view.

Poet Daniel Hoffman believed "Alone" was evidence that "Poe really was a haunted man." (Hoffman, 31-32). The poem, however, is an introspective about Poe's youth, written when he was only 20 years old (Meyers, 1992). To me, it was the perfect launch point for my story, and it's central theme of what it is to be 'truly alone.'

When I finished *Chasers*, some early-draft readers asked me if it: Is it a kid's book or an adult book, eg a book for teens or a book with teens in it? I likened it to the Harry Potter series, or the Phillip Pullman books, or Clive Barker's *Thief of Always*, or the Lemony Snicket books, as these all seemed to be read by any age group, they were books with young protagonists, with stories that children enjoy and that adults enjoy and they seem to be enjoying different things. It's not a long book – it's 247 pages long in the Australian print version (2010), which is about half the usual length of my Fox novels. I've not had figures on my own readership, a recent study found that more than half the consumers of books classified for young adults aren't all that young. According to an ongoing biannual study from Bowker Market Research (2012) study, fully 55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 -- known as YA books -- are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales. And adults aren't just purchasing for others -- when asked about the intended recipient, they report that 78% of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading.

I think that kids seem to read *Chasers* as an adventure. Adults get nightmares. Every adult I've met who's read the book has asked 'what' the attack was and 'who' perpetrated it. I foresaw this and referenced it in *Chasers*, where Jesse is thinking about the passage from *The Little Prince* (1945), where adults are asked what a drawn shape is and they say "That is a hat" (7-9) – they can't see that it's a boa constrictor which swallowed an elephant until they're shown that image in an x-ray type drawing. The narrator states that he has met many people who are "concerned with matters of consequence" (8), and that when he shows such people the first drawing, and they saw "That is a hat", then he would bring himself down to their level and talk "about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. And the grown-up would be greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man." (9). From the feedback I've had for *Chasers*, young readers seem to care most about Jesse's outcome: 'will he be okay?'



while the adult readers want to know why it happened and who did it. I liken Jesse being trapped in Manhattan to presenting the reader the drawing of a 'hat': being unable to see from 30 Rock, and from Manhattan, the bigger, wider world, as though we all put up walls of some sort to protect us from the outside world and then we cannot see the reality beyond that.

### **On revision and publication: beyond the first draft**

Prior to publication, I'd had several trusted early readers read the book who had given me feedback. I do this with all my books, and more and more people are now reading them before my agents and publishers because I don't want to go the way of so many of my favourite authors, where they wrote a few good books and then their work dropped off in quality. I think that happens because when you're starting out, you get rejections and you get lots of notes from agents and publishers about your work. When you've been around for a while and have had half a dozen or more books published, they seem to accept that what you're doing is up to standard and they don't give you many notes or they don't reject you -- and I've got a lot of writer friends who miss getting rejections (and I'm sure their work misses it too). They're now sending in work that should be rejected or at least re-worked but that's not happening -- it's being published. So, I sent *Chasers* out to several trusted readers, my critical friends (a fantastic legacy of my MA Writing through Swinburne) who gave valuable feedback on the story. Many had questions in regard to "wanting to know more about this or that", which was perfect seeing as this is the first of a trilogy.

While revising, I kept asking myself: what would entice me to want to read the next instalment? I love the ending of *Chasers* because it leaves us hanging and turns so many of our questions on their heads. As a writer, I enjoy the story because it set up the challenge of having to work really hard to make book two better than the first. Perhaps because it was designed as a PhD artefact that I set out to write a piece that

could be unpeeled and unpacked by readers: I wanted it to speak out against the world it was depicting, fantastical in its viral-outbreak concept while being rooted there in the familiar for us to empathise with. Too many modern teen audience novels are about money and greed and power and all that it entails, almost always with the accumulation of more and that the value system of that equates happiness, populated by vapid and weak protagonists. My artefact is a rally against consumerism and globalisation and the incessant news cycle that's fed by sound bytes and what Orwell warned us of what would come: newspeak and all that entails.

I knew on that subway that when Jesse came to, he could not deal with the reality of what was around him. Jesse decides to leave 30 Rock and chance the River for a way out. On the way he admits to us, the reader, that his friends were dead and he can survive on his own now. A big influence on this is the conclusion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), where Jim tells Huck that Huck's father has been dead for some time (he was the dead man they saw earlier in the floating house). In the final narrative, Huck declares that he is quite glad to be done writing his story, and despite Sally's plans to adopt and "sivilize" him, Huck intends to flee west to Indian Territory. This influenced me to have Jesse narrate: "And good luck to anyone who tries to pry my friends away from me; they're not going to civilise them out of me, not ever." (206). Jesse is aware that as long as you go on speak about the dead, they are not 'dead'; he's as much aware of that, an epiphany of sorts in the closing ages of *Chasers*, a letting go of apron strings, as he is that *talking* to the dead is what has to go. I hope that the readers see it thus, that they impose their own vision upon it (Sedgewick, 2003: 213).

For *Chasers*, my consideration with the ending had to do with the "who did this", one thing I didn't want to reveal in the books as I wanted the reader to write that part of the story themselves. I planted clues along the way, and characters across the three books will have their opinions (Russians, French, Chinese, terrorists, the CIA, etc. 70-71). Other characters Jesse meets, such as the military team in the sequel *Survivor*

(2011) tell him the attack is bigger than just, and that “the infection is worse in warmer areas” (2011: 106). I want the reader, via Jesse, to remain sceptical; I want the reader to create their own 'bad guys', or for it to not be the overriding issue, something McCarthy did in *The Road* (2006).

There was a point in the editing where my publisher wanted me to explain “who did this”, and have Jesse have a so-called “up-beat ending” where he “finds a group of survivors”, and to shift his reveal that his friends were dead not at the end of *Chasers*, but in the start of *Survivor*. At the very least, they asked me, “have Jesse make contact with others, eg via a radio or the like”. This was the kind of safe and dull ending that I wanted to avoid in this book. We know that there are other survivors like Jesse as in this book there's gunshots and aircraft and lights at night and things are sometimes different in the streets from day to day, but I certainly didn't want ‘real person contact’ in this first instalment, which I had a working title of “Alone 1”. The title of *Chasers* (and for the 2011 sequels *Survivor*, and *Quarantine*) was my publisher’s urging, as they requested that, like their successful *Twilight* series, the individual books have titles. Those three titles were the best I could come up with at short notice while on deadline, replacing my original concept of *Alone: Parts 1, 2, 3*.

### **A personal journey beyond the self**

In autoethnography, the self is the primary resource of data for academic, anthropological inquiries (Chang, 2008). Although my artefact is not an autobiography or an academic inquiry, I did use many autoethnographical techniques such as mining the self as data. The artefact relies on the author interpreting the world through the lens of a 16-year-old self in the characters. Chang (2008) identifies four types of research in autoethnographic data: personal memory, self observational, self-reflective, and external. My writer’s journal (full of personal memory data as thoughts of importance from my 16-year-old-self in what Chang describes as the

“building block of autoethnography” (71), my artefact, and this exegesis, all form the autoethnographic journey and discussion of a piece of practice-led doctoral research. This cyclical process of self as data is perpetual and eternal; from idea to execution and as it stands as I now write and beyond, I will examine my creative processes and choices to do with this project. Chang describes the external data as “data from external forces – other individuals, visual artefacts, documents, and literature” that provides “additional perspectives and contextual information to help you investigate and examine your subjectivity.” (103).

Why do people even bother being creative? My own experience as a novelist is that I am compelled to write. It is a desire to shine a torch into dark corners of society and life, to answer questions to answers that I am not only interested in, but through the process of this continual study of the world around me and the possibilities of life amplified through fiction, I have discovered much of myself as a man living in the place and time that I occupy. Life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belabouring him. This occurs in the principle of jazz syncopation, which simultaneously derides stumbling and makes it a rule. The eunuch-like voice of the crooner on the radio, the heiress's smooth suitor, who falls into the swimming pool in his dinner jacket, are models for those who must become whatever the system wants. Everyone can be like this omnipotent society; everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness. (Adorno, 1947)

Intertextuality – the acknowledgment of the relationship that exists between different literary texts (Hutcheon, 1998) – was to prove the perfect mode between my practice as a novelist and as a reader, allowing me to keep faith with the reader-writer contract I'd had with previous work. And in that sense, with that knowledge or at least awareness on my side as author and philosopher and thinker and theorist, that I am applying my own interpretation of texts studied and this text created, that I sit here, a

writer, within my own insights as that most illusory position, that post that evolves as quickly as thought and insight itself: the reader.

Readers bring with them a view that is at once plural and unique, informed and experienced, referential and exploratory. How will they read what I've read in *Chasers*? How will they read what I leave out, such as what is behind the locked door in apartment 59C (127-131). I enjoyed creating that openness in the text. The reader can, as they immerse themselves, become more than the person that they are in the time and place they are physically situated. There is the very real and fascinating reality where readers do not simply read to pass time, they read to inhabit time. The reader's imagination automatically takes over from the authorial vision, completing the symbiotic relationship that is the essence of any form of storytelling. In this sense, the core beliefs of existentialism prevail, that individual readers create the meaning and essence in their lives over any kind of authorial dictatorship.

Why do we read novels? Is it part of our quest to fulfil ourselves, our being? Perhaps to better understand ourselves and the world around us, the people we know and the ones we want to know. What is it that we are seeking when we open a novel and embark on a journey into the author's world? Is there some sense that as we as humans are haunted by a sense of completion that we search for in literature as parable and allegory of that which we cannot fathom, comprehend, or hope to seek in the truth that resides somewhere too distant for us to find in life. Could it be that authors are presenting not only their visions and beliefs but shortcuts to emotional growth to be explored in the many layered and tiered levels available given the context that the reader is coming from. For me the strength and success of any story lies in the characters, and in developing the characters that populate my fiction. This is in keeping with Kundera's views on developing a sense of self in character creation (2000: 33) and this view resonates throughout the artefact.

I've long been, prior to undertaking any literary studies, of the opinion that novels are snapshots of the world around us, written in and of the time however unconscious of those influences the author may be, and I still hold this opinion to be valid. Now, as a working novelist interested in the subtexts and nuances, I have a fascination in questioning the perceived notions that may well be prevalent as simplified givens as publishing trends or the by-product of a creative collective conscious of authors. If the reader is of the proposition that humans define their own meanings in life, will the fictional form of a human (character) within the context of a story as depicted in novel form, be in any way a kind of example of those who define the nature of their own existence? If individuals invent their own values and create the very terms under which they excel, where does that leave creativity?

I see Jesse, who rose to be clear and strong in his character journey throughout the narrative, answer that in the affirmative. It could be said that we only create when driven to do so by dark, semiconscious forces within us – guilt, anxiety, aggression, hostility, and so on. Certainly some novels strike us as being products of tortured self-expression. Artists and writers have suggested a link between their level of production and emotional fragility. For me, *Chasers* was all about driving back the dark. In meditation on what I felt as a teen, in order to write for them, the notion of feeling alone seemed central. Posing the question in my creative work “are we ever truly alone”, I show, through Jesse’s journey, his answer, so that readers may find their own. His journey, a connected narrative with a resolution of that core question/problem, proved a model of plot that worked here (Richardson, 2008).

As readers of novels, we rely on what is published in order to then read or listen to that product. It's not as though the readership is creating the content, although some case could be made for them ‘voting with their dollars’ as they buy a certain genre or type of novel. If it is a case of ‘if you build it, they will come’, then the publisher is, as they have been through time, the shapers of taste and public opinion as it is they who say what will be available for reader’s consumptions. As the novel is the product

of the author's creative mind, and the drive to mine that seam of ideas to build a novel is an arduous task in itself, where is the author left at the 'end' of the creative process? And what would be our options to put against this – to have a reader created content?

## Section 4: Creativity and Commerce

I knew that symbolically the destruction of the city would likely at the time of reading be read as the destruction of the economy, perhaps even the destruction of values. I designed certain markers in the narrative that would symbolise meaning for readers of all ages and of an age. For example, the rivers that run either side of Manhattan are a symbol of life for Jesse, and he makes a trip to the east river, where he meets a boy Chaser and Jesse says his first words out aloud since the prologue, and there at the river he sees a boat bobbing along, aimlessly. This is the boat from *Huckleberry Finn*, a symbol in my mind's eye as eternal as a moving river itself. Of *Huckleberry Finn*, T. S. Eliot says:

“It is Huck who gives the book style. The River gives the book its form. But for the River, the book might be only a sequence of adventures with a happy ending. A river, a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination.... Thus the River makes the book a great book... Mark Twain is a native, and the River God is his God.”  
(Bloom, 2006: 37)

So Jesse sees the possibility of salvation via the rivers running around Manhattan. At the end of the story, Jesse decides that he must not wait for help but instead help himself: and so he heads to a boat basin on the Hudson River, where he hopes to find a boat and a way off the island.

Jesse's viewpoint on the island of Manhattan is based on elements of what Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) eponymous character calls 'the Island of Despair'. Like Defoe's character, Jesse's journey is marked by self-reliance and preservation. He is marooned on an island, and struggles with identity and the coming of age element of what we associate with today as a YA title. When Crusoe is shipwrecked, his companions all die, save himself, and three animals who survived the shipwreck



(the captain's dog and two cats). Having overcome his despair, he fetches arms, tools and other supplies from the ship before it breaks apart and sinks. He proceeds to build a fenced-in habitation near a cave which he excavates himself. He keeps a calendar by making marks in a wooden cross which he has built. He hunts, grows barley and rice, dries grapes to make raisins for the winter months, learns to make pottery and raises goats, using tools salvaged from his ship, as well as created from stone and wood which he harvests on the island. In a similar way, Jesse marked his time, collecting what he could to survive, and at one point wrote with marker on a window 'How long do you think it'll be before help arrives?' (2010: 201).

### **Entertainment and Art; a thought-provoking combination.**

What I strived to achieve within the fine line of YA 'commercial' fiction was shaped by the notion that I wanted the story to be worthy and full of life, while being aware that I wanted to make it accessible on an easy-to-read level. I wanted it to be read, while being an expression of life, truth, and beauty that stand the test of time. To me novels are usually a representation of the period in which they are written; and the work merits lasting recognition for many generations of teenage readers to come, because it contains a certain universal appeal. Hence my idea of having the driving force of the novel being Jesse's inner journey and his sense of 'being alone'. I see good works of literature as those which touch us to our very core beings a least partly because they integrate themes that are understood by readers from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience. Themes of love, hate, death, life, and faith touch upon some of our most basic emotional responses, and I wanted to make connections from those to my readers.

*Chasers* was printed by Hachette Australia under their Lothian imprint in May 2010. With a first print run of only 5,000 copies (my adult novels first runs were closer to 30,000), I had feared that the book would 'sink without a trace' – that is, with so few

copies per book store (Dymocks, Borders, Collins, etc), department stores (Myer, David Jones, etc), and discount department store (K-Mart, Target, Big W, etc), that it would get little notice and the unsold copies would be returned to the publisher unsold soon thereafter. Thankfully, the book found an audience, was quickly reprinted, and from my fan-mail feedback (as emails via the contact function on my website [www.jamesphelan.com](http://www.jamesphelan.com)) the readership has not only been kids from around 10 years of age, but many of their parents and other adults as well, including those who had read my previous novels. A look at the first 100 such emails indicates a readership of about 60% school-aged, and 40% adult. Through the publisher's advertising and marketing, through many good reviews (see Appendices), the PR that I undertook via interviews and profiles in the media, and my own public speaking at schools (with over 10,000 students spoken to in the first 12 months since publication), *Chasers* is now in its 9th reprint and sold in several languages and available in over a hundred countries.

### **A YA readership or not?**

*Chasers* could be considered a “crossover” title, that is, one read by teens and adults. Michael Cart, an academic specialising in Young Adult Literature, says that while a ‘crossover title’ is a relatively new term, at least one aspect of the phenomenon it contemplates—the notion that young people will read books published for adults—is scarcely a new one. Two hundred years ago, for example, children were avidly reading *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, so many, in fact, that over the years those classics have come to be regarded as children's books. More recently, so many teens have read and embraced *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Lord of the Flies* that it is now commonplace to say that, if these books were published today, they'd be released as YA literature. Nevertheless, until recently publishers seemed oddly unwilling to capitalize on this. (Cart, 2010: 111).

Block, Cormier, Pullman, and Rowling demonstrated that adults would, indeed, read about young protagonists in books published (at least initially) for young readers. Two other books clearly evidenced to me the coming of age of the crossover phenomenon and the increased blurring of the line that divided adult books from young adults (and vice versa): the first was the British writer Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and the second was the American author Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2004). Perhaps because Haddon was already an established writer for children in England, *Curious Incident*, a story of a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome acting as detective, was published there in simultaneous children's and adult editions. When it was subsequently released in the United States, however, it appeared only as an adult title, though it immediately became hugely popular with young adult readers. A similar thing happened with the Canadian author Yann Martel's exquisitely inventive novel *Life of Pi*, which was also published in the United States as an adult title. In this case, however, Harcourt, its publisher, recognized the title's crossover appeal and subsequently issued a YA paperback edition.

The crossover phenomenon has excited as much interest in the United Kingdom as it has in the United States. Indeed, five of the six books shortlisted for the 2004 Carnegie Medal (Britain's equivalent to the Newbery) were crossover titles. Four years later, Amanda Craig, the children's critic of the London Times, wrote, "Crossover books—novels that appeal to adults as much as they do to children—are the publishing phenomenon of the past decade". Craig (2008) attributes the success of the crossover book to the plodding dullness of contemporary adult literary fiction, that it is the power of story-telling which, however, lies at the heart of the crossover novel's rise. So, while the distinctions among children's literature, YA literature, and adult literature have historically been flexible and loosely defined, it is often policed by adults (librarians, teachers, parents, booksellers, publishers) who feel strongly about the border. (Flynn, 2008)

**The commercial aspects of publishing young adult fiction: can creativity, allegory, and symbolism remain?**

Australia does seem to have developed an extraordinary cadre of gifted, home-grown YA authors, whose work is often both cross-marketed and cross-published there. Brilliant writers like Markus Zusak, Margo Lanagan, and Sonya Harnett belong in this category, though all are published only as YA in the United States.

Commercially, my *Alone* books are sold as YA titles in all markets, which means a unit price per book around half that of my adult novels; that low cover price, combined with my small print runs, has meant that I earned out my advance on the novel very early, and now enjoy royalties. That, in turn, has proved the *Alone* trilogy to be a successful publishing outing for my publishing houses, with over 30,000 copies sold locally. Am I surprised that my readers are not all young adults? No – I’ve had feedback from kids eight years old, as well as from grandparents, and have found, as Eco declared, created ‘every type of text explicitly selects a very general model of possible reader.’ (Eco, 1994: 7)

Of all passages, coming of age, or reaching adolescence is the purest, in that it is the loneliest. The job of growing up, however, is demanding because, at the same time that young people are trying to become adults, they are also trying to show that they are different from their parents. This leaves each generation scrambling to find its own way to be unique, which is one of the reasons that literature for young adults tends to be a contemporary medium. Each generation wants its own stories. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson (2009) use the term YA to include students in junior high as well as those graduating from high school and still finding their way into adult life. By young adult literature, we mean anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and eighteen choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments. When we talk about children’s literature, we refer to books

released by the juvenile or junior division of a publisher and intended for children from pre-kindergarten to about sixth grade (1-3).

As an author of 'adult' novel stepping into YA territory, there was little hostility in the publishing industry that I encountered, yet I did have a few colleagues ask why I would 'write down'. A fine illustration of this sentiment comes from remarks about children's books made by Martin Amis on the BBC's new book programme "Faulks on Fiction" (2011), included the following: "People ask me if I ever thought of writing a children's book," Amis said, in a sideways excursion from a chat about John Self, the antihero of his 1984 novel *Money*. "I say, 'If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children's book', but otherwise the idea of being conscious of who you're directing the story to is anathema to me, because, in my view, fiction is freedom and any restraints on that are intolerable... I would never write about someone that forced me to write at a lower register than what I can write." But in an angry blog response on her website, author Lucy Coats, whose children's books include the *Greek Beasts* and *Heroes* series, called Amis's remark "arrogant twaddle" with an "implicit insult to those of us who do write children's books" (2011). Writer Jane Stemp, whose book *The Secret Songs* was shortlisted for the 1998 Guardian children's fiction award, and who has cerebral palsy, said in the Guardian (2008): "I have brain damage ... So Amis couldn't have insulted me harder if he'd sat down and thought about it for a year. Superglueing him to a wheelchair and piping children's fiction into his auditory canal suddenly seems like a good idea."

Coats said that as a children's writer she certainly did not "write down" to her young readership. "Children are astute observers of tone – they loathe adults who patronise them with a passion, adults who somehow assume they are not sentient beings because they are children," she said. "When I write fiction, I research and plan just as (I assume) Amis does. Then I sit down and let what comes, come. The story generally tells itself without any inner voice saying, Oh, but you're writing for children – you mustn't say this, or – oh goodness, certainly not that!" Every writer is the amanuensis

to their characters, often using language they never consciously would. “It's not a feat of the writer's art exclusive to highbrow literary fiction. When I write, I think about language, the richness and complexity and wonder of it, and I use it to hook the reader into my story, to ensnare them in my net of words, to take them so far that they forget that what they are seeing is only print on a page of a dead tree. I say the reader – and that means whoever is reading my book regardless of age.” *Troll Fell* author Katherine Langrish also took up the debate, asking: “People who make shoes or clothes, or who prepare food for children, aren't generally considered less skilful than those who do the same things for adults – why is the opposite so often assumed to be true of books?” (2011).

Some children's-book authors are deliberately shaping their books for adults. Jeff Kinney, author of the mega best-selling series, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2004), said he first envisioned his illustrated books about a middle-school kid named Greg as wry cartoons for adults. His first draft was 1,300 illustrated pages. His publisher, Abrams, convinced him to target kids, arguing that the sassy young narrator would appeal to children, and adults would follow. Mr. Kinney was sceptical at first. He thought kids might miss the fact that his protagonist, Greg, is an unreliable narrator (not to mention a bad role model). But it proved a savvy move. “The books have found a much bigger readership by going through the kids,” Mr. Kinney says, with over 150 million books sold to date, and stating that he still writes for adults and is often surprised to see children at his public appearances: “I'm so focused on the adult reader that it's always a strange thing for me to get out on the road and meet lots of kids.” (Alter, 2013).

I think teenagers are as resourceful as any age group, particularly so when we are seeing this story's events through the eyes of 16 year old narrator, Jesse. Characters are more stylised than people we know and stories in novels are the more dramatic moments, so 16 year olds in fiction, such as Holden Caulfield and Picene ‘Pi’ Patel, seem more resourceful than we'd expect. I put Jesse into a post-apocalyptic world

and tried to be true to him while letting the chips fall where they might -- extraordinary circumstances brought out some unique methods of survival for him. Young adult literature reflects the changes that adolescents are experiencing. Making their first excursions into adult territory, adolescents are learning to take responsibility for their own actions. Thus, young adult literature reflects their experiences with conflicts, focuses on themes that interest young people, includes young protagonists and mostly young characters, and has language common to young adults (Vogels, 1996). Rather than being watered down in content or style, it is often sophisticated, artistic, and compelling.

### **Setting and place**

I chose New York because it's the world's greatest city and its most inglorious, its most frenetic and its most lonely, and it has played a key role in spawning two global events that have shaped the opening of this century. Australian readers will see New York as Jesse sees it – through Australian eyes. The setting is a backdrop to the series but is a minor component compared to the story of Jesse that unfolds on the page. I tried to make every word of his so true that it hurt, so that by the final chapter when our truth is skewed it hurts all the more but at the same time it's an uplifting revelation because the lies preceding it were beautiful: they'd saved a life. Although young adult fiction no longer shies away from plots that centre on topics once considered only for adults, authors of young adult literature use less graphic details while still conveying the reality of the situation (1996). However, the literature is not boring in subject matter or in its appeal to young people. Rather, it contains exciting and intriguing plots and characters.

Jesse is aware of 9/11, as he was headed on a field trip to the memorial when the disaster struck (6), and they discuss the footage seen from the day: "Remember the footage of 9/11? After the towers came down, all that dust and crap that covered

people?” (156). To me it seemed logical he’d think of it in the context of what he’s seeing all around him, and I tried to have logic permeate wherever possible in the characters choices. Linking real events in his mind was something he employed to cope with the situation at hand – this kind of thing has happened before and people have overcome it, so he can do that here too. It deals with horrors as Jesse sees them: illness, mortality, heartbreak and loss.

The situation in *Chasers* is a matter of survival in a world filled with danger. I think at the end of this first book many of the questions that it threw up are turned on their head. The main question that remains is “Are you ever really alone?” Some readers will like or hate certain characters or moments, which is great, because I never write to make everyone feel or think the same thing. As for answers, I take kids too seriously to doubt that they’re already far smarter than me and can see answers that I couldn’t ever anticipate.

### **YA fiction’s evolution to today**

In *Young Adult Literature Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation* (2006), K. Bucher and M. L. Manning put it that although some children’s and adult’s books appeal to young adults, literature written primarily for young adults should reflect several criteria. It should reflect young adults’ age and development by addressing their reading abilities, thinking levels, and interest levels. It should deal with contemporary issues, problems, and experiences with characters to whom adolescents can relate. This includes topics such as dealing with parents and other adults in authority; facing illness and death; dealing with peer pressure, specifically relating to drugs, alcohol, and sexual experimentation; and facing the realities of addiction and pregnancy. It should consider contemporary world perspectives including cultural, social, and gender diversity; environmental issues; global politics; and international interdependence. (2006: 9-10). Also, young adult fiction usually has a concise plot



with a time span of 2 months or less, as well as a focus on the present and future in the life of one central character (Vogels, 1996).

Young adult literature serves a number of purposes. It may: teach adolescents about diverse peoples and the world beyond their community, provide pleasure reading, demonstrate the range of human emotions and allow adolescents to experience them as a result of reading quality literature, reveal the realities of life, provide vicarious experiences, focus on “essentials” that make order out of chaos, depict the functions of institutions of society, allow readers to escape into the realms of fantasy, introduce readers to excellent writers and writing, and increase literacy and the ability to analyse literature – and life. Of course, young adult literature cannot provide these benefits unless adolescents actually read the books. (Bucher & Manning, 2006: 10)

Writing with the belief that students will have a better chance of becoming life-long readers if they have choices and enjoy what they read, Nilsen and Donelson offer a comprehensive, reader-friendly introduction to YA literature framed within a literary, historical, and social context. The authors provide teachers with criteria for evaluating books of all genres, from poetry and nonfiction to mysteries, science fiction, and graphic novels. Coverage of timely issues such as pop culture and mass media have been added to help teachers connect with students' lives outside the classroom. (Nilsen & Donelson, 2008.)

Two novels from the 1950s continue to draw the attention of adolescent readers: *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and *Lord of the Flies* (1954). I loved both of them as a teenager and they were invaluable in writing *Chasers*. Unlike more recent fiction classified as YA, these two were written with an adult audience in mind, as was another perennial favourite Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985). So these books were written with teenage and child protagonists, and have since been accepted as YA, and posed a question for me as I was writing *Chasers*: have I written a novel with a teenage character, or is it a novel *for* teenagers?

Something academic discourse does not fully take into account, as today, this notion of who the book is *for* is more clouded than ever, and it's a largely *commercial* decision (rather than, what we do as critics and critical readers, is apply our theoretical eyes to the work after the fact in order to identify it via its components). Indeed, many popular novelists of adult books, such as James Patterson, John Grisham, Chris Ryan, Jodi Picoult, etc, are now writing or having their work re-branded as being for children. My friend, the crime writer Jeffery Deaver, said to me in 2011 that his publisher has asked him to write YA, of which we've discussed the pros and cons and length and it is something about which he remains sceptical in undertaking. For me as a novelist, the concept and constraints of writing to a particular audience lessened as the process of writing went on and the story and characters developed. As publishers began to focus on the emerging adolescent market, booksellers and libraries, in turn, began creating YA sections distinct from either children's literature or novels written for adults. In the 1990s, Young Adult literature included topics such as, drinking, sexuality, drug use, identity, and YA came into its own with the better written, more serious, and more varied young adult books published during the last two decades (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 1996: 5).

YA Literature covers as many themes as adult literature, in order to appeal to a wide variety of adolescent readers. Some of these themes and issues include: identity, sexuality, science fiction, depression, suicide, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, familial struggles, bullying, friendship, love, race, money, divorce, relationships within families (Wells, 2003). With *Chasers*, there was a moment where I discussed packaging with my agent and through that we agreed that we would pitch it to the publisher (and potential overseas publishers) as a YA book only. Should a publisher propose the book become published as an adult title as well, I'm sure I would be open to that.

The culture that surrounds and absorbs young adults plays a huge role in their lives; YA literature explores themes important and crucial to adolescence, an awareness of which was always at the background whilst I was writing *Chasers*. I knew from the outset that I would have my primary focus centred on a young lead character and write in the first person, in the hope that the reader experiences the emotions, situations, and the like through Jesse and is able to see how these problems/situations are resolved. The content also needs to play a significant role in how we approach this group and the books we offer them to read (Lesesne, 2003: 14). During discussions with my Australian publisher about the cover for the novel, I did raise my thoughts as to whether it was too YA in feel, e.g. that it may dissuade adult readers from picking it up, as Bloomsbury recognised when it published *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* in 2007, as seen in the Telegraph (2012):

“The editions, published simultaneously, only differ in their covers but pre-orders for the adult version already stand at 45 per cent of the total and are rising faster than demand for the children's version. Bloomsbury, publisher of the Potter series which started 10 years ago, recognised the need for an adult edition - possibly because older people were embarrassed at being seen reading a book with a childish cover - and brought out alternative covers for the first time when they launched the fifth book.”

Being open to having my work read and ‘produced’ by those readers freed my mind of any apprehension about being received by a new, younger audience. During re-writing, I went back to a book I read as a teen, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1965), and re-read it as a 30 year old. It still held up, and reading it some fifteen years after my first outing produced a similar read and a flood of memories of a summer in 1995. *The Outsiders* (1967) focuses on a group of teens who feel that they are not yet represented and instead of having a nostalgic tone that may have been typical in young adult books written by adults, it displays a truer, darker side of young adult life that I wanted to capture in *Chasers*. *The Outsiders*, written by Hinton who at the time was only a teenager, and in ways I felt that I was close enough to that age group to do

similar justice to a YA outing (though myself in reflections as a young man, and via being the eldest of five boys). I remember in my high school literature class that this book sparked talk about what we as adolescents faced and how it was depicted in fiction. That those discussions stayed with me, and that I drew upon them to write *Chasers*.

Reading about issues that adolescents can relate to allows them to identify with a particular character, and creates a sense of security when experiencing something that is going on within their lives. “Whether you call them archetypes or stereotypes, there are certain experiences and certain kinds of people that are common to adolescents. Reading about it may help a young person validate his or her own experience and make some kind of meaning out of it” (Blasingame, 2007: 12). April Dawn Wells (2003) discovers seventeen common traits of young adult novels: friendship, getting into trouble, interest in the opposite sex, money, divorce, single parents, remarriage, problems with parents, grandparents, younger siblings, concern over grades/school, popularity, puberty, race, death, neighbourhood, and job/working. In forming my role of Jesse and his three friends and his (and their) journey, I attempted to cover most of these points and more within *Chasers*, and through my editing process was able to bring in a couple more points (eg finding the drugs in the case, and the discussion on pages 145-146) that I had missed in my original draft. Although many genres exist in YA literature, the problem novel tends to be the most popular among young readers. Problem novel refers to young adult novels in the realistic fiction category that “addresses personal and social issues across socio-economic boundaries and within both traditional and non-traditional family structures” (Cole 2009: 98).

My own reading and literary education has a deep relationship to my writing. For example, I have studied and am influenced by the Bildungsroman journey – a novel of development, which is sometimes referred to as a coming of age story, emerged in German literary criticism during the late 18th century. The novel usually involves the “coming of age,” maturation, and/or development of the main character. or coming-

of-age story is a literary genre which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood and in which character change is thus extremely important. (Bakhtin, 1996: 21. Jeffers, 2005: 2) All my readings, in their own ways, some at the forefront and some at the background of my mind, influenced me as a writer, creating what Rohman (1965) identified in the writing process as the necessity of the writer, and of writing, as a deliberative act: “Without a person at the centre, the process is meaningless”. By the time I put my finishing touches to Jesse’s journey in *Chasers*, I felt that my character at that centre was someone I couldn’t wait to meet again. With so many questions remaining at the end of the text, I knew I had started what would become a trilogy, perhaps even a series; with *Chasers*, my YA writing journey had started.

## **Section 5: What only the novel can say: notes on style, allegory, and symbolism.**

Writing the artefact, *Chasers*, was as much a personal journey as a professional and academic one. I wanted to write a story about a teenage boy that was a coming-of-age novel, showing the psychological, moral and social shaping of the main character, Jesse. *Chasers* is very much a bildungsroman, telling us about the coming of age of Jesse as he is out looking for answers, foremost of which, we learn at the end, is the notion of “can I survive on my own?”.

### **Creative aims for a fictional truth**

I aimed to capture young readers' imaginations and to motivate them to read, think and be critical. The book focuses on the darker side of humanity, dealing with issues such as bullying, theft, rape, and murder as well as the obvious supernatural themes inherent with the *Chasers*. Themes such as normality, oppression, survival, and overcoming imposing odds. Similarly, the theme of making one's way through adolescence, an argument for tolerance, a prolonged plea for an end to bigotry and that also pass on a message to question authority and not assume that the establishment or the press tells you all of the truth. I wanted to write a novel that embodies the search for freedom; it is ultimately a critique of the American Dream, which I regard as our shared/identifiable dream, in the sense of the shared ‘Western’/English reader, alluded to in the “Americanised” discussion point among my characters (94).

9/11 we know well and has been written about in novel form. Indeed, on the 10th anniversary of the attacks, The Guardian Newspaper compiled a list of its 20 best

books on the topic, and most the selections are worthy. However, there are some that were not on there, such as William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005), both of which I believe were just as good. And what do I mean by 'good'? They were worthy of reading, and would stand up to re-reading to gain insights into deeper levels of the text.

Jesse discusses anthrax and other possibilities on page 63. The 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States, also known as Amerithrax from its FBI case name, occurred over the course of several weeks beginning on September 18, 2001, only a few days after the September 11 attacks. Letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to several news media offices and two Democratic U.S. Senators, killing five people and infecting many others. At the time I was a staff writer working at The Age newspaper in Melbourne, where we had our own scares of suspect white powder arriving in the post, leading to the installation of special safety equipment; and giving my writer's journal material of recorded feelings and fears that I would use in *Chasers*.

Another allegorical component was the Global Financial crisis. I've always been fascinated by economics. I'd watched the governments of Bush and Howard giving away easy credit and expanding national debt to unprecedented levels. At the time (2001) I wrote the first draft of my first novel (*Fox Hunt*, 2006), oil was \$7 per barrel. A few years later, when I was writing my third thriller (*Blood Oil*, 2008) – about an oil crisis – the price was over \$170 per barrel. While researching that novel I studied the housing bubble collapse in the US and several developed nations. Within months, the world was in recession. By August of 2008, it had become known as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Its build-up and signposts and explosion seemed to me not only symbolic of a novel, but of the creation of a novel and the reading of a novel. Together with the events and aftermath of both 9/11 and the Anthrax Attacks, the GFC would shape my work's narratives as a knowledge base I was bringing to the story construction.

What triggered the GFC for *me* as a background symbol of fear and suffering to draw an analogy to (eg the masses are affected the most, they're the weakest – ie the docile chasers – while those with more hostile intent are the tiny minority at the top of the food chain – I thought of as 'alpha chasers') was the boom and collapse of the shadow banking system. In a June 2008 speech, President and CEO of the NY Federal Reserve Bank Timothy Geithner — who in 2009 became Secretary of the United States Treasury — placed significant blame for the freezing of credit markets on a 'run' on the entities in the 'parallel' banking system, also called the 'shadow banking' system. These entities became critical to the credit markets underpinning the financial system, but were not subject to the same regulatory controls. Further, these entities were vulnerable because they borrowed short-term in liquid markets to purchase long-term, illiquid and risky assets. This meant that disruptions in credit markets would make them subject to rapid deleveraging, selling their long-term assets at depressed prices. Paul Krugman, laureate of the Nobel Prize in Economics, described the run on the shadow banking system as the “core of what happened” to cause the crisis. He referred to this lack of controls as “malign neglect.” (Krugman, 2009).

One event in particular shocked me and put the crisis into a realm that I knew would be almost impossible to get out of (indeed, I believe the worst is yet to hit): the collapse of Bear Stearns. On Monday, March 10, 2008, Wall Street was tense, as it had been for months. The mortgage market had crashed; major companies like Citigroup and Merrill Lynch had written off billions of dollars in bad loans. In what the economists called a “credit crisis,” the big banks were so spooked they had all but stopped lending money, a trend which, if it continued, would spell disaster on 21st-century Wall Street, where trading firms routinely borrow as much as 50 times the cash in their accounts to trade complex financial instruments such as derivatives. For *Chasers*, I drew the analogy of the GFC trigger (attack) to Jesse discussing being 'who did this' (126).



## **Narrative themes to unpack and unpeel**

Forces of consumerism – a globalised world where money drives everything, the most potent socio-political force in our culture – have gone on pushing. In many respects, my novels have benefited from that: they're commercial fiction, sold at discount department stores and airports, advertised through catalogues and billboards, attempting to attract mass audiences. So our literature is running up against that commercial barrier, and so its teaching has become a commercial enterprise in its own right. Martin Amis (2002), says that:

“...some citadels, true, have proved stormable. You can become rich without having any talent (via the scratchcard and the rollover jackpot). You can become famous without having any talent (by abasing yourself on some TV nerd-othon: a clear improvement on the older method of simply killing a celebrity and inheriting the aura). But you cannot become talented without having any talent. Therefore, talent must go.” (xii)

The talent of which he speaks is in all writers who dare bring it to the fire, and with *Chasers* I attempted just that: I rallied against the convention of creating what my publishers said would sell by the palette-load (young teenage spies geared towards a male YA readership), and I trusted my gut, my inner artist, to strive to write the best book I could, the story that had to be told, the story that was worthy of not only lasting, but being talked about.

The Kübler-Ross (2005) model of grief is a macro theme in *Chasers*. Jesse goes through a five stage journey of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance of his situation. Bargaining and depression stages are interspersed character threads throughout the story, going back to that idea which started back in high school, when I read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, which gave me the concept of how a teenager in a war zone coped with her alone time – by writing to imaginary friends. At the time I thought about incorporating this kind of concept into my character Lachlan Fox, who suffers from PTSD, as this was the first novel I

started when I was 15 (which eventually became *Fox Hunt*) but I felt it didn't work with the genre. It has been on the backburner ever since, and I finally found a way of writing this technique into *Chasers*. While the three friends of Jesse's are not "imaginary" like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* (1996), or taken from characters in a book (eg Anne Frank's literary device), they were alive, once.

I imagine Jesse's three friends in *Chasers* as being like those from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), where here they help Jesse's ideological, ethical, and emotional transformation after the supernatural visitations representative of the Past, Present, and Yet to Come. Jesse's journey of survival and coping, with the help of his friends, was the driving engine of the narrative and the ultimate payoff in his character arc when he shows, and tells us (207), that he will accept that he is alone 'I am alone'.

This explores how, when you "lose yourself" inside the world of a fictional character while reading a story, you may actually end up changing your own behaviour and thoughts to match that of the character, a recent study suggests. Such experience-taking doesn't happen all the time. It only occurs when people are able, in a sense, to forget about themselves and their own self-concept and self-identity while reading. The more you're reminded of your own personal identity, the less likely you'll be able to take on a character's identity. You have to be able to take yourself out of the picture, and really lose yourself in the book in order to have this authentic experience of taking on a character's identity. After reading the story, the participants completed a questionnaire that measured their level of experience-taking – how much they adopted the perspective of the character in the story. When you share a group membership with a character from a story told in first-person voice, you're much more likely to feel like you're experiencing his or her life events. (Grabmeier, 2012).

Early influences formed me as a creative writer, from the books my parents read to me to the experiences I lived and absorbed. When I was ten years old I travelled

around the world for a second time. The Cold War was under way, USSR was a country, I visited West Germany, and an Austria with Kurt Waldheim as president. The world was divided into two spheres, and all these countries I went to were living under the threat of a possible nuclear war. People I met in the US had trained as children for survival techniques in the advent of nuclear and conventional weapon attack. Signs in New York denoted the underground nuclear fallout shelters. Years later, I would visit to find my friends in NYC had stockpiled gas masks and duct tape.

What of my created infected, the “chasers”? Zombie myths arise throughout human culture, and they ‘warn against the illusion of the stable, self-possessed subjectivities and the belief that our reflection in the mirror projects an undisturbed, continuous, natural process called “I”’ (Thomas 2010: 8). Zombie theory has been utilised within the academy as an explanation for economic decay within late capitalism as well as ‘missing bodies’ (McGlotten & Moore, 2013). Shaka McGlotten and Lisa Moore define zombie theory as cutting across disciplines so as to frame ‘the limits of consciousness and embodiment’ (2). James Wierzbicki sees the most frightening aspect of the ‘modern zombie’ as being ‘the dazzling speed with which it spreads its condition among an otherwise normal population (2010: 10). He describes this as leading to ‘the embodiment of a nightmarish apocalyptic plague’ (12). He notes that ‘the concept of ‘zombie’ has appeared often in serious writings in such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, gender studies, sociology, medicine, computer science, international finance, philosophy, and literary theory’ (13). The Zombie undead, then, is a dominant metaphor that I am referring to in this section as a metaphor for capitalism itself: ‘the zombie, which is not an individual monstrosity but merely a generalised manifestation of a widespread condition, is an apt metaphor for much that troubles us in recent times’ (14).

Late capitalism also engages Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry in a consideration of the usefulness of the zombie metaphor whose ubiquity ‘suggest the zombie’s continued cultural currency... that speaks to some of the most puzzling elements of our

sociohistorical moment, wherein many are trying to ascertain what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism-if anything' (2008: 86). They assert that 'there is an irreconcilable tension between global capitalism and the theoretical school of posthumanism' (87). Moreover, they discuss the loss of the subjective self (a central meme of capitalism and the way power works to subjugate others. Fear of zombies is central to fear of loss of self and cultural harmony that can also be expressed in economic terms as Daiki Asanuma discusses how '...the existence of zombie firms is one of the reasons for the stagnation of Japanese economy' (87), and applies Zombie theory to his paper. He concludes that allowing firms to have a living death affects all business networks. Zombies as allegorical figures, then, are commonly called upon within theoretical discussions of late capitalism. They stand for a crisis within human self-understanding as well as social challenges and the dislocation of cultural boundaries – further reflected in my narrator being an Australian in a foreign land.

For Lauro and Embry, the zombie is an 'appropriate stand-in for our current moment, and specifically for America in the global economy, where we feed off the products of the rest of the planet, and, alienated from our own humanity, stumble forward, groping for immortality even as we decompose' (93). Caught between life and death, the zombie offers neither solution nor resolution to the negative effects of global capitalism. Today, rather than explicating the slavery mythology from which it arose, the zombie 'allegorizes the imperial, the colonial, the capitalist structure...' (97). The modern zombie 'now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system' (99). The zombie's virulence, then, arises from its need to 'transfer its burden to others' like the 'waste economy's operations (100).

## **Memories of myself as a young adult reader**

As a 10 year old, on a bus tour in Arizona I sat next to a WWII veteran, Ira Dunn. In writing *Chasers* I returned to my diary at the time and read over my experiences of that meeting. Ira been tortured by the Germans -- they'd used bolt cutters on his knuckles. In his pack he carried some books that he read. He read *The Great Gatsby*. He gave me *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to keep. Armed Services Editions (ASEs) were small, compact, paperback books printed by the Council on Books in Wartime for distribution within the American military during World War II. This program was in effect from 1943 to 1946. The ASEs were designed to provide entertainment to soldiers serving overseas, while also educating them about political, historical, and military issues. The slogan of the Council on Books in Wartime was, “Books are weapons in the war of ideas.”

I imagined *ALONE* to be written as a response to that idea of ASEs. This was a trilogy of books written about war, for us to read, to learn about it. As the GI's read to escape their reality, in a way so would the readers of *ALONE*, but I wanted them to inhabit time, rather than pass it, and I aimed for the reader to be confronted by the nature of man and war and its true cost – so a kind of inverted ASE. Completing the bildungsroman format, like Harry Potter, Jesse must grow up prematurely, losing the chance of a last year as a pupil in a school and needing to act as an adult, on whose decisions everybody else depends—the grown-ups included. I imagine Jesse doing this by being the one to step into the fight at the Piers, and then face his beliefs and renounced them. His character arc reflects those three stages of grief, and each book's arc moves him from one state to another — in other words, to effect change.

Story arcs in contemporary drama often follow the pattern of bringing a character to a low point, removing the structures the character depends on, then forcing the character to find new strength without those structures -- eg, after Jesse succumbs to

anger, as most have done in the sequel, *Survivor*, he finds the strength in that climactic character arc scene to get on with life, away from 30 Rock, to keep on living and doing what he does: survive and help others. He's forced to grow up early. That was a starting point. What I needed next was an idea of what the series would be about.

### **My writerly philosophy, and the implied reader**

My 2005 non-fiction *Literati: Australian Contemporary Literary Figures discuss Fear, Frustrations and Fame* spurred an interest into the world beyond the written object of the book as artefact; the process of the creative and working mind of the author, the now real-time interactions between the author and the reader, and academic thoughts in and around literary criticism.

My creativity is not just a response to readers, critics, or literary education; it depends upon my inner writerly self as well my reading and awareness of the life around me. I am interested in allegory in fiction and explored this in *Chasers*. I see allegory as a demonstrative form of representation explaining meaning other than the words that are spoken or written, and communicates its message by means of symbolic figures, actions or symbolic representation. As a literary device, an allegory in its most general sense is an extended metaphor. As an artistic device, an allegory is a visual symbolic representation. For me, it is all of this and more.

I don't mind if readers see the allegorical content in *Chasers* as intended, or if they write their own; and there's something magical that happens when the imagination of an author, through their words on a page, collide with a reader's own imagination. At the Adelaide writers week in March 2008, I heard Peter Carey say in discussion: "Writers of fiction should be insisting more on the fact that, in an unembarrassed way, that we are magicians, it is what we do and we do make up things that never

happened before and we don't often know where things have come from." *Chasers* is heavily influenced by Goethe's *Faust*, and its themes of cowardice, trust, intellectual curiosity, and redemption are prominent. *The Master and Margarita* is a novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, woven around the premise of a visit by the Devil to the fervently atheistic Soviet Union. Many critics consider the book to be one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, and one of the foremost Soviet satires, directed against a suffocatingly bureaucratic social order.

Umberto Eco is a major proponent of this kind of openness of the text. His *The Open Work* (1989) is where Eco began seriously developing his ideas on the "open" text and on semiotics, writing many essays on these subjects. In it, Eco argued that literary texts are fields of meaning, rather than strings of meaning, and that they are understood as open, internally dynamic and psychologically engaged fields.

Literature which limits one's potential understanding to a single, unequivocal line, the closed text, remains the least rewarding, while texts that are the most active between mind and society and life (open texts) are the most lively and best—although valuation terminology is not his primary area of focus. Eco emphasizes the fact that words do not have meanings that are simply lexical, but rather, they operate in the context of utterance. He also extended the axis of meaning from the continually deferred meanings of words in an utterance to a play between expectation and fulfilment of meaning. Eco comes to these positions through study of language and from semiotics, rather than from psychology or historical analysis.

Ultimately, *Chasers* deals with: the interplay of good and evil (eg the characters talking about the evil within "Evil does exist, Anna said. I know it." 63-64), innocence and guilt, courage and cowardice, greed, much of it encompassed here:

I'd seen things in the past four days; things other people wouldn't believe. Buildings glittering in the dark and becoming dust. Dead bodies. People no longer in control of themselves. Deranged men with a bloodlust, driven by some kind of primal greed. I'd had nightmares and terrifying

thoughts, but nothing had prepared me for that terrible moment. A trigger being pulled. A life taken. I closed my eyes and saw blood and realised I would never forget what it's like to hear a pistol being fired up close, for real. For keeps. Was that Chaser less than human? Did it matter? I'd flinched on the first shot, and the second, and the third, but the fourth – that last shot – I didn't flinch. I'd watched it enter that man and kill him and by then he didn't flinch either. Death didn't seem so remote anymore – I was surrounded by it. (92)

Further, I explored such issues as the responsibility towards truth denied (Jesse's masking, for the reader's sake, of the true horrors he goes through and witnesses, such as what he saw in the tunnel ("The tunnel was impassable and I saw things inside – horrific things – that I hope I won't ever have to talk about.") and behind that door in apartment 59C ("It's the tunnel all over again, Jesse." 168), and the freedom of the spirit in an unfree world with the repeated notion that the characters – ie Jesse – always has choices ahead of them – however bleak the situation.

Jesse in New York is very much an outsider, as he is as a teenager: he's in a place where he's finding his way, his identity and worth, his place and role in the world. When looking at boyhood's end in contemporary YA fiction, there's an obvious place to start: *The Outsiders* (1967), S.E. Hinton's iconic novel. *The Outsiders* is true to its title. Hinton's central character, Ponyboy, is not only an outsider by virtue of caste (he's lower class, a "greaser" in the novel's terms) but also, because of his unusual academic success, an outsider from his caste. There's a vague sense in his gang that Ponyboy is going to "make it"; that he's destined to get some of the power greasers are always denied. But no one knows exactly what "making it" would look like. In *The Outsiders*, and for Ponyboy in particular, "manhood" isn't so much a status to attain — it's a problem to solve.



Love and sensuality are also dominant themes in the novel, especially seen through Jesse's love and longing towards Anna as they had kissed in backstory, as referenced on pages 26-27 "...she'd kissed me and it was hot and fast, but she seemed to forget about it as soon as the weather cleared. New York had seemed colder then.", and Jesse later (111) feels guilt for thinking fond thoughts of that kiss – which we understand why, by the end. My publisher/main editor wanted that reference to a kiss cut, as she felt it would have more power if the characters had no more than sexual tension throughout the story (as well as a sense that "boys won't like it"). My response was "What tension is there, if Anna is dead from the beginning of the first chapter?" What value is left? Longing. Jesse had love and it was taken from him. That value, that power, had to remain: "Her lips were red and her eyelashes long and dark and I watched her writing and wished I could kiss her again. I never would, would I?" (192). The interplay of fire, water, snow, wind, destruction and other natural forces provides a constant accompaniment to the events of the novel, as do light and darkness, noise and silence, sun and moon, storms and tranquillity, fire and water, and other powerful polarities. For Jesse, there is a complex relationship between there (New York) and home (Melbourne) throughout the novel, sometimes polyphony, sometimes counterpoint, ever present: Jesse lets us know that he wants to go home, for that's his quest – at least, on the surface. His greater inner quest is to come clean with himself, to own up to being alone, so as to go on surviving.

There are numerous post-apocalyptic YA works, from Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* (1973) to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), where I found elements that worked and didn't in tales of kids in post-apocalyptic scenarios. For Golding's work, at an allegorical level, the central theme is the conflicting impulses toward civilization—live by rules, peacefully and in harmony—and towards the will to power. Themes include the tension between groupthink and individuality, between rational and emotional reactions, and between morality and immorality. How these play out, and how different people feel the influences of these, form a major subtext of *Lord of the Flies*. With Jesse, I developed a character constantly presented with

choices, and his soliloquy with his group is encompassing of all the conversational needs that a strong story needed to not only draw the reader along but to lend honesty to his character's journey – and, ultimately, lead to the big payoff at the end (“I am alone.”) which to me was the entire point of this novel: to prove to teenage readers that no-matter what, you are never really alone.

My work in *Chasers* arises from my philosophical belief that as humans we cannot escape evil. Beelzebub dwells within every human soul and it cannot be hunted or driven away. Mankind is sick and guilty for giving into these sins. However, mankind is not lost. Through the use of reason and civilized means we can escape the grasp of evil and its dark reign of anarchy. Evil served as a means of destruction in the story. Reason and virtue will always conquer over rage and violence. Wars are not the answers to every global conflict. Every war we have, we have to pass on to our children. In the end mankind is saved by the nature of reason not the use of war.

Another huge influence upon me as a person and writer is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943) was a huge influence on me as a person and writer, and specifically on *Chasers*. Though ostensibly a children's book, *The Little Prince* makes several profound and idealistic observations about life and human nature. In doing so it displays the role YAF may play philosophically on the development of adolescents (Galembert, 2000: 13). For example, Saint-Exupéry tells of a fox meeting the young prince during his travels on Earth. The story's essence is contained in the lines uttered by the fox to the Little Prince: “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” (Phelan, 2010: 70) For Jesse, this is the essence of his denial, and what finally fuelled his acceptance of the situation in keeping his friends ‘alive’ in his heart; they were right there with him until he was strong enough to let them go, to survive on his own, alone. Other key thematic messages are articulated by the fox, such as: “You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed” (72) which for Jesse translates as being those friends he is keeping alive in his

heart and mind's eye, and as the fox says "It is the time you have devoted to your rose that makes your rose so important." (72) Jesse may not fully realise it, but it is the time he spent with his friends in the *before* and *after* the train accident of the prologue that means so much to them and he; it's not just a one-way relationship, of him 'taking' from his friends by keeping them alive in his memory – it also plays as a homage that he went on to know them for as long dead as alive, a kind of fearful symmetry of survival. Sure, he can eat what he wants and sleep when he wants and do what he wants (some teenage dreams of mine, to be sure), but all he really wants is be normal, to be home, to be safe – to go back to all that he missed in the prologue.

### **Facing and filling the Blank Page; an anxiety of influence**

I know very well the realities of working as a novelist; all of my work has been made to deadline, whether contracted or not, and I read and absorb story across all medium for inspiration. Influence upon us writers is everywhere, and in the first decade of the 21st century it is more invasive that it ever has been via the real-time global reach and origin. As writers we are sponges in a world that is often alien to our own and what we know. Christos Tsiolkas, in a talk at the Sydney Writers Festival (May 2008 recorded in my notes) said on the topic of inspiration and influence: "For many years I have bought a season pass to the MIFF and immersed myself in there for a fortnight. The reason is that by the end of it after seeing 3 or 4 films per year and scribbling notes about them, I come out of it and into the Melbourne night elated by the worlds that I have seen and experienced... there is a phenomenon that occurs whenever you have been confronted by the work of an artist who has challenged you, provoked you, astonished you, it commands you to do better to write better to imagine better. It is a transporting of self that is physical, emotional and intellectual. It is that moment after reading a book, a poem, watching a film, a play, contemplating a sculpture or painting, where you are aware the challenge of art. The impossible is possible."

To read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat – that is to say the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophise them in our turn. Harold Bloom (2004) states that there is no degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words (56). If we are to approach a text, it must itself have an edge. The question of the text, as it has been elaborated and transformed and explored over the years of critical interpretation, has not merely “touched... shore”, for all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential frame outside the frame, and so forth (Derrida, 1978) – we read on and on, interpreting and re- interpreting in perpetuity. As a novelist thinking about my readers and the role that they play, no notion fascinates and fulfils me more.

Thinking of readership can be burdensome. Many writers are frustrated by creative blocks, for reasons that may be hard to uncover. Outside pressures, such as work at a job or at home, childcare, and holidays when the kids are at home. Fear of failure and criticism. The blank page. Contracts. Deadlines. Constraints and demands on one’s time. A problem with the creative process itself, such as a need for renewal; not enough time to come up with fresh ideas; working too long and hard at the art; and the cycle of ups and downs that is a part of almost anyone’s work. Self-discipline and drive; and I’ve found what drives me most (beyond my own yearning to get an idea down on paper) is the work of other authors, work that I admire.

What do I mean by influence on an author, and what affect that influence on output and our esteem or interpretation of it? Harold Bloom (1994) points out that what makes an author and works canonical is often the strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. He describes it as a school for the ages; when you read a canonical work for a first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny statement rather than a fulfilment of

expectations, and have in common is their uncanniness, their ability to make you feel strange at home (7).

As writers we cannot escape what has gone before us, and against our taste or not, literature that has stood the test of time has some virtue by whatever right. On the face value of my own fiction I am at once in competition with the influences on my literary life as I am in competition when the publishers package and promote my books and put them out there in the globalised marketplace that we have today. David Malouf said at the Mildura Writers festival (recorded in my own notes, July 2008): “Literature is created by readers, who have been doing it for centuries quite in their own way and without the aid of universities or arts comities. It is readers who will decide what is living and what will survive, what still speaks for a new present, as well as for it’s own time, in the largest and most human terms.” There can be no strong writing without the process of literary influence, a process vexing to undergo and difficult to understand. The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel or play. Bloom’s thoughts are not infallible and are open to interpretation and criticism: when he posits that any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalise her or his work’s anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work is the anxiety. (1973: 53)

Poems, stories, novels, plays come into being as a response to prior poems, stories, novels, and plays, and that response depends upon acts of reading and interpretation by the later writers, acts that are identical with the new works. These readings of precursor writings are necessarily defensive in part; if they were appreciative only, fresh work would be stifled, and not for psychological reasons alone.

In her *Negotiating with the Dead: A writer on Writing* (2002), Margaret Atwood says: “Writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse.”

(xvi). Originality becomes peculiarly difficult in everything that matters most: representation of human beings (Jesse and his friends, memories of his family and theirs), the role of memory in cognition (Jesse as unreliable narrator versus sparing us and himself the horrors surrounding him), and the range of metaphor in suggesting new possibilities for language (Jesse's soliloquy that is the novel). As a novelist I may not be consciously thinking of Shakespeare at every turn, but I am constantly thinking of other stories that I have read or heard or seen, always aware of them, constantly anxious of their influence. That depth of inwardness in a strong writer constitutes the strength that wards off the massive weight of past achievement, lest every originality be crushed before it becomes manifest. Writing is always re-writing or revisionism and is founded upon a reading that clears space for the self, or that so works as to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings. The originals are not original, but that Emersonian irony yields to the Emersonian pragmatism that the inventor knows how to borrow.

Strong writers do not choose their prime precursors; they are chosen by them, but they have the wit to transform the forerunners to composite and therefore partly imaginary beings. In awarding Naipaul the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy praised his work for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories. The Committee added, ... In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony. The Committee also noted Naipaul's affinity with the Polish author of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad: Naipaul is Conrad's heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in his memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished. Harold Bloom (1994) writes of literature and of the desire to write, that it "is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere...in a time and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound

with inheritance" (11-12). This partly means to be different from oneself, but primarily to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one's heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere in a time and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence.

And so where does this leave us? Here I am, now asking myself the very questions that I asked those literary figures who influenced me. If there is an essence here of the importance of the novel, and the burning desire from me as a literary critic, reader and writer, it is in this sentiment: we do not read to *pass* the time, we read to *inhabit* time. To look at the artistic pursuit of novel writing, as a creative and commercial enterprise, is at the very front of my everyday thinking. The influence of canonical writers, as well as my peers, together with those influential writers and artists that inspires the individual author, is as present as ever for writers of fiction who strive to re-imagine and rewrite what may be read into perpetuity, perhaps adding to the advancement of human knowledge. As John Ellis (1997) says, "the content of a literary work is its unique stamp, the individual meaning that makes it unlike any other work" (34). I am unburdened in the sense that no matter my intentions as author, the reader will make of it what they will – and I am happy with that, rather than having to suffer from anxiety that seems to concentrate in some conspiracy against the writer as creator, ever striving to carve out our own little niche.

## **Conclusions: Via a Practice Led Journey**

In my artefact and this exegesis, PLR draws together two aspects of scholarship that may once have seen as diametrically opposed (Strange, 2012). There is an enthusiasm of practise that conveys the exciting; imaginable; new; and even fun: certainly not the traditional “gravitas” knowledge profile for a PhD (Arnold, 2012). The artefact comes from the practice that is an experiential starting point from which the problem/idea follows (McNamara, 2012).

Here I reflect upon issues arising from analysing practice showing a dynamic process adding to academic knowledge. Practise Led Research (PLR) bridges the gap between theory and practice drawing creative people into developing academic knowledge. The growing emphasis on employability as a graduate attribute has led to the establishment of what is broadly called creative industries groups in many universities, their goal to show how many of their graduates from a variety of courses, but most particularly from practice based courses, are employed in areas that are not always seen as “business” orientated. Methodological research practises in the creative industries lead to new terms such as PLR strategies and Studio Research, but there is no single methodological template. At the same time, it is not an “easy option’, for a PhD should be original, situate itself within a body of literature, be ethical; and make a significant contribution to knowledge (Barrett, 2004).

My journey through PLR shows the connect between my writing practice with academic theories of textuality and discourse. Placing “the creative industries’ within a artefact/exegesis PhD framework means that we are enabled to look beyond performativity as an end in itself and see it is leading to new research and valuable insights. Traditional narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements do not suffice for PLR, as the major milestones of PLR are derived from the practice-



led researchers. This differs significantly from the gate-keeping model of evidence based research in the natural sciences. The challenges and restrictions on PLR, in my mind, will never fully go away. This is despite living with the concepts now for several years, and forever questioning the worth of my work as well as that of the theory that surrounds my profession. PRL is not an orthodox research methodology presentation (Millich & Schilo, 2004).

PLR is a multi-methodology that takes the discourse of traditional research formats beyond the operational mind that is displayed in the dominant mode of research formats beyond the operational mind that is displayed in the dominant mode of research thinking. It does not replicate the abstract and the general; the sequential and linear (etc), but moves it to the discursive and propositional (McNamara, 2012). Thus, traditional narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements do not suffice for PLR as the major milestones of PLR are derived from the practise of the researchers. So PLR bridges the gap between its research protocols and/or be aligned with them, and yet remains fundamentally different. In this way, while there is a significant new contribution to academic knowledge and insights, there is also present a rupture with traditional orthodoxies.

My experience of this project using PLR clearly points out that it enriches practice and practitioners (Kroll, 2004). In this way, PRL takes practice and brings it into the academy as a central factor in academic research. Without this, the practice would sit within its own arena of film, dance, photography, the novel, poetry, multi-media, etc. PRL, hence, is a very rich way of drawing together practice and research as a natural uber-production. In this model, the practice leads the research; it is not subsumed into it as a form of data, nor does it arise as the result of a research question being identified and articulated. In our artefact and exegesis model, the questions, problems and challenges being identified by the practices, insights and needs of the practitioners entice the practitioner to look even further than the initial creative act to

another that is creative yet resides clearly within the gate-keeping of the academic world, that is, the production of the exegesis.

I see this journey of mine as having bridged the Cartesian mind/body binary, drawing practice into the academic knowledge domain (Midgely, 2004; Gallop, 2002).

Looking at the two elements I have created here, I'm aware that either of them acts to validate practice or the academic discourse as two elements taken together are one. It is through this that I have expanded qualitative knowledge practices within the academy, bringing together practitioners and theorists. PLR thus: develops as multi-method led by practise; is a performative utterance from action to enunciation and performance and affect, to naming things done; expresses and also becomes research.

For me in considering the full journey of this process, I can see how, to me, the creative, commercial and academic worlds can come together (Fletcher & Mann, 2004). *Chasers* has been the first novel of mine created with this mindset of collision. Will this artefact live on – for intended readers, for those studying the text formally? I can safely say that yes, commercially, it is living on: the US publication in 2012, along with Brazilian and Russian translations, to add to those Commonwealth countries where *Chasers* and its sequels are available. There are secondary schools and universities where *Chasers* is being taught and discussed. And as for this exegesis... well, a few people are reading it. What I am certain of, is that for this practitioner, a new door has opened, and this is but the beginning of a new journey into the writer through this process: reflecting on my work and that of others, teaching those who will come after me, being part of a global discussion that is going on about our craft and thetical beliefs. Every novel I have written has meant something to me; *Chasers* has meant everything. What a journey.



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## Appendices 1

### *Chasers* Covers:



*Chasers*, 2010. Australia/New Zealand, Lothian/Hachette.

*Chasers*, 2011. UK/Commonwealth, ATOM, London.

*Chasers*, 2012. USA/Canada, Kensington, New York.



## Appendices 2

### Author's published books

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