

Cheryl's Novel

Episode I

Having completed a Modern Languages degree in 1997, I spent the next six years travelling in Europe and Asia, teaching English. During this time I got into creative writing on my own, and eventually realised that this was the direction I wanted my career to take.

A PhD in Creative Writing would not only give me an academic qualification, it would also provide me with professional guidance and much-needed feedback about my work. I hope to end up as a novelist who teaches creative writing at University level.

I applied to two Universities and was accepted by both despite not having a Masters in the subject, because I had built up a large portfolio of writing, a part of which I enclosed with my application. However, at this stage I hadn't yet properly considered the research aspect of the degree – I thought it would be a question of writing about the nuts and bolts of novel writing, or exploring in depth my creative processes as I developed the novel.

It turned out, of course, that both Universities wanted something far more specific. Both demanded a detailed research proposal, and one of the Universities was extremely helpful about this, providing me with an example of someone else's successful research proposal and giving me feedback as I developed mine.

Once I was ready, the proposal was looked at by a committee and accepted by both institutions. Having had so much help and encouragement from that one particular university, I decided to study there, and had a pleasant, informal interview with my supervisor.

The rules were simple: we had to meet a minimum of twelve times a year, and there would be a six-month progress report and a transfer viva at 12 months. I enrolled full-time and was awarded a fees-only bursary by my department. The rest of my degree is self-financed. Everything seemed straightforward, and I was ready to get started.

Q1 Discuss Cheryl's decision to apply for and accept this offer of a place to work for a PhD in Creative Writing.

Q2 Have you any comments on the admissions process?

Episode 2

During an introductory workshop for new PhD students in the arts and humanities, reference was made by the tutor to a creative writing student whose excellent novel failed the PhD viva. I was disconcerted to hear about this, and my anxiety about how practice-based PhDs in the arts are evaluated at the viva propelled me to make further enquiries.

Having checked in the Uni Handbook and found that they only focussed on specifics like word count and didn't really tell me anything new about practice-based doctorates, I tackled my supervisor, who explained that the two aspects of the PhD, research and practice, must not be seen as separate. 'It's not a novel accompanied by 20,000 words of academic research. The links between the two must be watertight. The novel *is* the research, and as such it must answer the research questions.' In his opinion, the excellent novel that failed the viva can't have had enough ties with the research aspect of the PhD. 'If students bear in mind the essential linking of research and practice, they shouldn't fall into the same trap.'

This appeased me for a short time, until I started to wonder, what exactly makes an instance of practice count as research? How can a novel stand as an answer to a research question? I considered my own research question and wondered how and to what extent I would have to weave it into my novel in order to satisfy the examiners.

Q1 What should be included in an induction programme for practice-based PhD students?

Q2 How would you have responded to Cheryl's questions?

Episode 3

I then spotted a notice in my department advertising a Practice as Research workshop, and decided to go along. The speaker had completed a PhD in theatre studies, and in her workshop she examined her personal journey of practice and theory.

Her thoughts supported what I had heard from my supervisor. Theory and practice must work together right from the word go. As this is a research degree, the student must show that the academic enquiry is demonstrated through the novel/theatrical production/artwork. The initial research questions inspire the student to produce a practical outcome.

The workshop was interesting but so personalised (rooted in theatre and production videos) that often it had little relevance to my own project. The speaker's advice was 'don't look directly at what you're doing – let the creative enquiry lead you where it will.' I agree that there's something to be said for this, but I also feel that in novel writing it is important - particularly in the beginning - to consciously interlace the strands of practice and research so that right from the start the two are inseparable. In this way each aspect of the PhD will compliment the other and develop together as a unit.

I also looked at the website of the U.K Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) and downloaded a lengthy document entitled Practice-Based PhDs which contained some illuminating comments:

'No matter how valuable or well-received in artistic terms the product is, this is not, in itself, indicative of the *process*. (The creative work must be seen) as evidence in support of a research based argument.'

'A practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly *by means of practice*. (...) It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work.'

'Whereas an artist or designer can simply present his or her end product, and refuse further explanation, the academic art and design researcher is obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at that product.'

So far, I had come to the clear conclusion that I must embed my research into my novel (and vice versa) if I wanted to pass my viva. What wasn't so clear was precisely how I should go about doing this. I decided to stop theorising about the possibilities and get down to work. In the following months I conceptualised my subsidiary research questions, wrote up the questionnaire needed for my case studies, produced an historical overview of my research topic, did background research for both aspects of the PhD, and wrote the first few chapters of the novel. I introduced my research topic in as natural a way as possible towards the end of the second chapter, once the main characters had been introduced and the plot was underway.

Q1 Do you agree with Cheryl's strategy?

Q2 What should she do now?

Episode 4

Now I am developing the novel and the research simultaneously, having agreed with my supervisor that I will aim to produce one novel chapter (roughly 2,000 words) and an equivalent amount of research every six to eight weeks. I am starting to reach the stage where I can feed my research findings into the novel as I make new discoveries. Part of the research aspect will involve me discussing the strengths and weakness of my fiction, but that can't be tackled until I am a lot further into the novel.

So far, the relationship with my supervisor is very good, and the feedback I have had from him has been positive; he even expresses surprise that I am advancing so quickly with no indication of flagging motivation, but I think that building up a sense of purpose over six years has something to do with it. Creative writing is something I really enjoy doing.

One problem I have discussed with my supervisor is ensuring that the research is not so obvious in the fiction that it detracts from the story instead of adding to it; the narrative must flow smoothly and I mustn't preach or cram in unnecessary detail. Most creative writers will have heard the maxim 'show, don't tell', and this is what I am trying to remember as I write.

Q1 Have you any suggestions for the supervisor at this stage?

Q2 Comment on the current supervisory arrangements

Episode 5

I am now nearly six months into the PhD, which means that in the next four months I have to complete a rough draft of the work I want to present at the transfer viva. They're expecting to see about 20,000 words, which will include a description of my methodology and research steps taken, a time plan, a novel plan, about 10,000 words towards the research and a few chapters of the novel. So there's a lot to do, and consequently less time to worry about how to do it.

Framing creative processes as research and embodying research questions in practical work appears to be a complex process of interweaving, trial and error. Now that I know the 'wrong' way of going about practice-based research, I'm just hoping that I'll naturally fall into the 'right' way as I progress with my work. As the speaker at the Practice as Research workshop pointed out: 'During practice-based PhDs in the arts, you come up with *an* answer, never *the* answer.' It seems to me that this could be said to apply not only to the practical outcome of the work, but also to the processes involved in reaching it.

Team task

On the acetate provided, list the main risks this PhD presents for

1. Cheryl
2. Her supervisor
3. The institution

and suggest how they can be addressed.