

The Time of the PhD: Doctoral Research in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Frances Kelly

(The University of Auckland, New Zealand)

Abstract:

This article argues that recent changes in higher education have contributed to anxieties about the present and future state of universities, and that a strand of neo-Victorian fiction arises as a response to these. As I demonstrate, the nineteenth century is an era of particular significance for universities as it is also an era of dramatic change, heralding the arrival of the modern idea of research and the PhD degree. In neo-Victorian academic fiction, a subgenre of the neo-Victorian novel, the figure of the doctoral researcher and the activity of research are central to the novel's examination of the nineteenth-century past. The article then overviews in brief the characteristics of this subgenre before analysing two novels in which doctoral researchers engage with the nineteenth-century past, Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) and Rachael King's *Magpie Hall* (2009).

Keywords: academic fiction, campus fiction, doctoral researcher, Rachael King, neo-Victorian novel, Audrey Niffenegger, PhD, research, university.

And yet I want to suggest that we can still profit from looking back to the Victorians, as we struggle with our own educational problems [...]. But I also want to argue that we should remember what drove the Victorians' belief in the value of education. They understood that it was more than a matter of social or economic advantage, or even the transmission of knowledge. It could change lives at the deepest level. (Birch 2008: viii-ix)

The neo-Victorian phenomenon, or what Mark Llewellyn terms the “cult of contemporary art forms” set in the Victorian period (Llewellyn 2008: 168), arises in response to significant changes in society since the late-twentieth century, as government reforms in the UK and its one-time settler colonies engendered the dismantling of the post-war welfare state in favour of one that valorises the perceived “Victorian values” of individualism and laissez-faire (Thatcher qtd. in Hadley 2010: 24). Education is one area of

Neo-Victorian Studies

10:1 (2017)

pp. 42-63



society where these reforms have been keenly felt, their impact ranging from changes to the way schools and other institutions are governed, to decreases in funding, through to changes to the curriculum.¹ Like reforms to education at other levels, changes to *higher* education since the late twentieth century have had a significant impact on university governance, funding and the curriculum. Universities, as higher education commentators like Ronald Barnett argue, are undergoing a “rapid” and “radical shift” in the ways they operate and in how their core purpose is understood and articulated in public discourse (Barnett 1994: 157).

Arguably, one of the most significant changes to higher education in recent times has been to the *idea* of the university. Cris Shore has described a shift since the late twentieth century from an idea of the university as a place of “critical enquiry and autonomous learning” to universities as “transnational business corporations operating in a competitive ‘global knowledge economy’” (Shore 2010: 16). Similarly, Barnett sees the idea of the “research university”, which has held sway since the nineteenth century, as giving way to the “entrepreneurial university” and the “corporate university” (Barnett 2013: 1). Although the purpose of the university may not ever have been singularly understood, as Stefan Collini has pointed out, drawing on the work of Sheldon Rothblatt (Collini 2008: 319), definitions of universities tend to cobble together principles and values that arise from different historical contexts, or are updated versions of those of Cardinal Newman. Nonetheless the contemporary idea that a core function of universities is to contribute to a global knowledge economy is now ubiquitous.

The language used to describe the function (some would say business) of universities proffered by governments, the media and universities themselves persistently determines their role as meeting the needs of societies by producing research *and* skilled research workers to feed the global knowledge economy. One effect of the shift in the idea of the university has been to hold universities accountable for these contributions – hence the rise of the audit culture since the 1980s. In the UK, Collini identifies several key events between 1981 and 1992 that mark stages of a “calculated assault by Tory governments on institutions”, including a “savage reduction” in budgets and the beginning of the “all devouring audit culture that has since so signally contributed to making universities less efficient places in which to think and teach” (Collini 2008:

323, 324). Since that time, he writes, the direction of change has remained consistent, with a key goal of the UK government policy on higher education “to make universities more responsive to the needs of the economy and more like commercial companies in governance” (Collini 2008: 324). Initially attention was primarily paid to auditing research production via the development of mechanisms such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK, the Research Quality Framework (RQF) in Australia and the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand; more recently, there has been an emphasis on developing identifiable measurable skills in graduate-level researchers through initiatives from the UK Research Councils and organisations like the US *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s Vitae hub. What Cris Shore and Susan Wright, like Collini, have shown is the extent to which the “audit explosion” in universities has its roots in the “neo-liberal experiments of the Conservative government in the 1980s” (Shore and Wright 1999: 561, 571). Altogether the changes to higher education as an effect of late-twentieth-century neo-liberal turns in government have left universities in what is widely considered to be a state of crisis.²

This article explores how a strand of neo-Victorian fiction arises as a response to this crisis. I argue that reforms to higher education since the late twentieth century have contributed to a number of *academic* neo-Victorian novels set in a contemporary university context, with postgraduate research students as central characters, novels which explore the idea and purpose of research. The academic dimension of many neo-Victorian fictions is an underexplored area of neo-Victorian scholarship, although others have noted that many novels, from the late twentieth-century versions of the genre by A. S. Byatt and David Lodge, are either set in universities, written by academics (or former academics) or, as Elizabeth Ho suggests, seem aimed at an academic readership (Ho 2012: 9). I begin by outlining pertinent recent and historical reforms to higher education, primarily focusing on the UK context, before turning to two neo-Victorian novels, Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) and Rachael King’s *Magpie Hall* (2009), which engage with these issues in distinct ways.

1. Literary Responses to a Contemporary Crisis

Clearly there are points of connection between neo-Victorian novels set in universities and campus novels or academic fictions that provide a satirical

commentary on and response to university life in a state of rupture and crisis. As Kenneth Womack has described, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century campus novels on both sides of the Atlantic, such as those by Richard Russo and David Lodge, often parody the experiences of disillusioned academics attempting the impossible task of trying to make shrinking budgets meet the needs of growing numbers of students, or resenting encroachments to autonomy and academic freedom (Womack 2002: 1-2). Campus novels have also depicted other crises of the late twentieth century, including the so-called schism in English departments or theory wars, and the related fear that English as a discipline has entered its sunset years. These tensions are clearly at play in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) – perhaps *the* neo-Victorian academic novel – in which Roland Michell thinks of himself as an old-fashioned literary scholar, unlike his rival (in career-terms as well as for Maud Bailey's affections) Fergus Wolff, who in his formative years was heavily influenced by Roland Barthes. As Roland's girlfriend, Val, points out, Roland is unable to secure a job in his department, because academic posts are increasingly scarce (due to shrinking budgets) and what jobs there are go to Fergus Wolffs.

The uncertainty about the place or role of English as a discipline in campus fictions highlights a late twentieth- and early twenty-first century change within universities that is not limited solely to English departments, but works in wider tandem with the aim of university administrations to streamline institutions and make them more efficient. The dismantling of traditional disciplinary departments like English, History and Philosophy has occurred in many universities worldwide, as departments are reorganised into schools. As Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente point out, in a rather neo-Victorian vein, the challenge at the end of the twentieth century to 'the disciplines' provokes examination of their emergence at the end of the nineteenth century, and engenders a "stepping back to consider the formation of disciplinary knowledge" during the *fin de siècle* (Anderson and Valente 2002: 1). Although the disciplines may have been significant to an idea of the university in the twentieth century, arguably English is a particularly significant case of a discipline in crisis because of the once central, but now diminishing idea of literature and culture as foundational to the university, as Bill Readings outlines in *The University in Ruins* (1996). Although Readings argues that recent changes to universities are broadly felt, and threaten to reduce them to organisations committed to the banal

function of “excellence” without hard ideas like thought, enquiry or “reason” at their core; nonetheless what Readings’ book recognises (or mourns) *is* primarily the decentralisation of literature or “the notion of culture” from the university, a shift that he is not alone in identifying (Readings 1996: 21, 54, 6). Michael Peters connects Readings’s discussion of the university, the role of literature, and the idea of excellence to the later work of Jacques Derrida, which explores the university and the place of the humanities, and the role and function of literature. The centrality that Derrida accords to literature denotes its significance not only to the idea of the university but also to democracy and, more generally, the idea of humanity:

If the invention of literature cannot be separated from the history of democracy – and the connection between the development of a literary culture, a reading public, and a civil society or the so-called ‘public sphere’ is a claim commonly made – then, the connection must also be made between literature, democracy, and higher education. Literacy, national literatures as vehicles for cultural self-definition of the nation-state, and civil liberties, including freedom of speech, were associated with the gradual development and extension of a universal education. Indeed, the concept of literature in the modern sense only becomes established with the appearance of the research university in the early 19th century, when the study of literature becomes institutionalised and the mantle of the responsibility for *Bildung* is handed over from philosophy to literature (Readings 1996). At the same time, under the pressure of globalisation and the technological transformation of communication, we might say with Hillis Miller that ‘the end of literature is at hand’. (Peters 2004: 51)

Campus novels highlight anxieties, perhaps most keenly felt in the UK and its former settler colonies –although Readings is writing from the North American context – about the loss of an idea of the university in which the study of literature and culture was highly valued, as well as the changes brought about by government reforms to higher education outlined above.

What distinguishes neo-Victorian academic fiction from other campus fiction, however, is its explicit engagement with the nineteenth-century past and with Victorian literature and culture.

2. A Nineteenth-Century Research Revolution?

The interest that the nineteenth century holds for recent writers of neo-Victorian fiction discussed below centres on the idea that, as an era characterised by progress and change, the period is a site of “emergence” ripe for postmodern reflection of the kind that Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich identify (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xv). As an era of “unprecedented progress”, as Louisa Hadley claims, the nineteenth century marks the “advent of the modern society we now inhabit” (Hadley 2010: 13). Just as the nineteenth century is significant in the genealogy of modern society, so too does it herald the coming of the modern university. A look at nineteenth-century reforms to higher education indicates that, like our own, this era can be understood as one of significant change for universities, particularly in Britain and its settler colonies, as well as parts of Europe. As Collini suggests, although it is conventional to look to the Middle Ages for the origins of the modern university, the nineteenth century is in some ways its “Palaeolithic Age”:

It was in the mid- and late-Victorian period that two developments took place that were to determine university development in Britain for almost a hundred years. First, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, which had long functioned as a cross between finishing schools for the sons of the landed classes and seminaries for the Anglican Church, were reformed. The public-school ideal of character formation took hold; ‘modern’ subjects, such as history, languages, and sciences, were introduced; a new self-consciousness developed about educating the governing and administrative class of the future; and the sense of the universities’ place in national culture grew. Secondly, in the 1870s and 1880s new universities were established in the great cities that had grown up as a result of industrialisation, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool [...].

A different 'idea' of the university was required to take account of them. (Collini 2008: 319-320)

In addition to the reforms of Oxford and Cambridge, the growth of modern disciplines, and the establishment of new universities, another key shift has also influenced the idea of the university since the mid-nineteenth century: the idea of research. Collini attributes this to the influence of German universities, to “an ideal of *wissenschaftlich* ‘research’, which came to be grafted onto the native traditions of teaching and scholarship” in Britain (Collini 2008: 321).

Collini is, of course, not alone in identifying *research* as signalling the emergence of the modern university.³ Oili-Helena Ylijoki, writing about the nostalgia of Finnish academics for an imagined golden age in higher education, considers the idea that in the twenty-first century a “second academic revolution” is happening in higher education, the first having occurred in the nineteenth century when research was added to the primary function of university teaching; now, Ylijoki suggests, these two functions are joined by a “third mission” that has universities making contributions to economic development (Ylijoki 2005: 557). Although contributing to the stability and growth of a nation’s economy has long been *one* aim of higher education I agree with Ylijoki that the addition of a third mission to universities marks a shift in contemporary understandings of their *core* function, consistently reiterated in various strands of discourse and particularly apparent in higher education policy. As Collini bitingly observes, currently “the main aim of universities is to turn out people and ideas capable of making money” (Collini 2008: 317), suggesting a radical turn comparable to that which universities underwent during the nineteenth century.

It is the *idea of research* that makes the university a site of particular interest to writers of neo-Victorian fiction. Like other neo-Victorian fictions, those that are set in universities revisit the Victorian period to examine the perceived crises of their own time.⁴ Not only that, these novels explore the present-day notion of research by looking back to the era of its origins following the Enlightenment. Others draw attention to the centrality of research in contemporary historical fiction; for instance, the group of British novels Suzanne Keen terms “romances of the archive” depict the activity of “doing research” as a feature of their plots (Keen 2001: 3). The novels Keen

discusses have researchers working in libraries or other kinds of archives, engaged in seeking and finding “solid facts, incontrovertible evidence, and well-preserved memories of times past” (Keen 2001: 3). Ideas about truth and the possibility that it can be located through empirical research are engaged by neo-Victorian fiction, as in romances of the archive, because these texts reflect on (and often question) the broad intellectual trend in nineteenth-century science and realist fiction that “favoured objective rationality” (Hadley 2010: 66).

Yet the depiction of “doing research” in neo-Victorian fiction is also significant for another reason, namely because ideas about research are bound up with conceptualisations of the researcher, epitomised in the PhD student. In neo-Victorian fiction, rather than an established academic, the central character is often a research student, or recently completed PhD like Roland Michell. This figure dates, like the research university itself, from the early nineteenth century. Indeed, according to William Clark the rise of the modern research university occurs *with* the advent of the PhD degree in nineteenth-century Germany (Clark 2006: 459). Although the exact date of the first PhD is contestable, the qualification came into being, according to Clark, following the Enlightenment, growing in popularity for German institutions after it was adopted by the University of Berlin in 1810, and eventually imported to the United States during the 1850s, and later to Britain:

If I had to choose one institution as the epitome of the infiltration of the modern, German academic system of research, I would choose that rite that officially creates the researcher: the modern doctor of philosophy, and its cognates, writing an original dissertation. (Clark 2006: 459)

Although the modern notion of research emerges in tandem with the development of research laboratories, the seminar, and the doctoral dissertation, the latter is taken as the true mark of the new charismatic “hero of knowledge” who emerged post-Enlightenment (Clark 2006: 237). Since this era, one could say, echoing Derrida, it has been ‘the time of the thesis’ for universities (see Derrida 2004: 113).

Recent efforts to increase numbers of postgraduate students in universities suggest that the research university lives on in the contemporary

entrepreneurial university, that it is still ‘the time of the thesis’. The PhD thesis involves original research and a contribution to knowledge – these aims have not significantly changed in the last two centuries. What is happening is that doctoral degrees are being aligned to work for the contemporary entrepreneurial university, as seen in the recent emphasis on doctorates fostering research skills and the targeting of financial support for research in particular disciplines. As Pat Thomson and Melanie Walker suggest in their account of changes in doctoral education in the twenty-first century, the once dominant ideology of industrial progress is currently being superseded with one in which knowledge becomes ‘capital’; hence the importance of research and ‘knowledge workers’ to contemporary societies (Thomson and Walker 2010: 14). The language around the third cycle of the Bologna Process demonstrates this too. The first principle (of ten) for the third cycle, which encompasses doctoral programmes and research training, has “the advancement of knowledge through original research” as a core component, while at the same time it states that “doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia” (Christensen 2005: 2). Even as the numbers of postgraduate enrolments increase internationally debates continue over what a PhD actually *is* – whether it should be understood as preparation for an academic career or a form of research training – and over whether or not the doctoral thesis still constitutes the most appropriate vehicle for the contribution to knowledge in the twenty-first century. For example, Chris Park has outlined concerns about the continuing relevance of the PhD as a degree and whether it remains “fit for purpose” in comparison to other kinds of doctorates (Park 2007: 2). Academic neo-Victorian fiction responds to these issues and raises the question: is it *still* ‘the time of the thesis’ or even ‘the time of the PhD’ in the contemporary university?

3. Neo-Victorian Academic Fiction and Doctoral Research

According to various art forms, doctoral research is an increasingly popular activity; just as there are more doctoral candidates and graduate researchers *in* universities, so too are their numbers increasing in novels, television and film (Kelly 2009: 370; 2012: 518). Doctoral researchers assume central roles in television series like the British drama *Sea of Souls* (2004-2007) or the American crime series *Bones* (2005-2014). In literature too, PhDs are particularly visible, including in neo-Victorian fiction. Several different

kinds of neo-Victorian novels depict doctoral research; I want to briefly overview these sometimes overlapping subgroups, partly to demonstrate that together they form a distinct subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction, which might be termed ‘the neo-Victorian PhD novel’. I will then discuss two particular case studies in more detail, namely Rachael King’s *Magpie Hall* and Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry*, both published in 2009.

Several neo-Victorian PhD novels are by writers from settler colonies, including Australia and New Zealand, and in some cases these texts offer a postcolonial perspective on doctoral research, suggesting that some forms of knowledge conventionally privileged by universities also control who has access to that knowledge. Lloyd Jones’s *Mr Pip* (2006), recently made into a film, is one such example. Others could be termed romances of the archive, like the range of British novels that Keen analyses. Byatt’s *Possession* is perhaps the most well-known of these romances, although other neo-Victorian exemplars, while also set in libraries or archives, sometimes involve researchers who are often not academics in the strictest sense, as Keen points out (Keen 2001: 30) but nonetheless strive to uncover a hidden truth about the nineteenth-century past. Like *Possession*, other neo-Victorian fictions depicting doctoral or graduate research also have a dual narrative structure: one strand follows the present day research student, whose topic is focused on some element of Victorian history or literature, and the other is set in the Victorian past. Two novels that fall into this camp are the earlier mentioned *Magpie Hall* and Kulyk Keefer’s *Thieves* (2003). In the former, the protagonist Rosemary is writing a thesis on nineteenth-century Gothic fiction by women at the same time as she uncovers the secrets of her own (rather Gothic) ancestors who settled in New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century. In Keefer’s text, which has dual narratives set in 1898 and 1987, the research student Montgomery Mills is writing a thesis on Katherine Mansfield.

Another subgroup of the neo-Victorian PhD novel contains texts set exclusively in the present-day, but again featuring postgraduate students whose specialist field of research is the Victorian era. These include *Mr Pip*, in which the graduate student Mathilda travels from the antipodes to the UK to research a thesis on Charles Dickens’s orphans; James Morrow’s *The Philosopher’s Apprentice* (2007), in which Mason Ambrose is writing a thesis on Darwinist philosophy; A.N. Wilson’s *A Jealous Ghost* (2005), in which an American student is in Britain studying Henry James; and Rebecca

Gowers's *The Twisted Heart: A Literary Murder Mystery and a Tale of Modern Love* (2009), in which Kit Farr researches Victorian novels, including Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and *Oliver Twist* (1838) that draw on actual period crimes. Similarly, in *Her Fearful Symmetry*, Robert Fanshawe studies the nineteenth-century graves of Highgate Cemetery as indicative of elements of Victorian society; while in the American writer Sarah Stewart Taylor's Sweeney St. George novels, set in Boston, an early career academic studies graves and other forms of nineteenth-century material culture.

The final cluster of novels within the neo-Victorian PhD novel evince a strong intertextual relationship with specific nineteenth-century novels, which they critically revisit. Of the previously mentioned novels, *Mr Pip* writes back to *Great Expectations* (1861), and the thriller *A Jealous Ghost* reworks Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) but also draws on his *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) in its depiction of an American graduate student in London. Kirsten Tranter's campus thriller *The Legacy* (2010) also rewrites *The Portrait of a Lady*, offering an antipodean take on the novel's conceit of an American in Britain – here it is an Australian student who travels to do graduate research in New York shortly before the events of 9/11. In all three novels, the depiction of a doctoral researcher (from the United States, Australia or New Zealand) undertaking a PhD somewhere *other* than their home country engages both with an old idea, namely that a proper PhD can only be obtained from the centres of learning and knowledge in the northern hemisphere, and with current ideas about globalised mobile knowledge workers, able to slip effortlessly between different national contexts.

There are two characteristics of neo-Victorian academic fiction to elaborate on here. The first is the marginalisation of the central figure – that is, the doctoral researcher – similar to the more general trend which Keen identifies in contemporary British fiction set in archives. In the texts she discusses the researcher is rarely presented as the “full-fledged academic professional” but instead tends to be an “academic outsider” more inclined to follow her/his intuition and take risks (Keen 2001: 30). Keen sees Byatt's Roland Michell as a case in point. Roland, although having completed his PhD, is not *yet* employed in a permanent (tenured) academic role, but gets by on poorly paid research work for his former supervisor, James Blackadder. Roland's uncertainty about his own future, and disgruntlement

at being consistently overlooked in his department (in favour of Fergus Wolff), enables him to take the risk of first purloining a letter he finds in the archive, then keeping his research and sleuthing a secret from the institutionally-inured (and therefore seemingly legitimate) scholars who employ him. Like Roland, the researchers and academics in neo-Victorian fiction tend to be either excluded from the institution in some way, or else disillusioned or nostalgic for a different era of the university. This is in keeping with Womack's attribution of the portrayal of disaffected academics in campus fiction to the changes within universities, and in particular English departments, since the late twentieth century (Womack 2002: 1).

A second major characteristic of this subgenre of the neo-Victorian novel has more to do with the kind of scholarship that fictional doctoral researchers undertake, which involves the uncovering of a truth about the past. Hadley has described a focus in some texts, including those by Byatt and Graham Swift, on ways of reading or interpreting the past in terms of detection, or the "quest of an academic researcher to uncover the past in its literary remains" (Hadley 2010: 27). In the novels discussed above, most of the central characters are either literary scholars or historians intent on unearthing clues that will reveal something long hidden. This does not mean that scholarly sleuthing is presented as entirely unproblematic. Rather, novels that incorporate nineteenth-century scholars as 'detectives' tend to question the very purpose of historical knowledge and the sometimes instrumentalised uses to which history can be put.

These two characteristics of academic neo-Victorian fiction, of course, are intertwined rather than unrelated. The marginalised figure of the researcher exists on the fringe of the academy, because they are engaged in research that may be unfashionable in the contemporary university – à la Roland Michell. What is perhaps more interesting is the ways in which these novels replicate and/or reconfigure a dimension of higher education that has characterised the university since the nineteenth century, namely its aims (not necessarily compatible) of the pursuit of truth and research, and the development of the individual and *Bildung*. The interplay of research and the discovery of truth *with* self-formation as sometimes competing, sometimes complementary forces in the texts, and the combination of these intersecting elements with a revisiting of the Victorian past, dominates the two texts to which I now turn.

4. *Her Fearful Symmetry*

In Audrey Niffenegger's novel, Robert Fanshawe is "working, rather slowly, on a history of Highgate Cemetery and Victorian funerary practices for his doctoral thesis" (Niffenegger 2009: 27). Robert lives near the cemetery where he also volunteers as a tour guide; his recently deceased girlfriend Elspeth also happens to be buried there. Robert devotes a lot of his thinking, working, waking, and emotional life in the graveyard, creating the impression that he spends too much time with the dead, and not enough with the living. Originally, Robert's idea for his thesis is quite objective, but it gradually takes him over:

Robert's PhD thesis had begun as a work of history: he imagined the cemetery as a prism through which he could view Victorian society at its most sensationably, splendidly, irrationally excessive; in their conflation of hygienic reform and status-conscious innovation, the Victorians had created Highgate Cemetery as a theatre of mourning, a stage set of eternal repose. But as he did the research Robert was seduced by the personalities of the people buried in the cemetery, and his thesis began to veer into biography; he got sidetracked by anecdote, fell in love with the futility of elaborate preparations for an afterlife that seemed, at best, unlikely. He began to take the cemetery personally and lost all perspective. (Niffenegger 2009: 53)

Over years of studying and working in the cemetery, Robert becomes attached to it, and to the people buried there, particularly the artist Elizabeth Siddal, muse to Dante Gabriel Rossetti: "He had rewritten the chapter devoted to her several times, more for the pleasure of thinking about Lizzie than because he had anything new to say about her" (Niffenegger 2009: 53-54). Pasted above his desk are images of the women and men buried in the graveyard – Catherine Dickens, Eleanor Marx, Mrs Henry Wood. All are either eminent Victorians or (in some cases neglected) relations of eminent Victorians. Robert likes to sit by all of their graves, sneaking into the cemetery at night to spend more time there.

The novel describes the Victorian relationship to death and disease as different from our own, a difference Robert both knows and struggles to account for:

He stared at his computer and tried to work out what it was exactly that so irritated him about Chapter III. There was something wrong with the tone of the thing: it was a rollicking, almost jolly chapter about cholera and typhoid. It wouldn't do. (Niffenegger 2009: 216)

The novel's own treatment of death and the presence of ghosts is also a nod to Victorian spiritualism, which Marie-Luise Kohlke notes is a thematic of neo-Victorian fiction (Kohlke 2008: 10). Robert's desire for and mourning of the dead Elspeth is so strong, so lasting, that she does eventually make contact; it is as if Robert's longing can bring the dead forth and make a figure from the past materialise. Even his (slightly creepy) thoughts about Lizzie Siddal are couched in terms that indicate the solidity of her presence for Robert: he "fondled" her life in his mind (Niffenegger 2009: 54). This novel, as well as Niffenegger's *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2005) and her illustrated novella *The Raven* (2013), displays an interest in questions of materiality and spirit, of transformation, and in the possibility of connecting to or even reliving the past. It is no accident that these interests are connected here through the research of a doctoral student studying Victorian culture and society. A desire to *touch* the past, to have greater contact with the dead, is a motivation for research – here and for other scholars in neo-Victorian fictions, including Byatt's *Possession* and Jones's *Mr Pip* in which Mathilda notes the pleasure in being able to touch the same paper and walk the same streets as Dickens once did.

Nonetheless there is a sense in *Her Fearful Symmetry* in which separation from the past needs to happen in order for the research to progress – and for the researcher to achieve the individuation and independence that characterise a doctoral graduate, as Stephanie Johnson, Alison Lee and Bill Green have described (Johnson, Lee and Green 2000: 135). Despite his dedication to his subject, Robert gets "horribly behind" on his thesis (Niffenegger 2009: 222). It is only once he is excluded from the cemetery, the site and subject of his research, that he finishes the thesis and finally manages to escape what has by this time clearly become an

unhealthy relationship to the past, figured through his relationship to Elspeth, whose spirit now inhabits the body of her dead niece Valentina. When she comes home one day Elspeth finds the thesis, but Robert himself has vanished: “On Robert’s desk was a neat pile of paper. *A History of Highgate Cemetery*. All the files and notes had been cleared away. There was a look of finality about the scene” (Niffenegger 2009: 386). Robert has completed the thesis, and in so doing released himself from living in the past, and from Elspeth’s grasp. Yet *completion* is all that he does do – there is no account of the thesis being submitted, examined, read in an academic context, or subsequently published. It seems entirely a personal accomplishment, and the reader is hopeful that its completion signifies a release from stasis for Robert, a return to life, although the novel does not provide this – he simply disappears.

5. *Magpie Hall*

In Rachael King’s novel, Rosemary Summers is writing her “interminable thesis” on Victorian literature, specifically on “depictions of romantic love in Victorian Gothic novels” (King 2009: 10, 258). The topic is one of several links between the modern-day narrative and the mid-Victorian past, the era in which the other narrative strand, involving Rosemary’s ancestor Henry Summers, is set. Rosemary leaves the university at the start of the novel, escaping a complicated relationship with her supervisor and lover Hugh, and the “claustrophobic” English department (King 2009: 12), which is in a state of crisis due to budget cuts, and heads to her rural ancestral home, built by Henry in the nineteenth century. She takes her thesis with her.

In the back seat, the scraggy bones of my thesis – pages and pages of desultory notes, false starts and ramblings – languished in boxes, along with piles of novels and academic texts and my ancient laptop and printer. I don’t know when my love for Victorian novels had turned into a burden. (King 2009: 10).

Her intention is to spend quiet uninterrupted time writing – although this act no longer seems a pleasure.

Rosemary’s idea of being holed-up in Magpie Hall writing, of course, is a fantasy. This idea that writing happens *away* from the world, in

a vacuum of pure ideas, is a well-known trope that draws on an idea of writing as springing from the mind of the individual genius – a Romantic idea that Clark argues also feeds in to the idea of the doctoral scholar, the “hero of knowledge” (Clarke 2006: 237). Predictably, finishing the thesis does not come to pass as easily as she had hoped, and at first Rosemary is as unable to write in the old house as she was in the university. “My thesis sat on the desk, taunting me. I was terribly behind schedule [...]. I had gathered all my research material and ordered my thoughts, but now the work of putting it on paper had to begin in earnest” (King 2009: 55). Feeling behind schedule is a sensation Rosemary shares with other thesis writers, real and imagined, including Niffenegger’s Robert, as is the determination to begin ‘in earnest’. However, something does happen at Magpie Hall which enables Rosemary to write; it is not so much that she achieves that difficult sought after thing – a room of her own – but rather that she is able to make a connection with the past which reignites her imagination and creativity. Inspired, Rosemary becomes unaware of time, possessed by a kind of writing fever:

Back at my desk I wrote for hours, gripped by a renewed vigour for my writing. I worked wrapped in a heavy blanket to stave off the cold. My hands on the keyboard were freezing. [...] I tried to stare out into the blackness but saw only myself reflected back, hair wild, with a hobo’s rug around my shoulders. I was my own madwoman in the attic. (King 2009: 141)

However, as we later learn, Rosemary is writing not her thesis but a story about her ancestors that is part historical fact, part fiction – her own creative neo-Victorian text.

As her description of herself as a madwoman in the attic attests, Rosemary’s sense of self is bound up with the fictional women she writes about, while her ideas about men and romantic love are drawn from the nineteenth-century novels she studies. Rosemary compares her lover-supervisor Hugh to Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) but finds him wanting. Rosemary herself is “like something out of an old story book”; she remembers herself as a child imagining Magpie Hall to be Wuthering Heights or Thornfield, and herself a “heroine” wanting “a great, passionate

love” (King 2009: 53, 99). Hugh, visiting unexpectedly, finds her wearing an old dress she found in the attic and says accusingly, “I thought you said you were working? Though I suppose this is a bit like work for you. Trying to inhabit your characters, perhaps? Making up Gothic stories about people long dead?” (King 2009: 107). Rosemary quite deliberately chooses to inhabit her work – to live in the old house and become a quasi Victorian Gothic heroine. In a gesture that reflects the complicated relationship of her New Zealand settler family to Britain’s cultural past, she also chooses to rewrite her family history as if it *were* a Victorian novel.

The final mention of Rosemary’s thesis is brief, after the other strands of the story are largely concluded. Rosemary is only able to finish the thesis once she has addressed her own ghosts, including her dead sister; exhumed her colonial ancestors sufficiently to understand and forgive them; ended her relationship with her supervisor; and agreed to the renovation of the old family home in the hope of enacting an emotional break with the past. It is a very neat ending and an unsatisfactory one insofar as it gives an all-too-tidy account of a capacity to move *past* the consequences of colonial practices of land-grabbing, species eradication and atrocities committed against Maori. An element of the novel’s neat *denouement* is the thesis’s completion. Once again Rosemary turns into the writer in the garret – yet this time she is at a distance from Magpie Hall:

I finished my thesis that winter: depictions of romantic love in Victorian Gothic novels. I wrote holed up in my flat where it was warm, and avoided the university as much as I could. I needed to get the work out of the way so I could move on with my life. There were no more digressions, no more fantasies. (King 2009: 258)

For Rosemary, as for Robert, completion of the thesis becomes a personal accomplishment, something that the researcher is stuck with, must get past and put to rest in order to get on with life. Completion *is* the outcome that ‘counts’ for Rosemary and Robert – not publication, employment, or even the contribution to knowledge.

6. Conclusion: The Haunting of the PhD

The researchers in these two novels experience a desire to know about the past and a dwelling *in* the past that leads to a kind of stasis. Neither Robert

nor Rosemary is initially able to move beyond a state of mourning for a lost loved one; at the same time, their ‘interminable’ research work involves an ongoing engagement with the dead, the nineteenth-century inhabitants of Highgate cemetery and the founders of Magpie Hall. Both projects are experienced partly as a form of haunting, an uncanny interaction that is profoundly unsettling. I have written elsewhere about the ways in which haunting or the presence of the undead in academic fiction can be seen as indicative of a cultural unease with the current state of higher education, since the extended period of ‘crisis’ outlined earlier, and as unsettling hegemonic neoliberal discourse about the university (Kelly 2012: 525-526). Ho has argued that a re-examination of the past comes with working through anxieties and uncertainties in the wake of change (Ho 2012: 7), which also holds true for changes to higher education. Every system is haunted by that which threatens it and reminds it of its provisional status – so in the case of the contemporary university, haunted by older ideas of itself.

Yet as Catherine Spooner argues in her discussion of the BBC drama *Sea of Souls*, the “haunting of academia” also has the effect of disrupting “conventional epistemologies” and problematising the acquisition of knowledge based on “Enlightenment values” (Spooner 2010: 178, 183). At the same time as these neo-Victorian academic novels engage with an old idea of research, as discovery or truth, to parry current notions of economic utility, the familiar spectre of Enlightenment knowledge *itself* undergoes re-examination, undermining familiar binaries of materiality and spirit, rationality and wonder. It is not, therefore, that a nineteenth-century idea of research is necessarily valorised; rather it is reanimated to demonstrate the extent to which it lives on in the new university regime. In the contemporary university, a ghostly (other) self is inherent, even epitomised, in the PhD degree that belongs to and recalls the research university forged in the early part of the nineteenth century. Even though current discourse strenuously reiterates the function and role of the PhD in twenty-first century terms, and Bologna missives offer good examples of this, the old idea lingers on, like Robert’s and Rosemary’s ghosts, destabilising current statutes and guidelines.

Few of the novels discussed here, however, take satiric delight in the potential destabilisation of the current higher education regime that we might expect from campus fiction (pace David Lodge). Nor do they

necessarily elevate creativity over criticality in the style of Byatt's poetry-writing Roland, although King's novel does gesture toward this with Rosemary's furtive writing of a neo-Victorian tale. Rather, these texts are dominated by a tone of nostalgia which, I would argue, characterises neo-Victorian academic fiction, *Her Fearful Symmetry* and *Magpie Hall* included. Although this nostalgia is not explicitly couched as mourning for a different idea (or era) of the university, I wonder if it perhaps points to an inability to achieve the two main aims of higher education: the contribution to research and the self-development of the researcher. In *Her Fearful Symmetry* and *Magpie Hall*, the doctoral students are lonely marginalised figures with no intimation of a future either inside or outside academia, and although their dissertations are at last completed, they are not seen as contributing significantly to the world, instead figured largely as personal burdens finally relinquished. Neither Robert nor Rosemary is the 'hero of knowledge' of Clark's description, nor is either the fully rounded individual matching the Newman ideal. Instead both are rather *unfinished* subjectivities. Similarly, other neo-Victorian academic fictions feature researchers who never finish their theses (Jones's Mathilda and Keefer's Montgomery), or are quite marginalised and disaffected (Morrow's Mason), severely unstable (Wilson's Sallie), or simply disappear (Tranter's Isobel).

The tone in these fictions can be partly accounted for by returning to Readings, Derrida and Peters, and to claims for the once central role of literature in the idea of the university: there is *no place* for the kind of research undertaken by these fictional PhD researchers in the contemporary discourse on the doctorate that comes out of government papers or Bologna-Process reports, and this contributes to an anxiety concerning the diminished value afforded to knowledge of the literature and culture of the past. Or perhaps what these texts signal is the end of the time of the research thesis itself, despite the valorisation of the doctoral degree as essential for the knowledge economy. Either way the doctoral researchers in current neo-Victorian academic novels exist as figures unsettled *and* unsettling on the edge of academia, uncertain of their place in its future, reminding us of its past.

Notes

1. Discussing the UK National Curriculum in schools, for example, Hadley links the Thatcher Government's perception of the Victorian era as one of "unprecedented progress" to changes to the history curriculum to focus on "Victorian developments in industry, trade, and science" (Hadley 2010: 24).
2. Michael Peters discusses the university as caught in a "pincer movement" between the state and its administrative demands, on one hand, and the market and its technical demands, on the other, resulting in "an institution perpetually in crisis" (Peters 2004: 46).
3. Ron Barnett (2013) describes the erosion of the metaphysical university during the Enlightenment, which was replaced by the research university; he echoes Rothblatt who describes how, in Newman's time, research had not yet been "raised to the level of an ideology" in universities, that this was not "an era of Ph.D. candidates and graduate schools" (Rothblatt 1997: 16).
4. Sadoff and Kucich offer a corrective to this view. Following Fredric Jameson, they suggest that while ruptures in society at the turn of the twenty-first century *recall* the nineteenth century as a previous era of change on a similar scale; yet they also remind us that "reflections on emergence" should be wary of searching for Jameson-like "breaks" in history, but instead proceeds more along Foucauldian lines, inviting us to recognise [acknowledge?] "beginnings, atavisms, and heredities" (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xvii, xxvii).

Bibliography

- Barnett, Ronald. 1994. *The Limits of Competence: Knowledge, Higher Education and Society*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- . 2013. *Imagining the University*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Birch, Dinah. 2008. *Our Victorian Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Byatt, A. S. 1990. *Possession: A Romance*. London: Vintage.
- Christensen, Kirsti Koch. 2005. 'Bologna Seminar: Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society', General Rapporteur's Report. Salzburg, 3-5 February. http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/Salzburg_Report_final.1129817011146.pdf
- Clark, William. 2006. *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

-
- Collini, Stefan. 2008. *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Public*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2004. 'Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis' [1990] (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin), in Hamacher, Wendy and David E. Wellberry (eds.), *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 113-128.
- Gowers, Rebecca. 2009. *The Twisted Heart: A Literary Murder Mystery and a Tale of Modern Love*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.
- Hadley, Louisa. 2010. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ho, Elizabeth. 2012. *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*. London: Continuum.
- Johnson, Stephanie, Bill Green, and Alison Lee. 2000. 'The PhD and the Autonomous Self: Gender, Rationality and Postgraduate Pedagogy', *Studies in Higher Education* 25:2, 135-147.
- Jones, Lloyd. 2006. *Mr Pip*. Auckland: Penguin.
- Keefer, Janice Kulyk. 2003. *Thieves*. Canada: Harper Collins.
- Keen, Suzanne. 2001. *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kelly, Frances. 2009. 'Supervision Satirised: Fictional Narratives of Student-Supervisor Relationships', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 8:3, 368-384.
- . 2012. 'Seekers after Truth? Images of Postgraduate Research and Researchers in the Twenty-First Century', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 33:4, 517-528.
- King, Rachael. 2009. *Magpie Hall*. Auckland: Random House.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. 2008. 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn), 1-18.
- Llewellyn, Mark. 2008. 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn), 164-185.
- Morrow, James. 2007. *The Philosopher's Apprentice*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson.
- Niffenegger, Audrey. 2009. *Her Fearful Symmetry*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Park, Chris. 2007. *Redefining the Doctorate*. York: Higher Education Academy.

-
- Peters, Michael. 2004. 'The University and the New Humanities: Professing with Derrida', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 3:1, 41-57.
- Readings, Bill. 1996. *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Rothblatt, Sheldon. 1997. *The Modern University and its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sadoff, Dianne F. and John Kucich. 2000. 'Introduction: Histories of the Present', in Kucich, John and Dianne F. Sadoff (eds.), *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ix-xxx.
- Shore, Cris. 2010. 'Beyond the Multiversity: Neoliberalism and the Rise of the Schizophrenic University', *Social Anthropology* 18:1, 15-29.
- Shore, Cris and Susan Wright. 1999. 'Audit Culture and Anthropology: Neo-Liberalism in British Higher Education', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5:4, 557-575.
- Spooner, Catherine. 2010. 'The Haunted Lecture Theatre: Ghosts in the Academy in the BBC's *Sea of Souls*', in Peeren, Esther and María del Pilar Blanco (eds.), *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*. London: Continuum International Publishing, 175-184.
- Thomson, Pat and Melanie Walker. 2010. 'Doctoral Education in Context: The Changing Nature of the Doctorate and Doctoral Students', in Walker, Melanie and Pat Thomson (eds.), *The Routledge Doctoral Supervisor's Companion: Supporting Effective Research in Education and the Social Sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge, 9-26.
- Tranter, Kirsten. 2010. *The Legacy*. Sydney: Fourth Estate.
- Wilson, A. N. 2005. *A Jealous Ghost*. London: Hutchinson.
- Womack, Kenneth. 2002. *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ylijoki, Oili-Helena. 2005. 'Academic Nostalgia: A Narrative Approach to Academic Work', *Human Relations* 58:5, 555-576.