

An Exploration of the Transnational Literary Journeys of the Australian Writer Amy Witting¹ and Elena Jonaitis, a Lithuanian Migrant.

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This article examines the circumstances surrounding the creation of a novel, *Maria's War* written by the Australian author, Amy Witting. The novel is underpinned by a pre-emigration narrative based on the traumatic life events of a Lithuanian migrant woman, Elena Jonaitis. Witting's novel confirms the view of critics who posit that 'some immigrant works of fiction produced in an Anglophone country are not originally Anglophone' (Walkowitz 529). *Maria's War* was based on Jonaitis' story, yet the research and writing process took some thirty years before Witting's novel was finally completed and published in 1998. During this complicated and lengthy journey, Witting empowered Jonaitis to write her own memoir entitled *Elena's Journey*, which was completed and released a year before Witting's novel *Maria's War* was published. The article investigates the genesis and connectivity between these two texts, one a work of fiction, the other an autobiographical memoir.

Amy Witting is a highly-acclaimed, multi-award winning writer. Her creative body of work telling the stories of the people she has met in multiple realities has been considerable. She has had six novels published, as well as a large number of short stories, collected in the volume *Faces and Voices* (2000). Her most famous novel *I For Isobel*, won the FAW Barbara Ramsden Award and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award. The sequel to that work, *Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop*, won the Age Book of the Year Award in 2000 and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award in the same year. Witting also received the prestigious Patrick White Award in 1993. She was 75 at the time and achieved the pinnacle of her success over the next eight years until her death in 2001. Witting was admitted posthumously in 2002 as a Member of the Order of Australia for her services to literature, as a novelist, poet, short story writer and mentor to younger writers.

Witting was born Joan Fraser in an inner-western, working-class suburb of Sydney in 1918 to Australian parents. Yet her education, which saw her study European languages and literature, enabled her to engage intellectually with people from other cultures and other places. Witting's view of humanity articulated a 'cosmopolitan, transnational, hybrid vision' (Mardorossian 21), which often marginalised or excluded her from participating in Australian social discourses. In the late 1930s at Sydney University, where Witting undertook an Arts Degree majoring in French and German, she was a member of a prestigious writers' group, which included James McAuley and Harold Stewart, among others. Amy Witting immersed herself in the Russian novelists and read, in the original language, Mallarmé and many other French Symbolist poets. Her writing at the time was strongly influenced by Maupassant and Proust (Witting, *Journey G.A.N.* 21). She was fluent in German and a great admirer of German culture, particularly German-language Romantic poets such as Rilke. In a letter to me in 1997, Witting acknowledged the complexities involved when an aspiring Australian writer's cultural preferences were formed by European influences:

The nature of my difficulties became clear to me when I reread [some of my] early efforts. Somebody, I thought to myself, had read an awful lot of Proust. Fitting Proust's detailed and analytical style to my decidedly uneventful life was quite a problem. I had experienced much more of books than of reality, where I think my experience was narrow but deep. (Witting, *unpublished letter* 6 Jan 1997 3)

After her father's death in 1937, poverty forced Joan Fraser to relinquish her ambition to be a full-time writer. Instead, she completed a Diploma in Education in 1939 and was employed by the New South Wales Education Department. When she was posted to a number of schools in different country towns, Witting's reality shifted from Sydney to outback New South Wales. While this cultural displacement was very difficult for the young teacher, she later claimed that her years in Coonamble, a town on the western plains, had enabled her to become a writer. She revealed:

I think that's when I started being a writer, because it was the impact of the outside reality. It was wartime, it was drought and the lives of people were just something dreadful, full of desperation but still they survived . . . I must have been very wrapped up in my own world until then. (Smee *Interview* 14)

As a result of the hardships of life in outback towns, Witting began to approach her writing differently. She realised that the everyday lives and stories of other people could be mined for her writing material, rather than relying on her own life history to create her fiction. She wrote short stories (two of which were published in *The New Yorker*) about shearers, people marooned in floods, and teachers in country towns who set up play-reading groups and dramatic societies. She adopted the pseudonym Amy Witting in 1948, and retained this for her authorial identity until her death in 2001. Her first published novel, *The Visit* (1977) detailed the lives of everyday people in the fictional town of Bangoree, which was based on the rural town of Kempsey. This novel was met with high praise by critics when it was published in 1977, to such an extent that Barry Oakley dubbed Amy Witting 'Australia's Chekhov' (57).

Witting's writing reflected her version of the reality of Australian lives, yet because of her Eurocentric cultural perspective, she often felt alienated by Australian societal discourses. She harboured a resolve to write a novel set in Europe which would explore issues surrounding the suppression of German culture and values during Hitler's Nazi regime. Following the outbreak of war with Germany in August 1939, Witting had found it very difficult to come to terms with the fact that Germany was the nation responsible for so many of the terrible atrocities that occurred during World War Two. The horrors of the war perplexed her. Witting admitted to Yvonne Miels: 'I can understand Germans and I kept saying during the war years, "show me these people as human beings. Show me how they came about as human beings"' (Miels 1996 Appendix 10). However, she consistently claimed that she was 'very dependent on what reality sends [her] way' (Chenery 1994 6) to inspire and inform her writing. Thus the concept for a novel set in Europe remained only the shadow of an idea for this clandestine writer who, now married, lived her everyday life in suburban Sydney as Joan Levick; wife, mother and teacher.

It was during the late 1960s that reality sent Witting the long-awaited life story about war-time Germany. Joan Levick met Elena Jonaitis, a university-educated Lithuanian migrant refugee, when they were both teaching in the Modern Languages Department at North Sydney Girls High. The interwoven story of these two women began with their shared car rides to and from work each day. They both lived in the northern Sydney suburb of Epping, and as they drove back and forth to school, Elena would fill in the time by recounting her experiences fleeing across Germany in 1944 to escape the Russians, whom the Lithuanian family feared more than the Germans. Elena told of the hardship, the fear, the loss, the suffering and, ultimately, the survival of her family, although her third child, an infant son, died while they were waiting in a Displaced Persons camp to board a ship to Australia. The woman sitting in the car beside Elena listened avidly to this painful regurgitation of memories. She listened with the ears and mind of a writer, as well as a friend. Witting's reaction to Elena Jonaitis' story demonstrates the writer's instinctive habit of focusing on, collecting, filtering and filing away the minutiae of human behaviour, a writing technique and *modus operandi* that Witting has described as essential to her own writing process (Witting, unpublished letter 6 Jan 1997 2).

Witting subsequently realised that the material would make an excellent novel. She filed away the ideas and narrative structure for future use, obtaining Jonaitis' permission to use her wartime experiences. Jonaitis' narrative would ultimately underpin Witting's fourth novel *Maria's War*, but the writing of this novel would involve an intermittent transnational journey of some thirty years. The genesis of the novel *Maria's War* provides a fascinating story, with Witting making the decision to write Jonaitis' pre-emigration story, setting parts of the novel in Germany, rather than focusing on her life as an immigrant refugee in Australia. What was so remarkable about the story of Jonaitis and Witting was the creation and publication of Jonaitis' own text, before Witting's *Maria's War* was even written. Jonaitis had her memoir, *Elena's Journey*, published in Australia by Text Publishing in 1997. It was a remarkable feat for this Lithuanian migrant to write her own story in English, in a novel-length text of 256 pages. *Elena's Journey* was so well received by the reading public that, soon after publication, it was placed on the NSW HSC General English syllabus. Meanwhile, *Maria's War* had not yet been written.

The genesis of these two reflexive texts is indisputably underpinned by the planning, over several years, of Witting's novel. Witting was determined to set the novel in Germany, basing it on the events that occurred in the Displaced Person's camp near Augsburg, where Elena spent several months with her two young children. During her writing process, Witting travelled to Germany, where she conducted research for a few months. She worked in the Augsburg City Library archives, talked to many people, travelled to the farm Elena had described in her story, attempting to absorb as much about the essence of the place and the people as she could, in order to make her novel as 'authentic' as possible. Witting has admitted, 'When I went to Germany I didn't think that they would talk to me about Hitler. I stayed in Augsburg for some weeks and the hotel proprietor used to talk about the war and his positive experiences of being in the Nazi Party' (Miels, Appendix 10).

The values and attitudes that Witting encountered during this period of research thus conflicted with her long-held assumptions about German cultural discourses. She revealed to me in a letter in 1997, 'I had intended many years ago to base a novel on Elena's experiences, had even gone to Germany and studied the archives in Augsburg, but I couldn't handle the alien background. I am born a barnacle and cannot detach from my support' (4 Dec. 1997). The support mechanism to which she was referring was her Australian upbringing and life

experience. Witting discovered that transnational knowledge gained from books, poetry and other people's dislocated stories was not the kind that she could easily translate into her own novel. Therefore, she put the material for the novel on the backburner where it stayed until 1991, when Witting was asked by Elizabeth Webby to contribute a 'poem, short story, whatever' (Ibid) to a special edition of *Southerly* entitled 'Memory'. Witting revealed: 'So I wrote [the short story] "Interview"'. The protagonist is a Lithuanian migrant woman, Maria, and the story is set in a retirement hostel, where Maria is one of the residents. A young man, commissioned to write a book for her family, comes to the hostel to interview Maria about her experiences during World War Two. When Witting submitted this story to Elizabeth Webby in 1991, she wrote in the covering letter, 'it seemed to read like the first chapter of a novel' (Smee 4 Dec 1997: 1). And so it proved to be. The story 'Interview' later became the first chapter of Witting's novel *Maria's War*. Sections of the novel are based on the protagonist in the short story, yet the novel was not written for another six years.

Jonaitis revealed to the journalist Elizabeth Wynhausen (25) that telling her story to Joan Levick gave her the idea that she should write her own account of her experiences, so that her grandchildren would know their family history and ancestry. Jonaitis had found the confidence to tell her story because her listener provided a sympathetic, fascinated audience, encouraging her with pertinent questions and comments. On the ship sailing out to Australia in 1949, Elena had written a journal in Lithuanian recording the most painful episodes of her life as a refugee. Twenty-five years later, after recounting her story to Witting, Jonaitis retrieved her journal, translated it into English and extended the narrative, which eventually took shape as her chronicle. Yet Jonaitis did not tell Joan Levick that she was writing her own account as a gift for her grandchildren (who were not fluent in Elena's mother-tongue Lithuanian) as she was embarrassed by her lack of expertise in written English. Furthermore, it seemed extremely audacious that she should use this language to write her life story, as English was her fourth language and 'she doubted her command of it' (Witting, Foreword: *Elena's Journey* 1). Jonaitis' amateur book came to Witting's notice when:

after they hadn't seen each other for years, Witting telephoned Helen [Elena had anglicised her name to Helen in order to assimilate more easily into Australian society] to say that she was writing a novel set in a retirement home and wanted to use some of Elena's experiences as background for a character . . . Witting recalls that Helen said 'oh, I've written a book too. I'll lend it to you' . . . so she brought me these folders and I started to read. . . . I rang her back and said 'your book's marvellous—can I show it to my agent?' (Wynhausen 24)

Witting revealed:

I asked Helen if she would be prepared to rework the manuscript and submit it to a publisher. She found the prospect daunting . . . Editing I argued, would take care of a few grammatical errors and awkward passages. I offered my services as editor and occasionally as translator. (Witting, Foreword: *Elena's Journey* 1)

Finally, Helen agreed and the project began. Witting's agent consented to handle the manuscript if Witting agreed to act as editor and advisor to Jonaitis. Witting therefore put her own novel aside to assist Jonaitis, who acknowledged her friend's help, claiming: 'Amy was wonderful. Without her, my book would never have happened. She put her own book away

for some eight or nine months. It was an enormous thing² that she did and she did it out of friendship' (Bennie 8).

Witting and Jonaitis 'laboured together, side by side in Witting's workroom two days a week . . . giving a fictional shape to the work conceived as a family chronicle' (Wynhausen 25). Witting discussed the work that they did together to create the finished product:

Once Helen knew what was wanted, she did all the cutting. Sometimes I said 'Now keep your storyline going.' But mainly all I did was to advise on English. I'd say 'you don't mean crestfallen, love, you mean downcast' . . . you know, things like that. I'd stop and say 'that doesn't go into English, Helen, something wrong,' and we'd rephrase it. I just did what an editor does, that's all'. (Ibid. 25)

In a letter to me at the beginning of 1997, Witting was discussing the process of writing fiction/autobiography and she made the following comments:

In my experience in fiction, one cannot use the first person in intensely personal, revelatory material. This shows very clearly in the novel I have been editing for a migrant friend. It is quite autobiographical, dealing with very emotive material; she has written it in the third person, calling herself 'Aldona', though the name is the only fiction involved. I sympathise with this; I know I could not have told the story except by pretending to be somebody else. The publisher is going to change the name and publish it as non-fiction, *Elena's Journey*. She doesn't mind that; her work is done and the assumed name was a necessary device without which she could not have faced the experience. (Witting, Unpublished letter 6 Jan 1997 4)

Indeed, the same modus operandi was employed by Witting to write her autobiographical novels, which draw on her own harrowing past experiences of child abuse and illness. *I For Isobel* (1989) and *Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop* (1999) are both written in the third person, via the persona of Isobel Callaghan. The use of the third-person narrative voice means that the novels can be labelled as fiction. Witting maintains: 'I had tried over a long period of time to conquer the truth of that situation, but I couldn't do it with fact, I had to do it with fiction, . . . the terrible truth of fiction' (Smee Oct 1997 16). Witting's autobiographical novels allow her to tell her own 'terrible truth' of her abusive childhood, silenced for fifty years. In regard to the creation of Jonaitis' memoir, Witting suggested that Jonaitis adopt the persona of an observer/narrator who details a character's life circumstances, thereby distancing the author, to some extent, from the traumatic memories and enabling the writing process of the pre-emigration narrative *Elena's Journey*.

The memoir is filled with harrowing and disturbing experiences that Jonaitis endured and survived. One such experience is when Jonaitis, her husband Vytas and their two children decided to leave Lithuania in the face of the advancing Russian army. Jonaitis and her family join a westward bound train with hundreds of other people. She describes what happened next:

In the late afternoon, two uniformed Gestapo men came into the compartments and started checking our papers. Then one of the Gestapo men asked Vytas to come out of the train with them. Minutes passed, but Vytas did not come back. Elena's uneasiness turned into fear, then as the train started to move, into panic. She rushed to the window in the corridor. There on the platform stood Vytas flanked by the two Gestapo men. The train gathered speed . . . (Jonaitis 93)

Jonaitis was now left alone with a baby, a three year old, two suitcases and no tickets, no documents and no money. Vytas had all of these with him. It was nearly two years before she saw her husband again; he had been press-ganged into the German Wehrmacht. Without papers, Elena became a stateless person, a so-called 'Displaced Person' (DP). She and her children were admitted into a DP camp where she was forced to strip naked, shower in cold water and be scrubbed with 'evil-smelling lye soap' (116) then, still naked, pass before a whole range of male personnel for various medical examinations. Her hair was soaked with kerosene to kill lice even though she cried out 'no lice! No lice!', then 'everyone had to stop and state her name and the date and place of her birth. These were recorded, then one of the attendants stamped a large number in purple ink onto her left buttock. 'Oh God' Elena heard herself say loudly 'Have we turned into cattle?' (117) and 'I have just been deloused and dehumanised!' (118). Vytas found his way back to his family in the last months of the war and they remained in DP camps for another three and a half years.

The fact that *Elena's Journey* was published before Witting completed her own novel substantially changed the shape and texture of *Maria's War*. It is interesting to note that since Witting used 'Interview' to create the first chapter of *Maria's War*, Jonaitis' experiences narrated in *Elena's Journey* coincide with those in Witting's novel, because 'Interview' predated *Elena's Journey*. Therefore, incidents such as the Gestapo removing Elena's husband from the train appear in both texts. However, once Witting decided to collaborate with Elena Jonaitis to write her book, Witting's novel, which she recommenced once Jonaitis' book was completed, needed to be substantially different. Jonaitis commented on the experience of reading her own life story transformed into a fictional character:

It felt rather strange; "Elena" and "Maria" were her and yet, were they? They were her shaped in words, one version factual, but as memory remembered her; the other fictional, but as an independent, vibrant writerly imagination toyed and experimented with aspects of her. . . . You see, the same event becomes like something else . . . when someone else tells it. (Bennie 8)

Witting retained the original form of the first chapter, as this established the time and place which would underpin the narrative set in a retirement hostel. This was a clever choice for the setting of *Maria's War*, as Witting had admitted that she was 'born a barnacle [who] can't detach from [her Australian] support', thus she was unable to set the novel in Germany, as originally planned. The Sydney retirement village concept provided the novel with an entire cast of characters from different backgrounds, education and interests mandatorily brought together in a defined and confined space. One of these characters is Maria, a Lithuanian migrant. The retirement home setting also allows Witting to play to her strength of using a limited number of indoor settings with little need for description of landscape, like a stage setting, which she has acknowledged she does well in her fiction: 'But I think I probably do

set the scene well. Like a stage' (Smee *Interviews* 1996 10). In addition, the retirement village scenario enabled Witting to address discourses associated with the elderly and their memories.

In *Maria's War*, the narrative shifts across time and place. In creating these time shifts, Witting employs conceptualisations of memory such as re/memberment and recuperative strategies of post-colonial narrative such as fragmentation and infinite rehearsal. Witting applies three different techniques in the novel, which fit happily within discourses associated with the aged and the theme of memory. The first is the interview technique, which allows the narrative to unfold via a dialogue revealing Maria's memories interspersed with comments from the interviewer; the second technique is the use of epistolary narratives, whereby one of the main characters, Erica, a retired teacher, receives a series of letters from a former student Margaret, whose grandmother Rosa is an Australian immigrant refugee (like Maria). Margaret is travelling in Germany in an attempt to find her family roots. Maria and Erica become friends in the retirement village; both are intellectuals and connected to war-time Germany. While the plot, involving a coincidence of place for both Maria and Margaret near Augsburg, may appear somewhat contrived, the technique of Erica reading Margaret's letters to Maria enables Witting to advance the plot without encroaching on the content of the book *Elena's Journey*. The third method Witting employs is the device of the shared table in the dining room at the hostel. Set seating brings a disparate group together three times a day, where conversations are shared, news imparted and disagreements abound. This device efficiently reveals the particulars of each character as well as advancing the plot. Witting also includes a session of hypnosis under which a character's repressed memories of an extremely traumatic event during World War Two are retrieved, providing another link to Elena's story in war-torn Germany.

Consequently, by the time of its completion in December 1997, Witting's novel had moved into another realm altogether. Although the character Maria is loosely based on Jonaitis, Witting was adamant that she be read as a fictional character. Jonaitis commented that "[t]here are some things in her book that don't appear in my book . . . There are details that I did tell her, but which I didn't write in my book. So, they are real, they happened to me; and yet they appear different when she writes them. On the other hand it must be sort of me, I suppose." (Bennie 8). Witting insists that "of course it [her character Maria] is not Helen. It is absolutely fictional. . . . Helen is a much nicer person than Maria" (Bennie 8).

The connectedness and reflexivity shared between the two books is apparent under analysis, but the two can also be viewed independently from one another. A particularly illustrative example of this is to compare the way in which the same incident is treated in the two books. In *Elena's Journey*, a group of refugees, including Elena and her family, take shelter in a barn for a few nights. The farmer is away fighting in the army, so his wife is alone on the farm with some foreign workers assigned to do the farm labour. One of the refugees, Dana, who is travelling with Elena and her family, remarks to Elena that the farmer's wife seems very frightened, even traumatised, particularly if the men speak to her. Dana surmises that the woman may have been attacked and raped, being left alone with her young child, isolated on her farm. The woman is not named and there is no further reference to her in *Elena's Journey*, following the refugees' exit from the farm (169-170). A similar incident is included in Witting's novel, foregrounding the issue of the rape of women during war time. Witting's character Rosa is modelled on the same woman, the farmer's wife, whom Jonaitis describes in her memoir. In Witting's novel, however, Rosa loses her farm and becomes a refugee herself, emigrating from Germany to Australia after the war. The recounting of the rape in

Maria's War via the words of Rosa's child (now a middle aged woman) under hypnosis is particularly harrowing: 'He's the man who milks the cows! He comes in through the back door. He shouldn't be in the kitchen! He picks up the big chopping knife off the block. Mutti is frightened. She pushes me into my secret room under the table' (Witting, *Maria's War* 221). Witting's Chekhovian ability as a writer of fiction enables her to utilise the remembered events from Jonaitis' memoirs to imagine and dramatise a transformed version of the narrative emerging in *Maria's War*.

Witting, for over twenty years, was involved in a programme in Sydney teaching migrant women English, so she was very proud of *Maria's War*, which foregrounded migration issues. Witting commented on the fact that both her book and *Elena's Journey* are essentially Australian, increasing the understanding and awareness of the valuable contribution migrants have made to the fabric of Australian society (Witting, *The Landscape of Place and Mind* 3). In regard to the comparison of the autobiographical truth of Jonaitis' memoir with the fictionalised version of truth in Witting's novel, the following exchange in *Maria's War* provides insight:

[Erica:] 'I think it would be quite an undertaking to relive the past . . . It is always difficult to give a truthful account of past events.'

[Maria:] 'I have no intention of seeking truth. I shall tell my grandchildren what is good for them to hear.'(12)

The above exchange supports Witting's premise that discourses communicated through fiction can provide truths about the human condition (Smee *Interview* Oct 1997 16) with as much reliability as autobiography. Richard Holmes asserts in regard to life-writing that 'truth' is always something of a floating currency, and the exchange rates alter throughout history'(18), while Michel Foucault theorised that there are no absolutely true discourses, only more or less powerful ones, produced within a real world of power struggle (63). In this context, the above example from Witting's novel demonstrates this power play. Maria's selective discourse exerts power over her grandchildren. In so doing, her version of 'truth' becomes the accepted 'truth' or facts of subsequent family history. Discussing the relationship between fact and fiction Witting speculated:

The whole thing is very interesting. Helen has written the actual fact, and I have written the fiction. But you know when I came to that part about the love affair she had in the camp, she was so terribly moved. She said: But you understand this situation better than I did then. What you have written now is really more like it felt to me then'. You have told my story. (Bennie 8)

Witting revealed that many of her readers had reacted in a similar way. She commented that, after *I For Isobel* was published, a reader wrote to her and said: 'You are with me. I am not alone. You have told my story' (ibid). Arguably, Witting's fictional versions of the 'truth' of the human condition have empowered readers so that they achieve an insightful understanding of their own life-stories.

Witting has since been recognised as a writer belonging to the Australian literary canon—a fitting tribute to an author whose fiction depicts not only her own narratives, but those of the various people she encountered during her long life. The stories she chose to tell were often those that were buried deep in the imagination; inarticulate, unrecognised until the writer transformed them into words. In this way, her transnational novel *Maria's War* encodes the intensity of lived lives and provides a sense of narrative for immigrant communities. The following comment from Witting encapsulates the whole relationship between Elena's story and her own fictional *Maria's War*: 'That is the most wonderful thing writing can do, I think. Tell someone their story' (Bennie 8), and even further, in the case of Elena Jonaitis, empower 'the other', the immigrant woman to tell her own story.

NOTES

¹ Amy Witting is the pseudonym chosen by the writer Joan Levick (née Fraser). The writer was known by this pseudonym from 1948 until her death in 2001. Her real-life identity remained largely hidden from the literary establishment.

² It was a particularly generous action of Witting to postpone writing her own novel, especially considering the fact that she was 79 years old and her eyesight and health were failing.

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