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The title of the book immediately sparked my interest, but as soon as I randomly read some of the 22 chapters, my interest was ignited. The book simultaneously achieves and surpasses what the editor intended.

Two of Maureen Ryan’s aims in producing this book include: (1) ‘to show how doctoral research can be personally and socially meaningful as well as being academically rigorous and significant’ (p.ix); and (2) to tell the stories of Arts and Humanities higher degree students whose age and academic pathways differ from students in Science, and whose research
is shaped by life and career experiences.

The chapters are grouped into themes, and a range of research methodologies is showcased, including, but not limited to, ethnography, auto-ethnography, action research, case study, narrative, and arts-based inquiry.

The themes are:
- Taking time out to reflect in doctoral study.
- The influence of life experience on research topic selection.
- The influence of work experience on research topic selection.
- Ways forward after the doctorate.

On face value, these themes seem unsurprising and predictable, and one might expect a matter of fact, “how to” presentation of completing doctoral studies. Not so. Instead, each of the 22 chapters is a narrative ‘of human sense-making’ (Squire 2008:43), made more intense as the telling of each narrative is a joint project between writer and reader (Ricoeur 1991).

I was captivated by each writer’s narrative. Various aspects of my own experience as a doctoral candidate were exemplified to a lesser or greater extent in each narrative. I took away at least one significant message from each narrative, something that was meaningful and resonated with my doctoral journey. I admired the writers’ sense of agency, their persistence, and creativity. Some writers detailed the research process, albeit with insights to challenges and significant results and personal learning. Others engaged in deep reflection, taking me into their personal and professional lives. Either focus was memorable and persuasive.

As much as I want to, I cannot give an overview of each narrative, however, I will share two that inspired me with my PhD and were philosophically and theoretically significant.

Loy Lichtman’s narrative of his thesis is incredibly moving. He takes a cathartic journey in completing his practice- or arts-based doctorate. It cast reflective light on his childhood, growing up in a Jewish family in Fitzroy, exploring his parents’ wardrobe and discovering black and
white photographs taken in the concentration camps in Nazi Germany. He refers to Roland Barthes’s ‘punctum’ to describe the impact of the photographs: he was ‘pierced’ by them. He adds that ‘In the eventual telling of my story, my PhD, and in the handing over of those photos to the Holocaust Research Centre in Elsternwick, I became less pierced’ (p.116).

Loy’s PhD was a very personal project that grew as it acquired a number of different threads to become a multi-layered, non-linear postmodern interrogation and representation of what Giddens (1991) referred to as the ‘individualised project’ and what Loy describes as the ‘malleable’ face and body within the context of his digital visual arts (p.117).

He starts with the visage of Pamela Anderson, her white skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and symmetrical features; an image he sees on the façade of a house in a Melbourne suburb. Her face represents the perfect and desirable face in Western culture: a popular choice in aesthetic surgery. Loy examines Herronvolk and what constituted ‘the ideal body and face in Nazi Germany’, and then contrasts and compares Pamela Anderson’s visage with that idealised by Herronvolk. Durer’s early work in researching and documenting human proportions, and using techniques not totally dissimilar to some of today’s digital practices, take on unexpected significance. Loy’s PhD journey results in a number of creative projects and realisations. One realisation he describes as a ‘shock’: that ‘the gap of 500 years between Durer and my own personal experiences, my experiences as an artist and my research into different trajectories, as well as the malleable body, did not seem too great’ (p.130).

Tanya Paterson’s past, as a public servant whose ‘career came crashing down’ (p.153), was the catalyst for her doctoral research. Her journey as an insider researcher resonated with my research, which is from an insider-outsider perspective. Intense energy, passion and conviction are expressed in her words and honest, self-effacing accounts of her experiences as a doctoral candidate, regularly interposed with humour.

Tanya wanted to use the research to better understand her lived experience of the injustices she and her colleagues had experienced, and to give voice to her co-workers. These were worthy aspirations.
However, as an insider researcher, whose lived experience and feelings of resentment were motivating factors, her journey was bound to be fraught with challenges. She describes receiving advice at her colloquium, ‘You cannot use PhD as therapy’, and reflecting that ‘it was the best misinformation [she] ever received’ (p.157). Ever present in Tanya’s narrative is her commitment to social justice and her ethical responsibility of writing and telling others’ stories and her own in a way that empowers others: participants, herself, and the readers.

All of the narratives in the book convey a combination of energy, humour, passion, commitment, doubt, angst, challenge, and transformation. The power of the narratives, individually and collectively, lies in their capacity to offer different layers of meaning, to “talk” to each other, and celebrate transformation and change (Squire 2008). Reading the narratives is very much a joint project between writer and reader and, as a consequence, made all the more meaningful.

Elaine Martin’s Afterword is not to be overlooked or forgotten. She describes the research in this book as ‘courageous research’; a term she coined to describe ‘[r]esearch that is courageous and inspired by imagination’, in direct contrast to research that is diffident and set ‘within the limits of traditional research methods and discipline boundaries’ (p.281).

Elaine Martin’s summation of the meaning and purpose of a doctorate is compelling:

To complete a doctoral study that is an honest reflection of personal wisdom is a deeply empowering experience, and beyond this there is a liberation that comes with eventually being able to have an informed and passionate voice that can speak back to the questions or comments of critics, curators, colleagues and others (p.283).

This book is very much in keeping with Maureen Ryan’s approach to her role as an educator and researcher. Maureen Ryan is a professor in the College of Education at Victoria University, an experienced educator, and the Director of the Gallery Sunshine Everywhere. Collaboration, community, relationships and partnerships, narratives and stories, reflection and transformation are constant themes in her work. This
book is yet another example of Maureen Ryan’s commitment to giving voice to others: teachers, educators, and now doctoral candidates in the Arts and Humanities.

I believe this book is an excellent resource for doctoral candidates, at any stage of their thesis, and an inspiration for those contemplating doctoral studies. It presents the human, emotional context, or texture, an essential ingredient for anyone embedded in or about to embark on doctoral studies. I see it as a supplementary resource to two of my favourite and often-read textbooks, both of which provide dynamic, creative, contemporary guidance to thesis research and writing that is accessible and easily understood and applied. These are: Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson’s (eds) 2006, Helping doctoral students write: pedagogies for supervision and Pat Thomson and Melanie Walker’s (eds) 2010, The Routledge doctoral student’s companion: Getting to grips with research in education and the social sciences.

The courageous research in this book is inspirational and presents the personal, emotional and intellectual investment necessary to complete a doctoral thesis. Maureen Ryan’s words resonate from the beginning of the book to the last page: ‘Each of these chapters comes from the heart’ (p. xiii). So true!

References
