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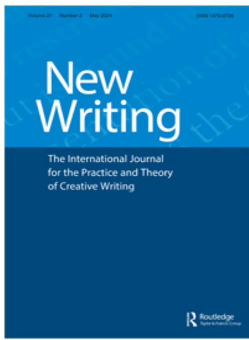

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‘Becoming’ and POET literary placemaking as creative methodology for writing character and place in biofiction

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ABSTRACT
Biofiction, a genre that produces ‘literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure’ [Lackey, M. 2016. *The American Biographical Novel*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1] presents significant technical, imaginative, and ethical challenges to its writers. This article gives a brief history of the biofiction novel and explores creative methodologies used by biofiction authors. The article then describes a post-graduate attempt at writing the manuscript of a novel about Scottish author, Naomi Mitchison and English explorer, Zita Baker. Employing an autoethnographical approach, I explain how I used a dual-methodology of Colm Tóibín’s idea of ‘becoming’ (2010) as creative practice and Meg Mundell’s POET model of literary placemaking (2018) and give examples of how these techniques worked in two ways: the writing of character and place.

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Introduction

Biofiction is a genre of writing that marshals the techniques of fictional writing to construct texts about historical subjects (Buisine 1991). This genre, which produces ‘literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure’ (Lackey 2016, 1) presents significant technical, imaginative, and ethical challenges to its writers. In 2017, when I took on these challenges as part of a PhD in creative writing which produced the manuscript for a novel about Scottish author, Naomi Mitchison and British explorer, Zita Baker, I was unprepared for how complex, confronting, and humbling these challenges would be.

Julia Novak notes that biofiction as a mode of writing ‘transgresses genre boundaries and renegotiates the relationship between historical fact and fiction,’ (2011, 145). This ‘renegotiation’ is one of the problems that was most obvious to me as I began writing about the lives of two twentieth-century women. To navigate it, I turned to the experiences of authors and creative practitioners who have developed and utilised various methodologies for creating biofiction works.

This article uses an autoethnographic approach to explore techniques that biofiction writers have used and two specific frameworks that I combined in my creative practice.

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Autoethnography is a qualitative research method which combines elements of ethnography and autobiography (Pace 2012). In creative writing, it is used as a self-reflexive practice to reflect on and construct prose. It can also be used discursively, to analyse one's own written creative texts in scholarly ways. Practices of.

autoethnography include journal-keeping, sketching or drawing, and recording one's own reflections about one's writing and/or research practice (Faichney 2021). Life writing scholar, Julia Watson, has highlighted the social and relational aspects of authoethnography, wherein the practitioner is both the 'narrating I'" and 'narrated "I"', illuminating the fact that writers exist within a particular cultural context (2021). The process of autoethnography asks the writer to observe themselves within their own social and cultural context, and my own positionality as a white, middle-class Australian woman became relevant in this project in ways I will describe throughout the article.

The scholarship of biofiction, as is it now known, is around twenty years old. However, as Michael Lackey has identified (2016), biofictions in print appeared as early as the 1930s, with works such as Leonard Ehrlich's *God's Angry Man* (1932), Lion Feuchtwanger's *Josephus Flavius* novels, (1932–1942), the Claudius novels (1934–1935) and *Count Belisarius* ([1939] 1968) by Robert Graves, *Lust for Life* (1934) and *Jack London: Sailor on Horseback* (1938) by Irving Stone, Arna Bontemp's *Black Thunder* ([1936] 1992), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* by Zora Neale Hurston ([1939] 1991), and Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* (1940).

Later works such as Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951), Anna Banti's *Artemisia* ([1953] 1992), *The confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron (1967), and many of Irving Stone's twentieth century works explicitly subtitled as 'Biographical novel[s]' such as *Immortal Wife: The Biographical Novel of Jessie Benton Fremont* (1944), *The Agony and the Ecstacy: A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo* (1961) and *Depths of Glory: A Biographical Novel of Camille Pissarro* (1985) also fall into the category of early biofiction. At the time of their publication, these texts were classified as belonging to historical fiction, but with a major character named after a biographical figure they bear the defining characteristic of what we now know as biofiction.

Like its counterpart, historical fiction, biofiction is therefore not a new trend in literature. However, it has become increasingly popular in the past forty years, spurred on by the success of bestselling biofictions in the 1990s. Some of these were parlayed into major Hollywood films which explored the lives of biographical figures in biofiction's sister genre, the biopic. One example of the commercially successful biofictions of the 1990s is Tracy Chavelier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), a novel which told the story of the model, the fictional Greit, who posed for Johannes Vermeer's famous painting of the same name. Originally classified as an historical fiction novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* bears the hallmark of biofiction; a character in the novel is named after a real person (Vermeer). Further, in writing the novel, Chevalier engaged in some of the techniques that have become synonymous with biofiction. Namely, the novel uses fiction to imagine what can't be known about the anonymous model in the painting, an approach that I have identified as the navigation of gaps and silences in biofiction (Chevalier 1999). Further, and in her exegetical discussions and interviews, Chevalier spoke to the process of building fictional narrative around her research which was 'true to the known facts' (1999).

The same year, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham was published, which told the story of three women. Cunningham's novel follows Virginia Woolf, and two fictional characters who are reading Woolf's novel, *Mrs Dalloway,* in different timelines; a 1950s housewife who is discontent with her domestic life, and a contemporary woman who is nursing her friend in his final stages of the HIV virus (1998). Cunningham has discussed the fact that, while he did not set out to write a biofiction novel, in hindsight there appears to have been a 'zeitgeist' (2014, 89) for this type of novel as he was writing *The Hours* at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Indeed, both Cunningham's and Chevalier's biofiction novels were made into award-winning films, providing a blueprint for other contemporary writers of successful biofiction whose published novels followed closely. Such authors include Joyce Carol Oates who wrote *Blonde* (2000), a Marilyn Monroe biofiction (made into a controversial Netflix film released in 2022), David Ebershoff, whose novel *The Danish Girl* (2000), centred on the life of Lily Elbe, an artist and transgender woman who was one of the earliest recipients of gender reassignment surgery, and was also made into a film, and Colm Tóibín, who wrote *The Master* (2004)*,* a fictional representation of the life of Victorian novelist Henry James, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

The boom of these types of novels hasn't slowed since, with more recent novels such as the Ernest Hemmingway biofiction, *The Paris Wife* (2011) by Paula McClain, Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2014), about the life of Icelandic murderess, Agnes Magnusdottir, and novels that blend the form of biofiction with autofiction (fiction about the self), such as *Mrs Nixon: A Novelist Imagines a life* (2011), by Ann Beattie, Olivia Liang's *Crudo* (2018), a reimagining of Kathy Acker's life as it might have been in the year 2016, and Anna Funder's *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell's Invisible Life* (2023) achieving commercial and critical success. Marie-Luise Kohlke has compellingly theorised that this continuing biofiction zeitgeist reflects 'postmodern memory and trauma culture, as well as capitalising on our reality TV show fascination with confession, voyeurism, and celebrity,' (2013, 4). Indeed, there appears to be a marked upturn in interest with the fictional telling of 'real' lives within popular culture after the postmodern turn (Lackey 2014).

The scholarship of biofiction, contributed to by theorists of the genre and by its writer-researchers, has concerned itself with the many issues that writing fictionalised versions of real lives presents. These include negotiating the line between fact and fiction (Bode 1955; Kendall 1967; Latham 2012), authorial subjectivity and how it affects the writing of biofiction (Buisine 1991; Mujica 2016; Ní Dhúill 2020; Tóibín 2010), the ethics of writing about real lives (Gardiner and Padmore 2022; Kohlke 2013; Kon-yu 2010), the ethics of including or excluding Indigenous perspectives (Morris 2022), representations of race in biofiction (Gill 2020) and representations of gender in biofiction (Novak 2017; Gardiner and Padmore 2022), to name a few.

While these issues will continue to be debated by scholars of biofiction, still a relatively new field in literature, writers of the genre have developed several creative methodologies to traverse some of these obstacles. These methodologies may not perfectly answer the challenges that biofiction poses and may be problematic in their own ways; containing biases, limitations, and technical inadequacies. However, given the popularity of the biofiction novel from commercial (Abbs 2016; Davies 2013; Fitzpatrick 2016; Lee 2004; Preston 2019) and critical perspectives (Buisine 1991; Gardiner and Padmore 2022; Kohlke 2013; Lackey 2014; Lackey 2016; Lackey 2017; Mujica 2016; Ní Dhúill 2020;

Novak 2011; Novak 2016; Novak 2017; Tóibín 2010), the creative practice of these methodologies are worth documenting as we deepen our understanding of this genre whose scholarship is not more than twenty years old.

Literary scholar, Monica Latham, describes a two-factor methodology she identifies as part of any successful biofiction. This methodology includes 'minute factual research' combined with 'imaginative and creative dexterity in order to open up infinite possibilities, prolong the true facts, or fill in the nebulous blanks left by biographies' (Latham 2012, 356). As an overview, Latham's methodological description rings true. Of course, as Latham is winking at, the reality of such 'minute factual research' and the development of 'imaginative and creative dexterity' may be beyond the scope of many writer-researchers' resources and/or abilities. Where is an aspiring biofiction writer to begin?

The biofiction authors: A brief overview of methodologies

More granular examinations are needed to understand the creative practices of biofiction authors. To that end, explorations of biofiction methodologies have been examined as part of broader interviews in *Truthful fictions: Conversations with American biographical novelists* (Lackey 2014) and *Conversations with biographical novelists: Truthful fictions across the globe* (Lackey 2017). These texts contain interviews that Lackey, a leading biofiction scholar, and other leading biofiction authors and scholars, such as Kelly Gardiner, conducted with popular and well-known biographical novelists. The list of authors interviewed in these works include Michael Cunningham, David Ebershoff, Julia Alvarez, M. Allen Cunningham, Joyce Carol Oates, Jay Parini, Edmund White, Hannah Kent, and others.

While creative methodology was not a major interview focus, it was one of many larger questions explored in these texts, and hints can be gleaned about various methodologies from the responses of authors in these books. In the America-focused *Conversations* (2014), Michael Cunningham, author of one of the most commercially successful biofiction novels, *The Hours* (1998), describes how he began with 'tremendous research' (2014, 92) into Virginia Woolf's letters and diaries, yet never attempted to portray Virginia Woolf; rather a fictional character who would resemble her. Cunningham also discusses homage as part of his creative process in writing *The Hours*, or as he more charismatically puts it: 'I ripped off Virginia Woolf in so many ways' (2014, 95).

Julia Alvarez began her biofiction novel, *In the Time of Butterflies* (1994), about the Mirabel sisters, who resisted the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, by writing poems and creating a collage of 'clippings from newspapers, telegrams, things that were happening around the world to create this kind of kaleidoscope around [the protagonists'] story' (cited in Lackey 2014, 28), and describes how this process gave way to fictional prose as she worked. Alvarez asserts that the biofiction novelist has 'fixed' moments in the story – facts from history – that they must adhere to, but that she used intensive research to inform different character perspectives to create 'multiple truths' in the novel (cited in Lackey 2014, 32).

Lance Olsen, author of *Nietzsche's Kisses* (2006), gives a detailed insight into his process and the larger questions about biofiction that were raised in his creative practice in the United States-focused *Conversations*:

> I did extensive research for Nietzsche's Kisses, both in terms of reading various biographies and Nietzsche's work multiple times, and in terms of traveling extensively, following Nietzsche's life journey through Germany and Switzerland and Italy, taking extensive notes along the way, taking photographs and film footage, visiting the Nietzsche Archive, standing in the room in which he died, and so on. But I was also trying to move beyond those kinds of events into a series of conditionals about Nietzsche … The best we can do is set up these thought experiments about the relationship of the individual to history and disrupt both those terms. The individual? How do we talk about identity? What are its limits, its substance? And history? Who's telling that history, and from what perspective, and with what sort of agenda? (cited in Lackey 2014, 198)

Conversations with biographical novelists: Truthful fictions across the globe (Lackey 2017), give further glimpses into the creative methodologies of writers outside the US. Laurent Binet, the French author of *HHhH* (2010), which reimagines the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, a Nazi leader in WWII, details a technique he calls 'meta-creative interrogations' (cited in Lackey 2017, 37). This process allowed Binet to avoid 'a point where fictionalisation becomes falsification' (cited in Lackey 2017, 36) by writing a fictionalised scene where Heydrich's plane is shot down that is entirely speculative. Binet admits that if he stuck to 'historical truth' he would have kept this scene to himself and not published it, but he liked the scene and so he kept it and instead, a few chapters later, acknowledged that it was fiction in a meta-creative wink at the reader (cited in Lackey 2017, 36–37).

Hannah Kent, Australian author of Burial Rites (2014) describes a research-led approach to biofiction in the 2018 global version of *Conversations*:

> It would apply and incorporate critical historical and cultural knowledge and require rigorous primary research. Rather than having practice-led research where you progress from unknown to known, the research practice would direct that creative work until the knowledge base was exhausted. The fiction would take a secondary role (cited in Lackey 2017, 106).

Both of Lackey's edited collections give significant insight into the creative processes of biofiction authors, even if this is not explicitly the focus of these interviews. Other works that have explored the creative practice of biofiction include exegetical works by authors such as Kate Grenville. After her Colonial Australian biofiction novel, *The Secret River* (2005), found critical and commercial success, Grenville interrogated the process of researching and writing the novel in *Searching for the Secret River* (2007). Grenville describes how she began searching for the truth about her ancestor, on whom the protagonist in the novel is based, with archival research in Australia before traveling to London to conduct further research (2006).

After a lengthy period of research, Grenville began writing by categorising the historical facts she'd found by location: London and Australia. Placing events into chronological order helped Grenville flesh out the structure of the plot in each location, which she then further divided by character (2006). Finding the characters was the next process, and Greville melded aspects of her ancestor – his 'quick temper, his tendency towards violence, and a certain, cold-blooded determination' (2006, 188) – with softer, fictionalised aspects to make him a compelling protagonist.

In an article for *a/b Auto/Biography*, Bárbara Mujica, author of *Frida* (2001) discusses using 'subjectivity as an approach to biofiction' (2016, 1). This involves the author navigating the possibility of misrepresenting characters by embracing their own subjectivity as

the researcher-writer. Mujica argues that in embracing their own subjectivity, a biofiction novelist may use techniques that free them from facts, and 'come to terms with their own inability to see the world through their protagonist's eyes' (2016, 11). In writing *Frida*, a literary device Mujica found helpful in embracing her own subjective perspective of her subject was to create an opinionated and unreliable narrator of Frida Kahlo's life in the character of her sister, Cristina (2016).

In an author note, Donna DiGiuseppe has detailed parts of her own methodology in approaching the fictional retelling of the life of Renaissance painter, Sofonisba Angissola, in *Lady in Ermine* (2019). For DiGuiseppe, walking in the footsteps of Angiassola was a pivotal starting place, and connecting with her family descendants helped her to bring the fictional Angiassola to life. The paratextual matter of DiGuiseppe's book – a list of sources, acknowledgment of dates that have been changed, fictional characters that have been added, clarification of terms that have been changed for twenty-first-century audiences, and a list of Angiassola's paintings that inspired various chapters of the novel – further illuminate her creative and ethical practice in fictionalising Angiassola's life (2019).

I considered these methodologies and others over the course of three years, during which I wrote an 80,000 word manuscript of a biofiction novel based on the lives of Scottish author, Naomi Mitchison (1897–1999), and English explorer, Zita Baker (1901–1952). The novel, *The Lightning is Beautiful*, reimagines key scenes from the women's lives between 1920 and 1940. An abridged version of the PhD novel, along with my dissertation, was examined in 2021. The manuscript is currently being revised with the hope of commercial publication.

Ultimately, I focused on two main methodological threads to support the writing of this manuscript. In this article, I will discuss a dual methodology I used for this postgraduate attempt at writing biofiction, describing Colm Tóibín's idea of 'Becoming' (2010) as creative practice and Meg Mundell's POET model of literary placemaking (2018) and giving examples of how these techniques worked in two ways: the writing of character and place.

'Hide and seek': finding Naomi Mitchison, witness to a century, and Zita Baker, the femme fatale of Oxford

For over five years I have been immersed in Naomi Mitchison and Zita Baker's lives and it seems strange that there was a time when I knew nothing of them. I stumbled upon the women's letters, written to one another during the 1930s (Heimann 1998), and they stuck with me. I was working on my Master's thesis at the time on an entirely different topic, but discussed the letters frequently with my creative writing mentor, and spent hours of time in the beginning stages of research about the two women. I thought perhaps I could write a short story about the letters and their compelling subject matter until my mentor presented a far more ambitious idea: writing fiction about Mitchison's and Baker's lives could be my PhD project.

Newly ensconced in the project, I quickly realised that excerpts of the Mitchison-Baker letters, published in a biography of British anthropologist, Tom Harrisson (Heimann 1998) were not detailed enough to answer my research questions. There were so many gaps, ghosts; things I couldn't see or fully understand. I needed to find the original letters. I chased them from biographer, Judith Heimann's condo in Washington D.C., to a

basement in Belgium, to a dilapidated garden shed in Oxford owned by Mitchison's family, and to Scotland, twice, before finally locating them on my second trip to Edinburgh in the National Library of Scotland.

Mitchison herself had, years before I was born, foreseen such a goose-chase. In the process of packing up her lifetime of personal and professional ephemera for the archives (Mitchison 1915–1993) she mused that:

> […] my letters and papers, things which may be of interest to another generation or which I am keeping in case I suddenly find I need the information in them? […] Well, well, that will be a treat for someone! […] But perhaps it will not be historians: more probably writers of PhDs. They will be one's own daughters and granddaughters for this purpose […] if PhDs still go on and I'm dreadfully afraid they will. How are she and I going to play hide and seek with one another? (Mitchison, NLS Acc. 9914, 1971).

My partner in this game, Lady Naomi Mitchison, (although, it must be said that she hated the title and never used it unless she was trying to secure a reservation), was a member of the Scottish aristocracy and an author of an estimated ninety books.

Mitchison is generally remembered as a powerhouse within the world of British literature, particularly after her major fictional works were reprinted by feminist publisher, Virago, in the 1990s as part of the 'Modern Classics' series (Benton 1992). A pioneering historical and science fiction novelist, she was also a political activist, feminist and passionate campaigner for birth control and sex education (Calder 1997). She was a 'witness to a century' (Lloyd 2005, 1), and documented much of her lived experience in the twentieth century in her memoirs, biofiction, and essays. Prolific and ambitious, Mitchison contributed to many genres including historical fiction, biofiction, science fiction, political essays and collections, travel writing and memoir.

Mitchison was a master of control in her writing and in many aspects of her life. She even had significant input into both biographies written about her, giving her biographers direct access to herself by inviting them into her home in Carradale, Scotland. Mitchison's self-assurance and clarity of narrative voice can be partly attributed to the security provided by her education, financial and personal independence, and her relaxed relationship with the performance of femininity and traditional gender roles. Her wealth and class mostly protected her from the oppression experienced by women in the early twentieth century. The daughter of a wealthy intellectual Scottish family, the upper-middle-class Haldanes, she had been educated alongside her brothers at the prestigious Dragon School in Oxford, a boys-only institution.

Throughout her life, Mitchison would not feel as bound by the traditional restraints of her gender as other women in her circles. This personal ontology manifested in a refusal to conform to overt performances of femininity, such as when she declined to wear restrictive corsets and stays from as early as her teenage years, choosing instead to dress in flowing, comfortable garments and shun makeup for the rest of her life (Mitchison 1979). This tension also became indicative of her personal life, which resulted in her and her husband, Gilbert 'Dick' Mitchison, engaging in an open relationship after their children were born (Benton 1992) – an arrangement that continued until his death in 1970.

It was a different story for Inezita 'Zita' Baker (1901–1952), Mitchison's middle-class friend and travel companion. Born to an English midwife and a cable manager in Tenerife,

Spain, in 1901, Baker lived there until her father, William Pool Field Davis, died when she was six. Her mother, Hilda Gwendoline Davis, moved with Baker and her younger brother, Cuthbert, back to Oxfordshire, England, where they had family. Baker attended Howells, a prestigious girls' boarding school in Wales (Howard 1990) and would go on to become a skilled typist and stenographer who gained employment in the university town of Oxford.

Middle-class and with no university education, Baker's achievements, such as her anthropological study in Vanuatu, and subsequent publications, may have only been possible within the cultural context of the 1930s in Britain, the circles of leftist and socialist intellectuals she moved in, and the academic setting she lived in, Oxford. Mitchison herself noted that the twenties and thirties were a fertile time for women in Britain, that there was a 'new freedom to write, paint, do scientific or historical research, become doctors, lawyers' (Mitchison 1979).

While Mitchison's fame endures, Baker's life story is an example of a woman whose memory has been overshadowed by the well-known intellectual men she loved, inspired, and married. It is only through autobiographies written by Mitchison in the 1970s and 1980s (Mitchison 1979; 1981; 1986) and interviews Mitchison gave in the 1990s (Heimann 1998), her second husband, Richard Crossman's archive (1923–1974), along with the autobiographies and biographies of her friends and romantic partners (Benton 1992; Berlin 2005; Calder 1997; Cesarani 1999; Heimann 1998; Howard 1990; Scammell 2009) that sections of Baker's life narrative have been documented.

Heimann's biography of Tom Harrisson documents how, in 1933, on an island in Vanuatu, a 32-year-old Baker found herself at the sharp end of a love triangle that was about to implode (1998). Baker had accompanied her first husband on a university-funded expedition to the small collection of islands to conduct a twelve-month study of the wildlife and climate, but there was a complication; along for the expedition was her 21-year-old lover, Harrisson. As such, Baker spent a good deal of her time on the islands juggling the two men and writing long, evocative letters about the entanglement to her friend, Mitchison (Heimann 1998).

Details of the Baker-Harrisson love affair are available to the researcher because of the resulting epistolary triangle of life writing with Mitchison. Both Harrisson and Baker took Mitchison into their confidence during their tumultuous relationship. Mitchison kept these letters safe in an envelope in her bedroom drawer containing her most precious papers (Mitchison NLS, TD.2980).

It was this envelope and its contents that I chased halfway across the world. Finding it illuminated the private world of Mitchison, an author who had been surprisingly frank in her published life writing but had hidden certain things, like the content of Mitchison-Baker letters, away from prying eyes. Even with these documents at hand, with my interviews with Mitchison's family members, my analysis of Mitchison's many novels and memoirs, and my creative research exploring the significant sites of the women's lives, how was I to bring their stories to life in biofiction?

'Becoming' as a creative methodology

Tóibín spent five years researching and writing *The Master* (2004), a novel about nineteenth century author, Henry James, that was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction the year it was published. It is considered by scholars of biofiction to be one of

the exemplary works of the genre (Parani 2014). In 2010, Tóibín published an exegetical work containing essays that discuss his creative processes over those five years of writing and research, including techniques such as research and writing trips, walking in the footsteps of his subject, seeking out objects and immersive details, and merging details from Tóibín's own life into the narrative (2010).

The fact that Tóibín is a celebrated and famous author and I, just a postgraduate student with dream aside, about a year into my PhD I was struck by how the descriptions of his creative process mirrored my own. His connection with his protagonist resonated with how I felt about my protagonists, synchronicities he described started to happen to me, and eventually, I began to use the idea of 'Becoming' to help me to tease apart the elements of my own process. I found 'Becoming' particularly useful when it came to rendering my character's perspectives. As Paula Morris notes, when creating a character's perspective 'the fiction writer is tasked with evoking that experience – from visceral to intellectual to cultural – in depth and in detail' (2022, 2).

To 'Become' Henry James, Tóibín set out to get into his world during different stages of his life. Specifically, he travelled to Italy, to get 'close to places James had known and loved' (2010, 26). Tóibín waited for the character of his protagonist to emerge by immersing himself in an environment familiar to James, by visiting the places he visited and by rubbing elbows with descendants of the upper-class people that James would have known.

Naturally, a disadvantage that I had placed upon myself by choosing Mitchison and Baker as my subjects was the social and geographical distance between myself and the United Kingdom. Until my first research trip in 2018, I had never even visited the UK. Like Tóibín following Henry James to Italy, using the resources provided to me through my PhD programme, I organised a journey to close the gap between my subject's worlds and my own. Through contact with the Mitchison family, in July 2018 I was generously invited to stay at Cloan House in Auchterarder, located in the Ochills of Scotland, owned by the family and their ancestors for generations. The Baronial estate with over ten bedrooms, multiple offices, bathrooms, and reception rooms, plus several caretaker's quarters, sits on 55.76 acres of land, containing one of Scotland's most prized walled gardens.

Arriving up the winding driveway as an infinite number of white stones crushed under the tires of the hire car was surreal. The car was crowded on both sides by flourishes of pink, purple, and red Rhododendron flowers attached to bushes twice my height. Eventually, what looked like an enormous castle with wide, circular turrets appeared and my charming hosts spilled out to greet me. I had arrived.

Like Tóibín, I was keen to get a sense of my character from the surroundings that she knew. Tóibín wandered around Florence, where James had spent time 1895, at dusk, searching for an opening for his novel. I, on the other hand, marked student papers jet-lagged from a plump couch in one of the many casual living rooms at Cloan House. The room couldn't have felt more Scottish, with green-painted walls trimmed with tartan wallpaper, and, procrastinating, I stumbled across a book about the Chiltern Hills in Oxfordshire.

I flipped through the pages, remembering that Mitchison had frequently holidayed there with her husband and various friends in the 1920s (Mitchison 1979). I returned to Mitchison's most autobiographical novel, *We Have Been Warned* ([1935] 2012), a novel

that opens with the protagonist daydreaming about the rivers of England as she pours water into flower vases in the kitchen. Later, while helping my hosts clean up, I stood at the enormous kitchen sink at Cloan House and imagined Mitchison staying in the Chiltern Hills house, where they had to do without servants and were therefore responsible for chores like cooking and cleaning (Mitchison 1979). An image appeared of Mitchison washing her own dishes while she daydreamed about a riverboat ride with her lover, Widg. I had my opening.

Tóibín describes the method of 'Becoming' as 'merging the deeply personal with the imagined' (2010, 36), a process that continuously came to bear in my experience of writing *The Lightning is Beautiful*. When in the research stages of planning my trip to Scotland in 2018, I made a startling discovery – Auchterarder, a town I had only just heard of – was not only the ancestral seat of Mitchison's paternal family but also my own.

From the 17th - 19th centuries, the Faichney family lived and worked in Auchterarder and nearby towns, Crief and Muthill. It is a small family with origins supposedly tied to Saint Coloumba's arrival in Iona in AD 563. My ancestors include the stonemason, James Faichney, who helped the wealthy and powerful Drummond family build the first lending library in Scotland, the Innerpeffrey Library, in 1680. For this, he was allowed to place his greatest creation, the Faichney Monument, in the adjoining chapel cemetery to commemorate the family.

My hosts took me to Innerpeffray to see the Faichney Monument, which I had read about but never seen a photograph of. We started in the library, where the Keeper of the Books – a historic position that comes with a live-in cottage next to the library (Welsh 2020) – exclaimed, 'Oh, a Faichney! We haven't had one of you visit for some years now'. She proceeded to tell me about my ancestor's contribution to building the library and pointed us to the Chapel adjoining the cemetery, where the monument could be found. The Chapel was bare, and we investigated several plaques on the wall that honoured members of the Drummond family, but nothing about the Faichneys. Finally, one of my hosts pointed to a large rectangle of stone at the back of Chapel. 'Could that be it?' she asked.

I thought, privately, *surely it's not so grand.* We approached the back of the chapel and feasted our eyes on what can only be described as the magnum opus of my ancestor, James. The stone is not a tombstone, or simply a marriage stone, but a declaration of the lives of the Faichney family as they were from 1668 to 1707. The stone documents when James married his wife, Joanna, in 1668, and the births of all ten of their children over the subsequent 12 years. The stone also functions as a gravestone, commemorating the deaths of each member of the family, and prominently features the family motto, 'I believe in God already'.

The stone is also an advertisement of James' skill as a stonemason, with intricately carved skulls, miniature full-sized reliefs of each of the family members alongside their birth date, the family crest, and, charmingly, two large round shapes atop the two pillars which tower over the stone. We surmised these shapes to represent pineapples, which my ancestor had almost certainly never seen in real life. He was saying, 'we lived' and also, 'I created art'. For me, over 350 years later, living and trying to create art, this poignant encounter with the legacy of my ancestors was a surprising synchronicity.

Over the next two years, I merged countless hours of desktop research, fieldwork research, personal experiences, memories, photographs, sound recordings, thoughts,

and feelings, filtered through my own subjectivity into two characters based on Mitchison and Baker. Using 'Becoming' as a basis for embodying these historical characters on the page, I began to flesh out their impressions of London, Oxford, Scotland, Vienna, Vanuatu, New York, and Mississippi.

It is important to acknowledge, as Barbara Mujica has, that my own subjectivity is innately connected with both methodological approaches discussed here: Mundell's techniques for the writing of place and Tóibín's 'becoming' method of characterisation. Tóibín's description of his own creative practice in writing *The Master* ring true:

> By the end … I simply did not know if certain moments of the book took their bearings from things that were important for me or were merely inventions, images made to satisfy the pattern I was making in the book, or images made in my own likeness (2010, 32).

I layered in the sense of character of Mitchison and Baker respectively into the sense of place, as Tóibín describes doing with James: 'I was merely using these details about James in the same way that I would otherwise use memory, and that there really was not any difference in the process for me. I had imagined a character and I began to work with him' (2018, 152). Now that I had my characters, I also had to think about bringing to life the places they would experience in my manuscript.

Poet model of literary placemaking

Meg Mundell's POET model of literary placemaking was useful here to fill in the places where I could not 'Become' Mitichison or Baker, and had to rely on my own imagination, lived experiences, and memories. Mundell's model of placemaking describes the ways in which writers use 'generative techniques that engage an array of lived sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, ideas, and actions, and which writers can deploy to evoke literary sense of place' (2018, 2).

In writing my novel after the research trips in 2018 and 2019, POET model helped me to thread together the various research material I had collected to create fictional representations of the settings in *The Lightning is Beautiful*. Mundell's model consists of 'generative techniques that engage an array of lived sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, ideas and actions, and which writers can deploy to evoke literary sense of place' (2018).

The model contains five modes; retrospective techniques, immersive techniques, collaborative techniques, vicarious techniques and nebulous techniques (2018). I will discuss these modes with examples from the manuscript of my novel.

Collaborative techniques

Mundell's collaborative techniques involve cultural, conversational, and scholarly-based forms of knowledge of place to inform the writing of a literary setting (2018). Initially, there were several of these techniques available to me which helped inform setting in the early drafts of *Maneater*, my ill-named first attempt at the creative artefact. I think of this research as being at a distance; removed from the actual place and instead relying on a theoretical engagement with place.

Firstly, I researched pictures of Baker and Mitchison taken at various points in their lives (Benton 1992; Calder 1997; Heimann 1998; Howard 1990). Photos of Vanuatu from the

Oxford Expedition (Baker 1935) gave me an idea of the basecamp on Santo island and how thick the jungle of the islands was. Images of Scotland, Oxford, Vanuatu were also helpful, for example, photos and videos that I found of Gaua island and its crescent-shaped volcanic Leto lake, where the 'Steaming Mountain' that Baker and Harrisson climbed is still very much similar to how it was in the 1930s.

The Google maps function 'street view' took me on a virtual tour down New College Lane in Oxford, through the narrow streets of Kintyre, Scotland, at the back of Mitchison's house in Carradale, and right outside the Baker's former home at 94 Woodstock Road, unchanged since they lived there. YouTube videos of this walk were also available from vloggers who had visited sites in Oxford (Cool2BCeltic 2012).

In addition, textual descriptions of these places, such as Baker's 'Marooned on a desert island' article (1935) and Harrisson's *Savage Civilisation* (1937) along with setting descriptions in the various sources of life writing were extremely valuable (Mitchison 1934; 1935, 1954; 1979; 1981; 1986; Howard 1990; Benton 1992; Calder 1997; Heimann 1998). I found that would return to collaborative techniques even after I had access to other, more illuminating techniques, such as the immersive and retrospective techniques, which are sensory in nature. The combination of sensory and scholarly material helped me to render settings in the novel in factually correct prose.

Immersive techniques

As I have described, like Tóibín in his search for Henry James (2010), I needed to get a sense of the places Baker and Mitchison had known and lived in. Thus, the research trips of 2018 and 2019 allowed me to begin the 'immersive' techniques of Mundell's model of literary place. This mode of Mundell's theory involves site visits to places that will be rendered in fiction. Here the writer's presence is key so that they can engage sensorily and emotionally with the site (2018).

These techniques involved my visits to Cloan House in Scotland, Mitchison's mansion in Hammersmith, and various sites around Oxford. I took copious videos, still images, notes and audio recordings in each location, even sketching Mitchon's Hammersmith house in my journal. It is not an accurate drawing in the slightest, but it is imbued with the awe I felt looking up at the house, and looking at the drawing later brought me back to the emotions I felt upon viewing the house.

The immersive techniques of Mundell's POET methodology were the closest in overlap with Tóibín's 'Becoming' and as such it is difficult to separate the two in my reflections of this practice. The final section of this article will describe the assemblage of immersion and 'Becoming' in more detail.

Retrospective techniques

Mundell's retrospective techniques, which involve remembering place or using place-based memories to inform a literary work, were useful upon my return to Australia when the novel writing began. Mundell states that these place-based memories can be distant or recent, and in the case of my research, they only required me to reach back in memory between 6–18 months, to retrieve memories of my two research trips to Scotland, Oxford, and London which I used to inform various settings in *The Lightning is Beautiful*.

I placed memories of the flora of the United Kingdom in my novel; the elm trees, the Rhodesian bushes, and the peony roses. For the scenes in the United States, I relied on memories of my trips there in 2008 and 2016; things like the mugginess of the weather, the over-sweetness of the food for my palate, and the enormous sizes of the buildings in Washington D.C., which Baker's character remarks on in my novel.

Often, I would refer to the photographs or video I had taken and go over the notes I wrote in my journal at each site. Then, I would close my eyes momentarily and remember being there; the sounds, smells, sights, and feelings within me. I would start with architectural detail or describing the plant life and then move to the feeling of the place, such as when Baker describes looking up at Mitchison's house for the first time and noting that 'the energy felt like it did in Autumn, when the night air crackled before a storm' (Faichney 2021, 57).

Vicarious techniques

To write setting and dialogue from Baker's character's perspective was sometimes easier than it was from Mitchison's perspective, as I naturally related far more to the middle-class character than to the aristocratic millionairess. In this way, Baker's thoughts and feelings were sometimes easier to conjure, but for Mitchison's perspective, I relied on Mundell's 'vicarious' techniques of literary placemaking (2018). This is the process of 'imaginatively inhabiting a fictional being' according to Mundell and involves placing oneself within the character's perspective and taking on 'narrative empathy' for them (2018).

How would an upper-class woman of such means regard her surroundings? Naomi's character is rarely giddy or overwhelmed by situations, even when she is in unsafe surroundings, such as a sharecropper's protest in Arkansas or meeting late at night in coffee shops in besieged 1930s Vienna.

Not having the experience of extreme wealth (particularly, British Colonial wealth), I turned to literature. I read Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* ([1929] 2004) in which the death of Mitchison's son, Geoff, is fictionalised and she herself is tuned into a character, *Zuleika Dobson or an Oxford Love Story* ([1911] 2017) by Max Beerbohm, about a femme fatale in Oxford, Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* ([1935] 1987), about women intellectuals of Oxford in Mitchison's time, and of course Mitchison's own *We Have Been Warned* ([1935] 2012), which is set between London, Oxford and Scotland. I also watched films set in 1920s and 1930s Britain, such as Carrington (1995), Gosford Park (2001), Atonement (2007), Brideshead Revisited (2008), and *Tolkein* (2019) taking extensive notes on set design, costume, characterisation, dialogue, and paying attention to the way actors portraying women of Mitchison's time and class held themselves, behaved and spoke.

It was startling to stumble upon a recording, now converted to podcast format, of Mitchison on a radio show called 'Desert Island Discs' (1942 – current), a long-running radio show from BBC 4 where the who's who of British (and sometimes International) politics, literature and culture discuss their favourite songs and what they would take to a desert island. A ninety-two-year-old Mitchison is interviewed in April 1991 by Sue Lawly, introduced by the host as a 'radical, energetic and versatile' writer of 90 books who 'devoted her life to new ideas' (BBC 1991).

Most presciently, this recording connected me to Mitchison's voice, the clipped, Received Pronunciation accent of the early twentieth century – the same accent as

Queen Elizabeth II. 'I can write, anywhere,' Mitchison says, the 'wh' of where pronounced as IPA phonetic symbol /hw/ (Jones 1924), and notes that she does so 'quite often', pronouncing 'often' as 'orphan' (BBC 1991). In between sections of interviews in which she discusses her books including *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison requests songs such as 'Finlandia' by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) because it 'takes one into another world; a dark, cold, beautiful world and it's so exciting to get into another world, and then perhaps write about it' (BBC 1991).

I listened to the tracks over and over, and as Tóibín listened to songs by Spanish operatic lyric soprano, Victoria de los Angeles and connected them to James' character, Isabel Archer, in the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (2010), I connected them to images of Mitchison at various times of her life. For example, Mitchison requested the 'Dragon School Song' to recall her education there as a girl ('I didn't think of myself as a girl, I thought of myself as a dragon'), and or in memory of going to see the 'Russian dancers' in the 1930s, Mitchison requests 'The Rite of Spring' by Igor Stravinsky and describes how moved and excited she was by watching this new form of dance. Listening to Mitchison be interviewed about pivotal moments in her life, including the birth of her children, her decision to have an open marriage, and the censorship of the rape scene in *We Have Been Warned*, an under-researched work of Mitchison's that was maligned by the literary set of London upon its release for its overtly sexual and feminist themes.

Besides these sources, which helped me to imagine her world a little clearer, Mitchison's own life writing was the central source of my vicarious imaginings. Mitchison wrote six volumes of memoir, including *You May Well Ask*, which is the official autobiography of Mitchison's life during the time that *The Lightning is Beautiful* is set. However, *Vienna Diary*, Mitchison's journal from her time in helping organised socialist groups in Vienna in 1934 was also very useful. Here, Mitchison sets out a positionality for herself at age 36, which gives much insight into how she saw herself in these years:

> Well, then, I'm an observer. I'm also a socialist and my observations will be the observations of a socialist, just as they'll be the observations of a woman of thirty-six, of someone brought up before the war, partly-scientist, partly historian, nothing complete, the usual set of odds and ends that my social class and circumstance are likely to produce. So I shan't be objective. But, then, nobody is, so that doesn't matter. (1934, 5)

I used this framing about Mitchison's own thoughts about her class, somewhat arrogant but also demonstrative of how very sheltered she was by her status, in the novel. Once in Vienna, staying in a very shabby motel, Mitchison's character notes how good it feels not to be surrounded by luxury, how 'proletariat' (Faichney 2021, 145).

Another example of having to place myself in Mitchison's view happened while writing the epilogue of *The Lightning is Beautiful*, where an American journalist comes to visit Mitchison for an interview at Carradale. Mitchison's character is in her nineties now, and has more than grown into herself; she is the Mitchison of the 'Desert Island Discs' interview – wittily sarcastic, fully aware of her legacy, and far sharper on the edges than she had been in her thirties. This is the Mitchison described by her biographers, Benton, Calder, and Heimann; a grand dame who had lost none of her vigour, intellect, or charisma, but who was harder, more forceful, and whose displeasure was quicker to surface.

The fictional young journalist, Jennifer Barker, steps into Mitchison's home filled with nerves and admiration for the famous writer. She is clumsy, out-of-place, and intimidated, bringing an idealistic contemporary feminist subjectivity to a century of Mitchison's life and work that she hasn't even begun to understand. She is a parody of myself approaching Mitchison at the outset of this project, and in my empathetic narration of Mitchison's character, I have Mitchison regard her with a condescension that is completely warranted.

Nebulous techniques

Mundell's 'nebulous techniques' concern themselves with the esoteric. For Mundell, the writer may use dream content, imagination 'subconscious formulations, intuition, the sublime, the uncanny, hauntings and genius loci (spirit of place)' (2018). I dreamed of Mitchsion and Baker often, and in the feverish months of working on the novel manuscript, I would often be woken by either character speaking to me or acting out an as-unwritten chapter, telling me what the plot points were, and would scramble awake, grab a notebook and jot everything I could remember down. Strange coincidences, such as landing in Auchterarder for my fieldwork and accidentally connecting with my family history, also occurred, as discussed earlier in this article.

Bricolage: bringing it all together

Here I will further discuss how the two methodologies blended together in ways that are hard to untangle. I have explained that Cloan House in Scotland was my first touchpoint into Mitchison's world. For my stay there in June 2018, the Mitchison family put me in 'Nou's room', the room that had always been Mitchison's, and has a large portrait of her on the Northern wall. It contained a bed with a vintage lace valance, an art deco dresser and mirror, a chest of drawers, and its own sink, a curious Victorian convention found in many British homes. Its window looks out onto the back of the property and up to the peak of the hill on which the Baronial manor sits. This was where in 1925, after working through the night, Mitchison raced up the hill in the sunrise, elated at finishing her second book:

> The same delight I had racing through London, the need to run, caught me at Cloan at the end of writing *Cloud Cuckoo Land*. I must have finished it late at night, for I gathered my typeset up early before it was quite light and went out through the never locked front door of the sleeping house in the dawn. The Ochils behind us cut off the eastern light, but I ran uphill to meet the sun which had already illuminated the strath and the far range of the Highlands. In one of the high fields among bracken and wild pansies I met the sun, I plunged into light, I showed it my finished book. (Mitchison 1979, 127.)

Borrowed hiking boots on my feet (my leather fashion boots had been deemed unfit for the task of tackling the Scottish terrain by the Mitchison family. They had generously offered me a spare pair, which I sheepishly accepted), I set off on the same walk in the startlingly bright morning of my second day. I walked out past the Coach house, which has been converted into a wine cellar by the current owners, and past the Garden Cottage to the road that winds up the property, which sits over more than 50 acres of land.

I noted the bracken of Mitchison's memory and took photographs of wildflowers so that I might identify them later. There was a fast-running brook making its way down

the hill on one side of the road and I took a video to document the way the water moved and record the sound it made. In her discussion about immersive techniques, Mundell notes that writers such as Tony Birch, an Indigenous Australian author of many bestselling books such as *Shadowboxing* (2016), *Ghost River* (2015), and *The White Girl* (2019) often photograph and video or audio record the sites that will become settings in their work, so that they can use this material in the creative practice (2018).

Finally, I reached the summit of the hill, the 'high fields' where Mitchison met the sun, and looked out over the valley which overlooks the slate rooftops of the town of Auchterarder, from where, by pure coincidence, my paternal family, the Faichneys, had lived two centuries prior. At the time, I assumed I would write this scene into the book, however, a need for a scene at Cloan House did not present itself in the writing of *The Lightning is Beautiful*. Instead, I now understand this experience in two ways. It was part of 'Becoming' Mitchison; in beginning to understand her and the world she inhabited.

Tóibín describes visiting a cemetery in Rome where several of Henry James' friends are buried, and imagined he was standing where James would have stood. suddenly felt a sense of 'death as a sort of completion' as he stood in James' footsteps (2010, 31).

Like Tóbín, the emotional and sensory connection I felt on the hill at Cloan was immense, a connection both to the young novelist version of Mitchison, thrusting her manuscript proudly into the sunrise, and to my own creative research journey which would culminate in writing my first novel manuscript and had somehow, incidentally, led me to the ancestral seat of my own family. A sense of Mitchison's life as real, as more than simply the facts I had read, her written words, photographs of her; as Tóibín felt about James, 'I had all of that research done, and I was thus able to imagine putting flesh – putting blood or something – into the body where the bones already were' (2018, 152).

Umberto Eco describes the process of creating the fictional world of *In the Name of the Rose*, admitting that 'I spent a full year, if I remember correctly, without writing a line … Instead, I read, did drawings and diagrams, invented a world' (2005, 303). It was important to the novelist that this world be so precise that he would know how long it would take the characters to walk around in it and could time their dialogue accordingly.

While my setting is based in the real world, not fiction, Eco's technique was useful for rewriting a scene in an early draft, where Baker and her first husband attended a party at New College in Oxford. I selected the room from the website of New College, which offers descriptions of the spaces available for hire complete with photographs (2023). I chose a room in the North Undercroft, accessible from the ground floor, as it is within the main courtyard and opens into the New College gardens.

In the scene I wrote, two characters escaped the party to converse privately in the garden, crossing the lawn and quickly finding a spot behind a tree, out of sight. Visiting New College in 2018, I located the room I had chosen from the New College website and peered through the windows into the space, startled to find that there was a vast distance between the New College courtyard and the New College garden – it wouldn't have taken seconds for the characters to reach one of the trees, it would have taken almost eight full minutes. I could only learn this information by physically visiting the site and walking the space, so that, like Eco 'I could move around in [the fictional world] with total confidence' (2005, 303).

Similarly, my experience of the visit to Mitchison's London home in Hammersmith was a turning point. This experience wove together the threads of Mundell's 'immersive'

techniques and 'Becoming' in a visceral way. Mundell asserts that site visits 'can yield unexpected narrative treasures: story ideas, sensory impressions, spatial scenarios, emotional cues' (2018, 4), as I found when I visited Hammersmith on a July morning in 2019. After searching for about an hour in the summer heat, I finally stumbled upon the huge property that Mitchison purchased at 21 years of age, feeling immediately awed and embarrassed that I had been picturing, and searching for, a far smaller-scale dwelling. Although I had been to Cloan House and seen pictures of Mitchison's Carradale House (also a large Baronial manor), something about the enormous, four-storey house impressed upon me the extent of Mitchison's wealth and resources, especially at such a young age.

River Court House as it stands today and during Mitchison's ownership was built in 1808, incorporating some of the features of the seventeenth century house of the Queen Dowager, Catherine of Braganza's (1638–1705) that had stood on the same site. It is now owned by Latymer Prep School, and is the central school building, with Mitchison's squash court and gardens now part of the school's facilities and grounds. The reason I couldn't find the house on my first visit to London is because it is no longer listed as 'Rivercourt' and because the ties to Naomi Mitchison aren't clear as they are with other famous houses in London where writers have lived – presumably because the site is now a functioning Prepatory school.

I found its location through an architectural magazine in a digital archive, which talked about the house's significant architectural features. The day I travelled to view it, I walked around the full block on foot, peering through gaps in the twenty-foot high back fence, grateful that the school was let out for holidays and thus, deserted, and glimpsed the notorious seahorse weathervane sculpture on the top of the roof of the main house that artist Gertrude Hermes had made for Mitchison, her close friend, in the 1930s (Mitchison 1979).

Subsequently, I wrote a scene in *The Lightning is Beautiful* where Baker and her first husband arrive at Mitchison's London home. Baker peers up at the people partying on the roof in an awe that was drawn from the sense of intimidation I felt looking up at the house. Baker is nervous to make a good impression on Mitchison, first appraising her husband, Richard Mitchison, musing that 'that must be something special about him, besides his wealth' (Faichney 2021, 60).

When Mitchison enters the scene, Baker feels a rush of adrenaline, 'her heart did a great gallop. Her hand reached up to smooth the curl of hair that peeked out from underneath her hat' (Faichney 2021, 61). The stakes for Baker are high. This was the first party that Mitchison has invited her to, and the first time she has been in her home. Baker was a fan of Mitchison's work, and she was very well aware, particularly scoping the luminaries at the party, of what a connection to Mitchison might do for her and John Baker's social status. It wasn't until I was immersed in the setting myself that I could begin to 'Become' the mercenary side of the fictional character of Baker (2010). To imagine how the house must have impressed her; how Mitchison herself, who coolly and Calvinistically barely registered her own wealth, must have impressed her.

Conclusion

Biofiction, a genre particularly concerned with reimagining historical life narratives in fiction, has emerged as a popular offshoot of historical fiction. The responsibility of

working with real lives and facts, while also negotiating gaps and silences, are significant challenges for authors of biofiction. This article has concerned itself with the methodological practice of writing biofiction; glimpses we can catch from the discussions of global biofiction novelists, and more specific descriptions of practice such as Tóbín, Mujica, and Grenfell's exegetical works. I have described a post-graduate attempt at writing a biofiction novel about the lives of Scottish author, Naomi Mitchison, and English explorer, Zita Baker, using a dual-methodology of Tóbín's 'Becoming (2010) and Mundell's POET model of literary placemaking (2018). In doing so, I have only scratched the surface of the immense undertaking that biofiction novelists set about working away at in this genre that attempts to bring the inner lives and 'afterlives' (Novak 2016) of biographical figures to life. The novel manuscript of *The Lightning is Beautiful* is currently being significantly redeveloped in the hope of commercial publication and has been a humbling and challenging experience in approaching this fascinating genre which continues to draw in readers, writers and scholars alike.

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