

## **Meeting 5 February 29 2016, Corsham F32**

### **Empathy in medical practice and training, in interactive digital biography, in the creation of interactive digital characters and in dramatic improvisation based on traumatic events**

Present were: Bea Hitchman, Alison Lee, Morag Shuaib, Linda Blair, Emma Geen, Tanvir Bush, Grace, Becky Midwinter, Linda Blair, Morag Shuaib, Gerard Woodward, Tracy Brain, Richard Kerridge, Robert Sherman, Patrick Edwards, Deb McCormick, Rebecca Midwinter, Omar Al-Khayatt, Maggie Gee (chairing), and visiting American PhD Creative Writing students, Barbara Harrington, Susan Daniels, Amy Locklin, Dara Weinberg, Kathleen Harding.

**Our first External Member, Dr Omar Al-Khayatt, a physician and neurologist at Addenbrooke's Hospital Cambridge** who is writing a novel about post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, introduced himself: 'As a scientist, I have a background in the methods for associating brain areas with specific functions; as a doctor, a neurologist, I have applied in clinical practice what was initially arrived at in the science lab.' He is interested in 'the paradox of our doctorly attempts to narrowly circumscribe brain functions so that we can effectively pathologise and therefore treat what we deem to be neurologically abnormal; this is easy for people presenting with weakness, with speech arrest, and so forth; but when it comes to more complex higher functions, such as empathy, or feeling love, is it not ...unscientific?' His novel has a doctor protagonist who is lacking in empathy; which some might assume is problematic for a doctor. But if you have to stick a needle in someone or operate on them, might effectiveness matter more than empathy?

#### **Presentation by BSU PhD Creative Writing student Lisa Gee**

Lisa introduced her work in life-writing and life-story telling. 'Where the people I'm writing about are alive, I need to be able to make them feel I understand and empathise so they will trust me enough to be open and honest. I then need to demonstrate that empathy in how I retell their stories. My Digital Writing by Practice PhD project involves creating a new form of digital biography – the reader/audience gets to know the subject in a way that mimics encountering them in real life. My subject - William Hayley - has been dead for almost 200 years, and I'm hoping the audience will feel empathy for him - and also for his first wife Eliza (rather misrepresented in his Memoirs), and for Mary Cockerell, the mother of his only child, who was completely written out of anything he wrote that was intended for publication.'

#### **Presentation by PhD Creative Writing student Robert Sherman**

Rob told us about his project: to explore 'how digital interactive characters can better embody the same "literary" qualities found in more traditional works of art, while maintaining their unique qualities as dynamic agents within a system.' He had considered traditional and more abstract/non-representational central digital characters, but showed an on-screen prototype of the digital interactive creature he has now created, a simple, face-like, presence, with a long proboscis-like nose somewhat reminiscent of a shaggy ink-cap mushroom. Archetypes it evoked might be a nature god or 'Green Man'; the protagonist of Rob's story will carry this 'face'. Readers/participants will eventually be able to copy Rob's protagonist by walking

through their own landscape holding the live digital creature on a tablet. They will perhaps read the text aloud to it, while it reacts in a variety of ways. Rob explained that one of his starting points had been 1960s 'reader response' theory, which views reading as an interactive and performative process where the reader puts meaning in. He cited Howard Sklar, (<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/hes-eng/volumes/volume-5/believable-fictions-on-the-nature-of-emotional-responses-to-fictional-characters-howard-sklar/>), who believes 'we bring many of the same intuitions and forms of evaluation to our encounters with fictional characters that we use with real people.' The difference between writing traditional written texts and writing games was the latter's interactivity with form, which meant designers had to create a set of possible alternative worlds. Games tended to be weaker on character, and character-based games had so far been less successful, 'because the complexity of a well-written character is difficult to mesh with the unpredictability and multiplicity of a character that must interact with an audience. A character in a book must only be written once; a digital character must be written many times, and have many potential selves, only one of which the player will ever see.' Moreover the current audience for games tend to be reward-focused in a narrower sense than reader of more traditional texts, whose rewards can be as indirect as pleasure in shared sorrow or human experience understood. On the other hand, games were spectacularly good at creating authored environments with which players could identify and empathise – Rob showed a stunning example of an icy digital landscape – and game designers have also created animal characters with whom games players found it easy to empathise, albeit animal characters with human-like characteristics. The question of anthropomorphism (argued and deconstructed back and forth in Empathy Group sessions before Rob arrived) was touched on briefly – Rob said 'Games designers love it' because creating animal characters helped them avoid having to create problematic human characters. Rob talked about how we invest meaning in the simplest shapes: a game which only featured a single cube could be transformed with a narrative statement like 'THOMAS WAS ALONE'. Rob will investigate all these questions in the eventual design and creation of his own digital narrative.

**4) BSU low residency PhD Creative Writing student Dara Weinberg's presentation** began strikingly with a request that all cameras be turned off, and no recording made. She explained that the term 'postmemory' referred to second-generation memory, the memory of the children of those who actually underwent a traumatic experience. Dara's work however is based in third-generation memory, her own connection to the experiences of her grandfather in Poland. She told us about the time she had spent in Poland, the country which her grandfather had left in 1930, acting and singing with a Polish theatre group, [Teatr Chorea](http://www.chorea.com.pl/en) [http://www.chorea.com.pl/en ] in Łódź, performing traditional, wartime, and contemporary material. Often, but not always, she was the only Jewish person performing with the group; sometimes, as in the performance discussed, Polish Jewish or Israeli performers joined them. Then the presentation became electric as she began teaching us, musical phrase by musical phrase, the Jewish songs she wanted us to experience with her. 'The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing to recall is not to be frightened at all...' *Kol Ha'olam kulo / Geshet tsar me'od*. The music to *Kol Ha'olam kulo* was modern, the words from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century rabbi. Dara's talk led us towards a site-specific piece, "[Szpera '42](http://www.ruthieosterman.com/szpera42-site-specific-theatre-event/)" [http://www.ruthieosterman.com/szpera42-site-specific-theatre-event/] that she and

Teatr Chorea had performed in the locations of the former Łódź ghetto. The piece concluded at one of the locations in Poland where Jewish people had been killed, in this instance a hospital, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ghetto's liquidation. At that time, ghetto hospital patients had been pushed out of higher-floor windows to their deaths. Director Ruthie Osterman's original idea was for the choral group to sing Jewish songs down from the windows at their audience, but various problems with the building meant that eventually the singers sang up at the windows amidst their audience, hundreds of Polish people who, Dara said, became part of the performance. Then it was our turn: Dara taught us one of the songs they had performed that night, "Jacob's Ladder," and once we had learned it, we walked out and sang it together over the generous acoustic space of Corsham Court's grand staircase. Dara had made us part of the performance, part of her history, part of a re-lived history: she had made us be and feel her work, rather than just telling us about it. It was a dramatic demonstration of how empathy can bring creator and audience together in the shared space of creative work. And then the cameras were switched back on.