Novels that involve writing about writing don’t usually appeal to me – maybe because, as a writer, I try to make the process as invisible as possible, just as an engineer tries to hide the workings of a building behind the elegance of its facade. Yet the process of a piece of writing is as important as the face it presents to the reader – concealing it is a literary convention.

So what do you call a novel, or a story, or a memoir that is all process, so that the process becomes the narrative – the thing itself?

The narrator, Emily Stuart (known as Nin), starts to write a novel based on a story of unrequited love told to her in a series of pubs by her childhood soul mate Evan, but she gradually realises that it is ‘veering wildly off track with every paragraph’.And, just as she is unable to recognise the relationships that are unfolding between herself, Evan and the glorious Caroline, she struggles to identify the text she is creating with her pen: ‘this essay of ours, report, genre-blending prose, whatever . . .’

This ‘work’ is not only a mesmerising account of a love triangle, it is a critique of the whole concept of narrative structure and the distinctions of genre.  From the ‘meet cute’ of Evan’s encounter with Caroline in the doorway of her Richmond home, to the crisis in a pub called the Last Stand and the final (?) resolution on The Remarkable’s riverside terrace, Caroline’s Bikini challenges every cliched conception of what a novel should and shouldn’t be.

Katherine Mansfield had very decided views on the kind of fiction she wanted to write; a tantalising vision just out of reach, of something that would have perfect pitch – a type of narrative that was ‘neither a short story, nor a sketch, nor an impression, nor a tale’. Even experimental writing had to have form. ‘One cannot lightly throw one’s story over the mill.’  There were rules that must be followed. The characters must set out ‘on a voyage of discovery’, through ‘unknown seas’.

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| Katherine Mansfield, the only writer Virginia Woolf was afraid of! |

Difficulties and dangers must be encountered, ‘and there must be an ever-increasing sense of the greatness of the adventure and an ever more passionate desire to possess and explore the mysterious country’. And then there must be a crisis and a final attempt to succeed.  Without this ‘central point of significance’, Mansfield insisted, ‘the form of the novel as we see it is lost’.

Emily Stuart, as Evan’s ‘amanuensis’, realises from the beginning that there is as yet no plot behind their story, but references Mansfield as an example of what is possible.  ‘After all, there’s nothing so lively or romantic going on with Beryl in “At the Bay” either, is there,’ Emily writes, ‘that you’d think a whole dramatic story could occur from it?’

With Mansfield  the reader thinks and breathes with the characters as if the author, as intermediary isn’t there. In Kirsty Gunn’s novel the workings of the author’s mind are part of the narrative.  It’s the story of the writing of a story, told to the narrator by someone else (as in Wuthering Heights). But it’s clear that neither narrator nor amanuensis can be relied on when it comes to the interpretation of the facts or their own emotional condition.

One of the delicious surprises of this ‘work’, is the way that it both illustrates and subverts the history of narrative art. Virginia Woolf’s ‘moments of being’ within the story, which she compared to a ‘row of lamps’, become a series of London pubs and gin bars with significant names. Every change of location signifies a change in the emotional landscape, a shift of narrative emphasis or point of view.  Even the labels of the artisan gins the characters drink are metonyms.

The narrative looks forwards, backwards, and turns itself inside out with self-analysis, in prose that is rhythmic and vivid. There are stories within stories – ‘Alternative Narratives’ with different trajectories.  The chunks of ‘back story’ the writing manuals advise us to use sparingly are there in footnotes and addenda for the reader to take or leave. You leave them at your peril. The extensive research a novelist or biographer has to do, but must bury invisibly within the text (show don’t tell!) is also there so that we, as readers, can decide what is relevant and what is not.

And then there’s the question of ‘whose story is it?’.  Emily thinks it’s ‘Evan’s love for Caroline . . . This is his story not mine’.  The reader might have a very different viewpoint.

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| Kirsty Gunn |

Literary allusion – the background context within which we all write, woven from everything we have ever read or studied, is also there, including Mansfield and Woolf, but in particular Petrarch and the poetry of courtly love, with paradox at its heart. ‘Unrequited love,’ writes Emily, is the most ‘natural’ love of all. ‘The kind of love that seems so straightforward, so easy, honest and assured; other forms of romantic attachment seem artificial and highly wrought by comparison.’ But it is not straightforward, it is self-reflexive and repetitious, a fantasy based on emotions felt but not expressed.  Evan, like other lovers so afflicted, wishes ‘to create a document, a written story or record of their desire in order that they may make real their condition’. For nothing is ‘real’ until written down. ‘How’s anyone to know anything if it’s not written down, Nin?’ Evan asks. ‘How can any of us otherwise be certain about a thing?’

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As the writing down of the story begins to consume Evan and Emily –  ‘It felt like we ourselves were fading away’ –  the reality of what they are actually putting into words on a page confronts them with a certainty that is both unexpected and initially unwelcome, because ‘words do happen, they can go to work on the page and wreak an effect’. P.89

Any novel is cut from a broad cloth of almost infinite detail, as Kirsty Gunn observes in the ‘Further Material’, adding that ‘a bikini is cut, as Evan Gordonston knows, from the smallest increment of this fabric.’  Caroline’s bikini is perfectly constructed, to be consumed both literally and metaphorically.  It’s a long time since I’ve read anything that excited me so much about the creative possibilities of fiction.

[**Kirsty Gunn**](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Carolines-Bikini-Kirsty-Gunn/dp/0571339328/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

[**Caroline's Bikini**](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Carolines-Bikini-Kirsty-Gunn/dp/0571339328/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

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