

Sanso (“*Oxygen*”): A Study in Practice-Led Research

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INTRODUCTION

Central to this project is the question: “How does a writer fictionalise the lived experience in order to produce a narrative which is both credible *and* entertaining?” The answer, ultimately, lies with the ‘final judge’—the readers themselves—and can be only truly ascertained once the novella is published and in their hands.

This essay, which outlines the processes, mistakes, discoveries and ‘small victories’ which have helped this writer to produce a work of fiction, focuses on three areas of research: 1) Research as Practice, which explains the criteria used to select data for this project, 2) Research into Practice, which outlines the methodologies such as plot device and character development used to organise the data, and 3) Research through Practice, which shows the influence of various theoretical perspectives on the text and how these have shaped the central protagonist.

To appreciate the scope of these research processes, it is first necessary to provide a context. An outline of *Sanso* follows:

A Japanese Imperial Army captain leads his men in a suicide charge on a remote Indonesian island in 1945. He dies and his battle sword is taken by a trophy-hunting American GI. Unbeknownst to him, the sword is a 400-year-old family heirloom called Byakko, the White Tiger of the West. He hides it in a cave, intending to retrieve it later, but the next day is killed. Fifty-five years later, during a typhoon, a Dutch planter discovers the sword and notifies the Japanese embassy.

The story's protagonist, Noah Cockaigne, is a 27-year-old ferry boat captain and a ‘person of interest’ to the Sydney Harbor police. Having fled to Indonesia for “endangering life and reckless piloting of vessel under the influence of alcohol”, he has run out of money and has all but decided to return home and

face charges of recklessness and endangering human life. On the ferry to Surabaya, however, he befriends a mysterious Japanese man (the grandson of the army captain who has been sent to recover the sword). The ferry sinks in a storm and the grandson is lost. Cockaigne retrieves the sword and resolves to finish the man's quest. He travels to Japan (with money wired to him by his father) to find the man's family and return the sword.

The family comprises of three women and they preside over a dojo which teaches the ancient arts of swordsmanship (*iaido*) and sword dance (*kenbu*). The Grandmaster (the lost man's mother) offers Cockaigne a cash reward for the return of the sword and for the news of her son, but he returns it with a proposition: the money in exchange for tuition. Reluctantly, she accepts. The Grandmaster's daughter is strict, the training hard and the dojo members are suspicious of the foreigner in their midst. Sexual encounters with a swordswoman lead to a street fight with her boyfriend and Cockaigne is hospitalised as a result. The boyfriend is an outcast from a rival dojo. His sword dancing skills are second only to the Grandmaster's lost son and he will now have his chance to take the national sword dancing title in Tokyo unchallenged.

The Grandmaster makes Cockaigne a proposition: that he undertake the gruelling training necessary to win the national title. It is a chance to redeem himself and bring honour to the dojo and she insists he use *Byakko* to do it. As his training intensifies, so does his relationship with the Grandmaster's daughter. On the eve of the Tokyo tournament he discovers she is pregnant. Though he succeeds in winning the title, he is compelled to return to Australia to clear his name, vowing to return to Japan (*sequel in mind*).

Research as Practice

"Having gathered these facts Watson and I smoked several pipes over them, trying to separate those which were crucial from others which were merely incidental."

The Crooked Man - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1893)

Journaling:

Anecdotes, impressions, sensations, reflections; journals which the writer has kept from journeys in Indonesia, as well as from being resident for 18 years in

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a Japanese neighborhood, provide an enormous cache of qualitative data. Initially, it was decided that anything authenticating the atmosphere and scenery of *Sanso* could be used, reasoning that by applying semiotic theory (Chandler 2013) to this data later, what to keep and what to omit might be determined later. If readers draw on their own personal knowledge, bias, gender, age and life experiences to extract meaning from a text (Barthes 1968), then perhaps this meaning could be anticipated and word choices for maximum effect in the reader's mind could be made.

Indonesia travelogues:

In 1995, the writer travelled by ferry from Java to the fabled Spice Islands, stopping on the populated, volcanic islands of Ternate and Tidore. In a dockside cafe, over a cup of muddy coffee, he noted:

"From my table in Restoran Jaiolo I watch the morning ferry cut through the whitecaps towards Sidangoli. Blue and white breakers smash against the jungled shores of distant Tidore. Two fishermen cast their lines against the swells, the triangular sails of their tiny prahus straining in the wind." (Journal entry, October 1995)

The first ten chapters of *Sanso* draw primarily on these impressions for setting and atmosphere. Recreating this world has required tapping into deeper memories of time and place to "make sense of myself and my experiences" (Kiesinger 2001; Poulos 2008 cited in Ellis, Adams, Brochner). *Sanso*'s protagonist, for example, re-lives a night ferry ride which the writer made one night through a stormy Molucca Sea-experiencing the same "tilting deck, lightning flashes, passengers' vomit and pitch darkness" as did the writer.

Technology-unavailable in 1995-has helped to 'fill the gaps' in these memories. Google Earth, for instance, has provided geographic and oceanographic snapshots of the Spice Islands, their reefs, inlets, volcanoes and coastal villages, helping to more accurately depict setting and location where the narrative takes place. Other web-based resources have furnished information on:

- The Battle of Morotai (1945)-necessary to explain the origin of the sword through dream 'flashbacks' which the protagonist experiences.
- Names of popular Indonesian dishes and history of the Spice Trade in

Indonesia to authenticate local culture.

- News reports of Indonesian ferry sinkings to detail the sinking of the night ferry, the *Umsini*, in the story.

Japan travelogues:

What are the Friday night sounds of downtown Osaka? Can a Westerner sleep comfortably inside a capsule hotel? What is the smell of the Tanimachi Line subway train on a rainy rush-hour morning? To make the narrative truly believable, the writer has abided by American writer, Mark Twain's quote, "Write what you know."

Central to *Sanso* is the martial art of iaido, a 500-year-old fighting discipline founded by Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu (1542-1621) (Klens-Bigman, n.d.) to serve the samurai classes. Iaido, the 'art of drawing the sword', is also termed "Moving Zen" (Wishawaikikai.com, n.d.) which infers the act of moving with a clear, uncluttered mind (Nicol 1975)-a significant learning step for the protagonist in his attainment of knowledge after he joins the dojo.

Confidence to write on this subject has come from the writer's first-hand experience as a dojo member and practitioner of the Kansho-ryu (the Flying Crown style) in Himeji city, western Japan. A knowledge of the sights, smells, sounds and rigours of training in a traditional dojo has enabled the 'passing' of this knowledge to the protagonist as he, himself, undertakes training under the guidance of the Grandmaster, as shown below:

"The sword is brought down in a half-moon sweep, called the chiburi, to wipe the blood from the blade. It is then returned to the scabbard using the thumb and forefingers to guide the blade safely and smoothly in." The Grandmaster lit a cigarette. "Control is everything," she said. (Journal entry, Sept, 2008)

To bridge gaps in the research and to clarify details, such as the names of techniques and sword movements, websites have assisted; among them:

- Japanese Sword Terminology (www.samuraisword.com/)
- Iaido - Traditional Japanese Budo (www.fightingarts.com/)
- The Way of the Samurai (Youtube)
- The Samurai Archives (www.samurai-archives.com/)

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The funeral of the Grandmaster's son, Kazuha, represents a major plot point in the novella's narrative. Here, we witness the bond between the protagonist and his mentor, Zenjiro, strengthen as they depart for the mountains of Hyogo province. Amidst its raging streams and forests of cedar and giant bamboo, Zenjiro imparts his knowledge of the sword. This writer cannot claim the kind of meticulous research that American author Charles Frazier (n.d.) conducted for his American Civil War epic *Cold Mountain* (1997), another 'odyssey' tale, but past camp expeditions in these mountains have enabled the writer to authenticate a setting with confidence.

Where personal knowledge of samurai philosophy has lacked, the Himeji City Library has assisted by providing authoritative texts such as Yoshikawa Eiji's classic ronin fable, *Musashi* (1935), Romulus Hillsborough and Kiyoharu Omino's *Samurai Tales* (2015) and William Dale Jennings' *Ronin* (2007) gave insight into Japanese *Budo*—the Way of the Warrior. As he mentors the protagonist, Zenjiro quotes from Musashi Miyamoto's *The Book of Five Rings*: "The ultimate aim of martial arts is not having to use them." — Miyamoto Musashi, *A Book of Five Rings: The Classic Guide to Strategy* (1645)

Presenting 'New Knowledge':

To this writer's knowledge, the story of a young Australian mariner searching for the owners of a 400-year-old samurai sword in Japan is yet to be told. Only Edward Zwick's film *The Last Samurai* (2003) bears any semblance, in which the story of a troubled and misguided foreigner (Tom Cruise) is nurtured and shaped by his samurai mentor (Watanabe Ken) in the late 19th century. James Clavell's *Shogun* (1975) and *Gai-jin* (1993) together weave historical fact into fictionalised epics; Barry Eisler's *John Rain* series follows the exploits of a Japanese-American assassin in modern-day Tokyo, William Golden's *Memoirs of Geisha* offers a historical romance fiction, while celebrated Japanese author Haruki Murakami's books "inhabit the liminal zone between realism and fable, whodunit and science fiction." (Wray, 2004).

The Last Samurai, however, does not recreate the sound of a blade slicing through bamboo, the smell of clove oil (used to oil a sword blade), or the feeling of a sweat-soaked dojo floor feel beneath one's feet on a summer's night. Realism lies in re-creating the 'lived experience' and that by doing so, it is

possible to impart one's own learned knowledge, in this writer's case-Japanese culture-to the reader.

It is also important to note that from an autoethnographic standpoint, these accounts carry "personal reflexive views of the self" (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont cited in Anderson 2003) and that these express the writer's own personal bias. An example of this might be the discomfort which the protagonist feels on a crowded commuter train-considered 'normal' by the average Japanese commuter.

In creating a research question and establishing research areas (Indonesia, Japan, adventure 'quest' plots and martial arts) for this project, the writer has also arrived at the answer to a very significant question-who is this story for? This person is:

- 16-65 years old
- male or female
- harbors a curiosity of Japan and its culture
- an experienced (or would-be) Asia traveller
- someone who enjoys an adventure story
- has an interest in martial arts

Research into Practice

"Show the readers everything, tell them nothing."

— Ernest Hemingway

Sanso was begun in 2008. The subsequent learning and exploration of the writer's research and writing practices during this course have had a profound impact on the original manuscript, to the point of a complete rethink of plot, structure, point-of-view, even the protagonist's name. Feedback and critical review received by the writer from academics and peers have also led to surprises and discoveries which have shaped the narrative and led to significant changes such as:

- Purging of all unnecessary adjectives and adverbs to 'show' rather than 'tell' the action and to reveal the characters by their actions.

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- Making the protagonist less obnoxious, less aloof, less unlikable, because "most readers of most types of fiction want to read about characters they like." (Scott Card 2001 p98).
- Switching from third person to first person point of view to create a more intimate relationship between the writer, the reader and the protagonist. There became a need to create "a character...who's familiar to the reader not because of some external trappings but because his inner voice is recognizable and believable and, on some level, not unlike our own." (Flaherty, 2013).

Plot and structure:

Sanso is both a quest and an adventure story. The 'quest' plot (Tobias 1993) requires the protagonist to make decisions which push the story forward. The struggles he encounters on the way both reveal his character and act as a prompt for the 'adventure'-the physical action. (ibid.). By weaving these elements together, the writer seeks to transport the reader through exotic worlds to an end point which represents the protagonist's transformation and a satisfying denouement to the story.

In *Sanso* the journey begins in the Spice Islands of Indonesia; it then moves to Osaka and the mountains of western Japan, before reaching its climax in Tokyo. Initially, the narrative structure was convoluted and unwieldy. However, through further reading on plot structure, a more workable three-stage structure based on Aristotle's concept of *unified action* (Tobias 1993) was adopted:

- *The Beginning* (Chapters 1-5) introduces the protagonist, establishes his problem and shows his intent to solve it.
- *The Middle* (Chapters 6-15) builds action, layer upon layer; barriers appear to create tension and cause conflict, forcing the protagonist to alter the path of his quest.
- *The End* (Chapters 16-20) rises to the climax and a resolution. The strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved (Oxford 2013). Questions are answered!

Character:

Sanso's protagonist first stepped onto the page as "Karl King", a bourbon-

swilling chauvinistic prawn fisherman who was struck by lightning as a kid. As *Sanso* developed, the plot demanded a deeper more sensitive character to drive it and one which does not alienate female readers by presenting a “primarily male structure of power” (Kolodny cited Shoalwater 1980). It was also felt that his name did not live up to the soul-searching adventurer now needed; “Karl King” lacked *veuve*.

The writer thus settled on “Noah Cockaigne”, a name which better symbolises this role and adds subtext (“Noah” carries biblical connotations of seafaring, bravery and righteousness). For instance, when the Indonesian night ferry sinks and Noah is rescued- could this be ‘divine intervention’? A confirmation of Noah as the ‘chosen one’ to return the sword to its rightful owners in Japan? The reader will have to make their own connections.

There are certain parallels between writing for screen and writing creative fiction and these began to emerge in the character development phase. In order to ‘hook’ the reader, it is necessary to establish the protagonist’s main want early in the story (Green 2013). While ‘showing’ this is straight forward-Noah’s spends his brother’s money on a ticket to Osaka-expressing his motives for doing so proved more difficult. How does one show what a character is seeking *internally* ? What is at stake? And to bring this full circle, how can his actions, in terms of the human condition, be explained? (ibid). A premise began to emerge: “rough diamonds have hidden qualities” (ibid.) and that flawed people can rise above failure.

This encouraged the making of a major structural change in the first draft. Whereas the story opened with a lengthy prologue of how the sword came to be- a Japanese Imperial Army captain uses it against the Americans in the jungles of Morotai island in 1945-the newest draft brings the protagonist forward to the first chapter (Appendix 1). The prologue is then introduced as backstory, told through mysterious dreams which torment the protagonist, ‘urging’ him to travel to Japan. Elements of mysticism and the supernatural are thus inferred.

Research Through Practice

“The investigator is always implicated in the product.”

(Bochner, 2000)

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Outlined thus far are the ‘essential ingredients’ of the story and a brief explanation of how they have been gathered, weighed and sorted. In this section, the methodologies used to distill these ingredients to their essence—the meaning of the text itself—are examined.

For the writer, *Sanso* represents a junction between two forms of writing: fiction and nonfiction. The process of travelling, researching and writing from travelogues has evolved into a more sophisticated methodology of reading, writing, researching and writing which has been tempered by reflection, guided by theory and driven by discipline. The Research through Practice stage has thus opened up possibilities which, very unlike travel writing, have led the writer to make “an elaborate series of gambles” (Morley 2007) in his own personal quest to write a novella.

Theoretical perspectives

Creative Theory:

Perhaps the most significant discovery of this writing process has come from deeper inquiry into theories on creativity and deliberate practice (Ericsson 1993).

David Morley (2007) explains the practice of ‘creative flow’ as “a state of total absorption, a superfine focus in which the writer has clear goals but is writing at a stretch, at the limits of their intelligence in fact.”

Autoethnography:

As a methodological tool, autoethnography has assisted through expanding and informing the data (Whitting 2010) and to make sense of both the (writer’s) lived experience in Japan and the relationship (ibid.) with its people. “Hidden meanings” (Atkinson 2007) have emerged from these reflections, such as how a text like *Sanso* might convey the way in which a Westerner deals with culture shock, how he reconciles his attitudes, moral values and philosophies with Asian ones, and how he overcomes frustrations such as not being able to communicate in the local language. These first-hand ‘lived’ experiences have been turned into “palpable emotional experiences” (Whitting 2010) and communicated to the reader via the novella’s characters. Semiotic theory has assisted in this process through the analysis of emotional states, such as frustration, and their physical

representations (Bainbridge 2013).

Ethical theory:

Sanso is not a work of historical fiction, memoir or creative non-fiction and does not draw on members of a vulnerable or marginalised group (Peters 2009). Rather, it portrays ‘real’ people created from inspirations and observations that the writer has made during his travels. This has left the text relatively free of ethical issues. Since the Japanese characters in *Sanso* are composites of real people and there is no “relational concern” (Ellis 2007; Trahar 2009) arising from these, the writer feels no obligation to explain the project and is satisfied that all research and writing has abided by the Hippocratic Oath to “Do no harm” (Tyson 2001).
Existentialist theory:

As noted earlier, *Sanso* carries strong themes of freedom, choice-making and the search for life’s meaning, themes which equate well to the theoretical perspectives of Existentialism. Namely that they “emphasize the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will” (Oxford dictionary 2012).

Noah Cockaigne sets out in search of life’s meaning, seeking the sword’s owner and then his own understanding of the situation he finds himself in. He discovers, like Charles Nichol searching for his Thai forest temple in *Borderlines* (1988), that there are “no right or wrong truths” (Abhishek n.d.), only the ones he discovers on his own journey.

“From a hundred feet away I could feel the intensity of his solitude, I could feel that the ‘code’ of the road is loneliness as well as freedom.” (Borderlines 1988)

Existentialism asserts itself in the works of David Malouf (*Johnno*), Jack Kerouac (*On The Road*) and Antoine de Saint Exupery (*Southern Mail/Night flight*). These, among many others, have impacted on this story of a young man making the rules as he goes along, or to use Sartre’s words, “makes himself” (1956).

Literary influences:

This leads to the question of how literature has shaped the product, the novella itself. Naturally, the writer’s reading choices have leaned towards the quest

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genre, and just as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* leads the reader up an African river to a Belgian trading station in search of Mr Kurtz, a man who has “gone mad”, Noah Cockaigne will lead readers of *Sanso* through the Spice Islands of Indonesia to Japan, on quest to find the lost sword’s owner.

As his quest progresses, his fixation grows. It bears a likeness to that of Siddhartha in Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* (1922). Unlike Siddhartha’s quest to find enlightenment (Analysis n.d.), Cockaigne attains enlightenment as a *result* of his quest. Here there is a certain resonance; Japanese, as Buddhists, learn empathy, compassion and modesty through social conditioning and (indirectly) through religious customs and rituals, and exposure to these shapes Cockaigne in the same way.

The quest plot is driven by the protagonist’s perseverance and persistence. These are also central themes in Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* in which Santiago’s unrelenting search for his Personal Legend (Cowels 2009) mirrors Cockaigne’s own one and that “Life is a struggle no matter what path we may choose, but if we stay strong and continue on, the consequences are all good.” (Clapsaddle 2008).

CONCLUSION

Not so long ago this writer experienced an epiphany. It was a realisation that the protagonist’s outer need (the quest to find the sword’s owner) and his inner need (to find meaning in life) were inextricably linked. By making this apparent through his physical and emotional struggles, and through the ultimate transformation of his character, the writer realises a more powerful story can be produced.

Additionally, that by conveying my own knowledge of tastes, sounds, sights and sensations, it is also possible to tap into the reader’s sensory knowledge and create a strong sense of ‘being there’ in their minds.

Perhaps the biggest discovery of all, however, has been that this is a story about the writer himself. By tracing his own journeys through Asia, reviving actual events of riding night ferries through storms, sleeping in Osaka capsule hotels and performing sword dance on stage in Tokyo, he has been *reliving* the ‘lived experience,’ and this has been the greatest source of enjoyment of undertaking this project.

“Excellent” I cried. “Elementary,” said he.”

— Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (1927)

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APPENDIX 1.

Chapter 1. SANSO [Oxygen]

From somewhere along the hallway of the Ternate Port Authority came the clack-clack sound of an old-fashioned ribbon typewriter being punched one finger at a time. A toilet flushed and a phone rang constantly in a far-off office. It was the symphony of a small island bureaucracy hard at work.

A woman in high-heels turned out of a door marked “Maritime Affairs” and walked down the wooden hallway towards the office of the Harbor Master General. She was tall, wore a tight beige skirt and a shirt with epaulettes, and she walked with a rhythm that could break the concentration of even the most dedicated male civil servant.

As she passed by the office, she glanced through the open door and her eyes met with the foreigner’s. A smile might have crossed her lips before her footsteps faded into the zip-ring of the typewriter being pushed home.

“Mistah Cocaine. Mistah Cocaine! Can you hear me?” The harbor master’s words rolled about the room like distant thunder. He lumbered to the door and shut it.

‘It’s Caw-caigne,’ the foreigner said.

Three days of rest, rice gruel and jackfruit juice courtesy of the Ternate Public Hospital, and he was still having trouble concentrating. His eyes wept, his skin burned and every fibre beneath it ached. Even the ceiling fan breeze hurt.

“What did you say?” he said.

‘I asked if you require any assistance from the Australian Consul-General? We will contact them in Jakarta on your behalf if you wish.’ He squeezed his large buttocks behind a small pale green desk. A black dial telephone sat in one corner, a clam shell filled with half-smoked clove-scented cigarettes in the other and between them an opened Manila file. A single sheet of paper fluttered on top

of it.

A nautical map of the Maluku Islands of Indonesia covered the wall behind the fat man's desk. It may as well have been the wallpaper for the hundreds of blue lines which swirled in endless whirlpools, each one numbered, each denoting an island's gradient, a reef's depth, a shipping channel's width.

Morotai island loomed from them like a ragged wound. His gaze followed the route the night ferry had taken from to Halmahera Island 130 kilometres south. He noted the name 'Nusa Kohatola' printed on its western coastline. The newspaper had reported that a fishing station nearby picked up a vessel-in-distress signal on the night of the storm. Ternate had been alerted and navy rescue boats dispatched. Just before dawn two women - one of them pregnant - had been pulled from the rough seas. A cage full of drowned fighting cocks, some rubber sandals, water bottles, nothing more.

Not a day had passed when he hadn't asked the hospital staff about the fate of the other passengers: what of the Catholic priest returning to Ambon for his daughter's wedding? Or the teenaged boy escorting his uncle to Jakarta for a cataract operation.

Most of all he had wondered about the fate of Kazuha, the Japanese man, whose bag now lay beside him on the floor of the Harbor Master's office, the leather shrunken and shaped like a reptile from 36 hours of sun and seawater.

If he, himself, had been rescued after drifting 25 km across a sea littered with islands and atolls clutching the Japanese man's 'precious' bag, then Kazuha might have done the same. For all he knew, Kazuha could be sitting on a sandbar contemplating his existence at that very moment!

But four days had passed since the Umsini had capsized en route to the port town of Ambon in the southern Maluku Islands. The official search had been called off and he now sat waiting for the harbor master behind the green desk to close the file on the third known survivor.

'Mistah Cockaigne? What is your answer, please!'

'My passport,' he said. 'I need my passport back.'

The big man grunted. He tugged on a side drawer, lifted out a booklet with a faded kangaroo and emu coat-of-arms on its cover and pushed it across the desk.

The foreigner picked it up, thumbed to the first page. A pair of seaweed-

green eyes stared back at him, their softness offset by the lines of a broad, tanned face and an upper lip scarred by some long-ago accident. To the Australian Government he was Noah James Cockaigne, born in Sydney, December 24, 1977. To his father he was a lost cause, and to the Sydney police he was the primary suspect in one of the most bizarre maritime incidents in half a century.

The harbor master slipped a packet of kreteks from his chest pocket and gestured with his eyebrows. Noah nodded. He took one and leaned forward, allowing the harbor master to light the clove-filtered cigarette before lighting his own.

'The doctor advises that you rest in Ternate a week longer. We have reserved a room for you at a guesthouse in Ternate town. You should be quite comfortable there.' He leaned back, relieving his waistline and let the ceiling fan carry off the fragrant blue smoke. 'There is also the matter of compensation. The ferry owners in Surabaya are co-operating with us. However it seems that they have been insolvent for some time. You understand it may be some time before you receive anything.'

'Is there an orphanage on this island?'

'There is.'

'Then give anything you receive to them.'

'That is an honourable gesture. And once again, we are very sorry for your ordeal. It has been a very unfortunate experience for all of us.' He stubbed out his cigarette and shrugged his bottom free of the chair. 'Now, please excuse me but I must attend a meeting in a few minutes. There is a driver waiting downstairs to take you to your guesthouse. I will have one of my staff call on you tomorrow evening.' He handed Noah his name card. 'In the meantime, if you require anything during the rest of your stay on Ternate please do not hesitate to contact me. Salamata jalan.' He shook hands and left the office. The sound of a woman's heels joined him at the end of the hallway and then they were gone.

Sanso (“Oxygen”): A Study in Practice-Led Research

Simon ROWE

Abstract:

How does a writer fictionalise the ‘lived experience’ to produce a narrative which is both credible *and* entertaining? This question is central to the research project, *Sanso*: a novella. This essay outlines the three stages of research practice which the writer has undertaken to produce a novella-length work. In doing so, the writer addresses his research needs, examines methodologies used and looks at how theoretical perspectives can and have contributed to the writing process. *Sanso* (meaning “Oxygen” in Japanese), is a 40,000-word narrative which employs the universal “quest” plot device and is driven by themes of adventure, freedom, personal choices and the search for life’s meaning. Essentially, it is the story of a young man who sets out on a journey to right his wrongs, and by way of this, achieves enlightenment and ultimately redeems himself. From the writer’s standpoint, the greatest challenge presented by this project has been bridging the gap between the ‘lived experience’ and imagination, in order to produce a narrative which is both compelling and believable to the reader.