

Constraining the (Im)possible: Improvisation and Violence in Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home*

Hannah Ianniello
University of Notre Dame, Sydney
Petersham, Australia
hannah@live.com
hannah.ianniello@nd.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the role of jazz improvisation in the characterization of the protagonist in Rafi Zabor's 1998 jazz novel, *The Bear Comes Home*. I suggest that Zabor represents the process of improvisation to not only enhance the enigma of The Bear's ability as a jazz musician, but also to enhance his capacity towards violence.

Through the exploration of the actual process of improvisation in the research of Paul Berliner, Ingrid Monson and Alyn Shipton, improvisation in a real jazz context is collaborative and exploratory. However, Zabor, like many other authors (such as Michael Ondaatje, James Baldwin and John Clellon Holmes) represent the process of improvisation as solitary, violent and explosive. Authors choose to represent this creative process as violent in order that they may use the music-making as an artistic response to dramatic events and violent occurrences in the characters' lives.

In addition, the figure of The Bear is a metaphor for characters (or musicians) who have led violent, suppressed and hidden lives. As he skulks in the shadows and avoids the authorities, he searches for a sense of self and tries to create human connections with those who help him. Music, and improvisation, seems to be the key to his identity and yet the music-making process often injures the people he cares about most, and forces him to question the essence of his impossible being. Improvisation, then, is a tool through which Zabor suggests that violence is inherent in both the creative process and the search for identity.

Keywords: Improvisation, violence, literature, jazz, Zabor, creativity, music, performance, outsider, suppression

The process of jazz improvisation live on stage is, at its best, illustrative of the process of creating something new through the breaking down and reshaping of traditional ideas. Many authors, including Rafi Zabor, Michael Ondaatje and John Clellon Holmes, choose to represent this creative act as something akin to violence, even though the reality of music-making does not, in itself, seem to be an obviously violent or destructive process¹. In addition, the context of violence that surrounds these representations of improvisatory performance highlights the contrast between music and violence while simultaneously suggesting the two elements are necessarily intertwined.

Although the number of novels specifically about jazz musicians is not large, jazz and literature have been intertwined since the early days of jazz – through novels, short stories and narrative poetry. Within this relatively small field, violence is a feature that recurs in various forms. However, the relationship between jazz and violence in literature is rarely recognised. This relationship is important for two reasons: it is a reflection of the history of the development of jazz; and is also emblematic of the artistic concern with the process of creation and the destruction or reconfiguration of conventional ideas.

This paper will explore the role of jazz improvisation in the characterization of the protagonist in Rafi Zabor's 1998 jazz novel, *The Bear Comes Home*. This surreal novel is essentially the story of a talking, saxophone-playing bear in New York City, who decides he wants to become a jazz musician in order to define his identity. I suggest that Zabor represents the process of improvisation to not only enhance the enigma of The Bear's ability as a jazz musician, but also to enhance his capacity towards violence. Zabor's novel is by no means the only novel to explore the relationship between jazz and violence, yet nowhere is the character of the musician more explicitly represented as the violent outsider seeking his place within a modern society.

In order to examine the role of improvisation in Zabor's novel, it is necessary to reflect upon the type of jazz the characters within the novel play: free jazz, post-bop and fusion. Paul Berliner argues that these styles go some way towards an "ideological rejection of former jazz conventions" and blend other styles of music such as rock into the idiom (122). The jazz in this novel therefore not only breaks the conventions of music from a pre-jazz era, but further challenges early forms of jazz such as New Orleans jazz, swing and even bebop.

Most significant in Zabor's representation of the jazz musician, is the importance of improvisation. Philip Alperson argues that nearly all human activity is a form of improvisation, but that improvisation in the artistic sense is essentially "spontaneous achievement within the constraints of the possible"(274). What is compelling about Zabor's representation, however, is that he has done away with the "constraints of the possible" altogether, by presenting the jazz musician as a representative of the *impossible*: a talking, saxophone playing bear.

In his study into the meaning and method behind improvisation, *Thinking in Jazz*, Berliner suggests that it is a misconception that improvisation is *only* about performing with spontaneity and intuition (2). Yet many novels about jazz do imply that musical inspiration comes from intuition alone². This creates a romanticised vision of the jazz musician, which often suits literary representations of these characters. However, in his comprehensive study, which involved interviewing and working with many jazz musicians throughout America, Berliner argues that there is, "in fact, a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that the improviser performs" (17). This is perhaps what Alperson means by the "constraints of the possible" in his definition of improvisation: the limitations of the instrument itself and the performer's skills will provide the boundary for the performance.

1 Here, I refer to Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home* (1998), Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) and John Clellon Holmes *The Horn* (1958), as a small selection of novels that make reference to many types of violence in relation to jazz. This broader study of the relationship between jazz and violence in literature was the subject of my PhD thesis, *Drawn to the Slaughter: Violence in Narratives about Jazz Musicians*.

2 This can be seen in Dorothy Baker's 1942 novel, *Young Man with a Horn*, charting the life of a man driven to excess by his commitment to his music, and Herbert Simmons' 1962 novel *Man Walking on Eggshells*, which also explores addiction and intuitive musical ability.

Yet, if Zabor's musician himself is impossible, then surely there are no constraints on the music. The Bear's jazz, because of its very unfeasibility, has the potential to have an impact in a way that no other musician has ever been able. Because he is a bear, he moves outside of the constraints of our human world – and so does his music. This renders him the ultimate artist: unrestricted, except by his own mind. Yet, still the question remains, why does Zabor represent him as a jazz musician? And perhaps more importantly, what is it about improvisation that is so important to this novel?

Like the majority of subjects in novels about jazz musicians, The Bear is a front-line player³. This means he is most often the leader of the band he performs with, and not only has the opportunity to express his individuality through the music, but does so by standing at the front of the stage. This is no coincidence. The role that improvisation plays in jazz provides Zabor with the means to give his bear a new form of communication, and The Bear is placed in the front of the band so that what he plays is presented with as much power as possible. In addition, his physical position of facing the audience opens a direct line of communication and allows for maximum impact. As Ingrid Monson argues:

When a musician successfully reaches a discerning audience, moves its members to applaud or shout praises, raises the energy to dramatic proportions, and leaves a sonorous memory that lingers long after, he or she has moved beyond technical competence, beyond the chord changes and into the realm of “saying something.” (1-2)

The idea of communication is crucial to Monson's somewhat romantic description of improvisation. Yet, the concept of “saying something” also highlights the importance of adding meaning to the music, as she suggests the act of communication through the music is made significant through “the reciprocal and multi-layered relationships among sound, social settings, and cultural politics that affect the *meaning* of jazz improvisation’ (2 *my emphasis*). In his complex study of when and how music has meaning, Lawrence Kramer describes music as “the art of collapsing distances” (3). This highlights that it is not only jazz and improvisation that act as forms of musical communication, but that all music has the ability to do so.

Yet it is the immediacy of the act of improvisation – composing on the spot – that makes the sense of communication in jazz more vibrant than in other forms of music. Indeed, numerous recent empirical studies into the state of jazz performances highlight how important this live composition is to audiences, as Burland and Pitts posit:

Spontaneity and uncertainty offer a sense of excitement as does the immediacy of the event: the sense that the music is being formed “in the moment” and that the audience is part of that process resonates with research on jazz musicians and audiences. (527)⁴

Monson's concept of “saying something” through improvisation is also a reminder that an important part of the jazz performance process is collaboration. The improvising soloist relies on the support of his or her band for the establishment of the melody, harmony and rhythm, and on their complicity in the act of creation. A common metaphor used by musicians to describe what it is like to improvise in a jazz context is that of a conversation. Yet Berliner has a more comprehensive metaphor for a jazz performance: that of a journey, where the musicians

must take in the immediate inventions around them while leading their own performances toward emerging musical images, retaining, for the sake of continuity,

3 Front line players in novels, primarily play trumpet or saxophone. One significant exception is the character of Rufus Scott in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, who is a drummer.

4 Other empirical studies that emphasise the importance of live performance and improvisation include (Brand et al.; Doffman; Macdonald and Wilson). Yet it is important to note that the results of studies such as these may be affected by how audiences believe they *should* respond both to the music and to questions posed by researchers.

the features of a quickly receding trail of sound. They constantly interpret one another's ideas, anticipating them on the basis of the music's predetermined harmonic events. (348)

In addition to this complex collaborative journey, the act of improvisation provides an interesting narrative context for these characters. An episode of improvisation is also a public display of something incredibly intimate: the moment of creation. As Alperson suggests, improvisation is interesting to audiences and readers alike because "we are actually witnessing the shaping activity of the improviser. It is as if we the audience gain privileged access to the performer's mind at the moment of creation" (274). Improvisation then, is the act of creating music in a public or live setting, through the combination of technical skill, musical knowledge, personal history, collaborative intuition and emotion.

The concept of improvisation is substantial enough to be the subject of numerous books and much critical material (cf. Alperson; Berliner; Carvalho; Kamoche and Cunha; Lespinasse; Monson; Szekely; Dean and Smith), and it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to cover all nuances of the form completely.

What is interesting about the representation of improvisation in literature, is that fact that author's often take this process of creation and render it violent. The music itself even becomes a kind of victim of violence. Where the music is cut up, reconfigured and broken down through the process of improvisation, violence is represented as an element of the music-making process. Of course, it is possible to see this fragmentation and reassembly as simply a creative process that is neither violent nor destructive. For instance, in his description of jazz composition, Paul Berliner describes the process of altering a melody through improvisation as follows:

Pursuing subtle courses, musicians carry over the inflections and ornaments of particular phrases to embellish other phrases. Venturing further, they may extract a figure's salient characteristic, such as melodic shape or rhythmic configuration, and treat it as the rudiment for new figures. (146)

Berliner's attempt at a realistic description of the process of improvisation is focused on the embellishment, extraction and treatment of a melody. However, I argue that the language Zabor uses to describe this process is quite different because of its suggestion of violence. It is the *representation* of the creative process that is of concern here, not how that process is achieved in real life. For instance, in contrast to Berliner's description, Zabor describes his fictional character improvising with a very different emphasis:

First thing he did was start dismantling the tune. He played a series of violent lower-register honks, then some angry, disordered runs that violated the cadence at the end of the chorus. And there went the tempo: the rhythm section was forced to break ranks and stutter ... the Bear applied more pressure, the time splintered like boxwood. (45)

Zabor's Bear dismantles, disorders, violates, and splinters time and his fellow musicians have to "break ranks." While improvisation in jazz is not necessarily a violent or destructive process in reality, Zabor's extract highlights how improvisation can lend itself to being described as such. Zabor represents the same process as that which Berliner describes, yet Zabor has chosen to foreground the potential violence of the act, and in doing so he focuses the reader's attention on The Bear's aggression and determination in the scene. This suggests that there is an inherent violence in The Bear's music-making process. Just as a painter may cut up or rip an image to reassemble into a collage⁵, a jazz musician may break a melody or harmony apart to make something new. How an author chooses to describe this act is what determines whether it is viewed as violence or not. When an author does represent the music as violent, the music often becomes a reflection of the character's psychological state.

5 Such as in the work of Pablo Picasso or Kurt Schwitters.

One of the most interesting psychological elements of *The Bear Comes Home* is that, when considering The Bear's mental state, it can also be read as a complex exploration of the relationship between racial identity and jazz. The ongoing social, scientific and authoritarian persecution of The Bear leads to a personal existential crisis and The Bear uses his music to respond to his victimisation.

The late 1990s was a very different time for jazz and racial identity compared to many earlier jazz novels such as Herbert Simmons' *Man Walking on Eggshells* and Ann Petry's *The Street*. The US Civil Rights movement ended in 1968 with several Civil Rights Acts being passed between 1964 and 1968. The most contemporary racial conflict to the novel were the 1992 race riots, instigated by the police beating of African-American man, Rodney King, in Los Angeles. Significantly, at around the same time the United States became involved in the Persian Gulf War, which went some way to shifting the focus of racial discrimination in the US towards Iraqis, and to reducing the perception of African-Americans as the "other" (Sidanius and Liu 685).

By the time of Zabor's writing, jazz, having arguably reached its peak of popularity in the 1940s, was no longer the sound that represented popular tastes. In a recent study into the current state of jazz gigs, audience members agreed that "jazz venues should be small and intimate" so that listeners can "immerse themselves in the experience" (Burland and Pitts 527). Burland and Pitts' study also argues that current audience members are "knowledgeable about jazz repertoire" and therefore attend performances with specific expectations about what they will hear (523). This suggests that these audience members are unlike the large dance audiences of the 1930s and are more educated and critical. In addition, as Brand, Sloboda, Saul and Hathaway argue, jazz has been suffering "a noted decline in the prevalence of attendance at concerts particularly ... in North America and Europe over the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century" (635-6).

Thus jazz was almost seen as cult music by the late 1990s, existing largely in the underground scene of small bars with an air of exclusivity. Zabor draws on this underground world as a perfect setting for the arrival of The Bear who slips in and out of small dark clubs, avoiding too many questions because these are places where unusual characters are accepted.

As The Bear dons his hat and trench coat to step into jazz clubs and meet his idols, he also has to try and stay under the radar to avoid the police and the scientists who would like to study him. It is in this climate of hiding, suspicion and the need to play music that The Bear tries to find out who he really is and how he can exist within the human world. I argue that Zabor uses The Bear's continual search for his place in society through his music as a metaphor for the desire to have one's racial identity accepted.

Prior to the beginning of the novel, The Bear has been working with his best friend, a human called Jones, as an "act" – he is a street performer who is led by his master to do human-like things, such as dance, drink beer and playfully wrestle with Jones. When he is performing on the street, The Bear hides his true identity and pretends to be enslaved:

When Jones led him home toward evening, The Bear's walk rolled him shoulder to shoulder, his head swayed genial and empty, his face was vacant and his eyes were glazed ... The Bear knew how to behave in company. (Zabor 9)

However, when The Bear arrives home, he relaxes, takes the chain out of his nose and puts his feet up to have a beer (10). When he is outside his home, he is performing and adhering to stereotypes of what people think a bear living in a metropolis should be. He performs the appearance of slavery, of dependence and disciplined behaviour. Yet he is not happy. This performance is something he desperately wants to shed. After one encouraging experience performing jazz with Lester Bowie, The Bear finds he is no longer able to keep up the performance of slavery, feeling as though he is about to "slip away": "Time and the city were pounding him to a powder, and something weaker was fighting for life in his heart" (Zabor 32). He chooses to drop the

act and takes the ring from his nose and bleeds all over the back of a taxi. The rest of the novel leaves him searching for a way he can be defined now that he is no longer simply a dancing bear.

The Bear, as an animal trying to exist in the human world, is a symbol of the outsider, or the other, but is also a symbol of violence. In this case, Zabor continually makes us aware of his animal status by never giving him a name and always referring to him as “The Bear.” In addition, The Bear is always willing to show his teeth to get his way, and we are reminded that his huge form cannot be disguised. Jerome Stueart posits that The Bear is, however, not bear enough and is “like a man in a bear suit”(198), arguing that we are only really made aware of his difference through the awkward sex scenes, as he fears hurting his human girlfriend, Iris, in the process of penetration. I argue that it is not only in the sex scenes, but also in the musical scenes that we are made aware of his “bearishness.” He bares his teeth at the audience, terrifying them with his potential violence, without even meaning to:

He reared his head back to take a larger breath, and had he been aware of his audience he would have realized that the sudden sight of his open jaws – great white tearing teeth, livid purple gums and broad, slavering tongue – had made it collectively gasp and jump back a foot. (Zabor 23)

It seems at times as if The Bear is unaware of how terrifying and strange he can be – particularly once he has decided to drop the guise of being Jones slave. Yet it is after this scene described above that The Bear is able to begin to really consider where he stands in relation to the human world.

When The Bear forms his own group, his music is suggested to show traces of both bebop and free jazz. In his discussion of one of the landmark albums of the free jazz era, Coltrane’s *Ascension*, Alyn Shipton argues that the “collective free playing” had “power, collective passion, and primal screaming qualities” (740). While Shipton admits that free jazz can be inaccessible or difficult to understand, he suggests another way of listening to the music:

If preconceptions about harmony, melody, and swing are suspended, and the music is approached in its own terms, it becomes a series of profound, impressive and frequently uncomfortable statements. (741)

Thus while the music may be both “profound” and “uncomfortable,” it has the capacity to be heard as a collection of statements or claims. It is almost as though it is a search for a sound, experimental and explorative. Ornette Coleman, who was partly responsible for the development of free jazz, is described by an old friend, Dewey Redman, as having a “a restless, questioning mind,” which not only reflects free jazz, but the characterisation of Zabor’s The Bear (Shipton 774). Coltrane himself, who is one of The Bear’s idols, also described the music as a process of searching (cf. Shipton 759).

Indeed, The Bear often uses the music as a means of searching for answers and exploring the anomaly that is his existence. Therefore, the music becomes a tool through which he can search for himself and Zabor describes this process as somewhat destructive. The Bear breaks apart the music that he knows to make something new in an effort to understand his desire to create music. In addition, through this process, he hopes to discover something about his own identity. As he records some music, he slips into this kind of philosophising:

There was a kind of shuttered tumult in him, as if all this equivocal music were being generated by a drama taking place from behind the closed doors of a room somewhere deeper in the house of his nature than he could bodily reach ... but all he could do here ... was use what he knew about music and the horn to make some sense out of such [an] echo of [the] real. (173)

But by the end of the novel, as his band members sit between sets with bleeding fingers (literally) he is convinced this search for identity through his music has led to nothing but violence:

What have I done? The Bear asked himself... Violence to everyone around me, the usual price of my obtaining any kind of pleasure at all. Does making an artistic statement sufficient to the fundamental questions my existence has proposed really require this much breakage? (457)

Therefore, by the conclusion, he has not found his identity, but instead has found that his musical response to the discrimination he has faced has led him to enact both intimate and performative violence upon others. His own acts of violence are explained as being a response to his identity crisis, which he attempts to solve through music. Zabor portrays the creative process as a violent act that is influenced by, and has influence upon, the psychological state of the performer.

In addition, The Bear has no answers: The uncertainty of who he is in relation to the human world remains. If the novel is viewed as a commentary on racial identity in the late twentieth century, Zabor seems to suggest that creative collaboration is not necessarily enough to bridge the gap between different ethnicities because of the imbalance of power – physically and socially. An underlying concept here is also that creative expression through improvisation cannot define who we are as individuals and how we relate to one another.

Finally, the primary way The Bear hopes to define himself is by comparing himself to other musicians, and by being accepted by them. Musicians initially don't take him seriously, as many are afraid to play with him or think he is just a "novelty act" (Zabor 43), reflecting the history of early black minstrel performers in America (Gioia 8). Once most musicians and audiences do accept him, however, it is as a musician and not as a bear. He is respected and even admired, embarking on a big performance opportunity at the end of the novel. Stueart argues that the reason the musicians finally accept him is not only because of his musical ability, but also because of the fact that he is a bear:

Other jazz musicians are the only ones taking him seriously, and this might stem from the fact that jazz is improvisation – working off the material you have to create something new. The Bear is an improvisation of a jazz musician, literally. A playful detour from the mainstream melody, an offbeat that still works, a harmony only heard if one modulates the right chords. The Bear, being improvisation on his own part and Zabor's improv, fits in well with the other improvisos who play instruments with him in various gigs throughout the book. (207)

Thus, Stueart suggests that The Bear himself is a kind of improvisation, and as such, he "fits in" because of the fact that he is a bear. While I agree that there is a possibility that his fellow musicians acceptance of him does come from their willingness to accept new ideas, I would dispute Stueart's equating of jazz improvisation with Zabor's "improvisation" of The Bear as a character. As previously argued, one of the qualities that makes jazz improvisation so arresting is that it is immediate and live; it evolves unpredictably and is only repeated if it is recorded and can be played back. Perhaps this is the manner in which Zabor wrote the character, but it seems simplistic to equate the two so fully.

Nevertheless, as Stueart suggests, The Bear, like African-American jazz musicians before him, finds some acceptance through jazz. Ultimately, it seems to be a legitimate occupation for him, as it was for early black jazz musicians struggling to find their place in society in the early twentieth century (Sidran 31). By the end of the novel, although he has found a place where he can be accepted, The Bear remains dissatisfied: He fears the violence of his music and has an incomplete love affair with Iris, his white lover. He muses over "this lucky-in-music-unlucky-in-love routine: I won't have it" (Zabor 473), reflecting the pattern of so many jazz musicians' lives. His identity as a bear has finally been made redundant in his professional career, but it still

has an impact on how he relates to women and perhaps the human race generally – where the human race represents the dominant race, that is, the white population of America.

Similarly, Zabor suggests musicians are capable of attacking one another through music, as The Bear responds to some unwilling collaborators by unsettling their sense of the music. Zabor portrays this attack as violence against both the music and the musicians:

As the Bear applied more pressure, the time splintered like boxwood beneath the weight of his phrasing and the home key collided smartly with two or three others, motivic fragments flying off at the edges like electrons from a critical mass about to go fission. (45)

In this way the ruptured music is represented as a weapon with which he can control his fellow musicians; he unsettles them to the point that they are forced to comply with the way he wants to play. In the context of the narrative, The Bear performs with violence in order to claim his place as a serious musician. Therefore the music becomes a means of fighting for respect, and for breaking down assumptions that he is a gimmick. It becomes the means for him to prove that he is not simply a saxophone playing Bear, but rather, an accomplished musician.

However, towards the end of the novel, when The Bear has finally established himself as a musician first, and a bear second, there is still violence in the music that he plays, and he hurts the musicians he works with – though with a different intention and outcome (457). Zabor thus explores a form of performative violence that occurs when performing music physically hurts the musicians. After The Bear takes a long solo at a gig, one musician says to him, “Next time you want to kill us use a gun, all right?” (457), suggesting he has pushed the rest of the band too far, exhausting them with his stamina. This question causes The Bear some self-doubt, unsure if he should be collaborating with humans at all: “What have I done?” (457).

The Bear does not want to hurt people, and his potential violence becomes emblematic of his personal struggle throughout the novel: How can a bear relate to humans without destroying them? He fears causing harm in his friendship with Jones, who may be incarcerated for helping him. He fears physically hurting Iris, his human lover, when they have intercourse, and finally he fears hurting his fellow musicians as they perform.

By the end of the novel, he hides himself away, disappearing into the wilderness to be alone and unable to “budge [a] brute rock with [a] bit of misremembered, half-accomplished song” (478). This line suggests that The Bear has tried to use music to change the “brute rock” of his existence and his complex relationship with humans. However, he has found that his music is not enough to actually change his world, no matter how much he would like it to have an impact. The music has enabled a dialogue between himself and human beings, but it has not actually solved the problem of his *relationship* with humanity – he is still a bear, and he is still stronger, bigger and more violent than a human.

The Bear’s consideration of a “misremembered, half-accomplished song” suggests that this is how he sees the jazz he plays: broken, fragmentary and perhaps unfinished. He sees his own performance ability as having not yet reached its peak, and therefore his own narrative is unfinished, and the music reflects this. His feeling that his song cannot move the physical world suggests that perhaps the meaning of the music is not enough. The music has failed to produce the bond he hoped to create, and the suggestion is that perhaps he was asking too much of the music. If examined in the context of music making as a representation of the creative process, The Bear’s position at the end of the novel suggests that if artists have an expectation that their craft will improve their life, they will be disappointed.

Zabor represents jazz and improvisation as an art form that has the capacity to transform sound into a means of manipulating both musicians and audiences physically and psychologically. The idea of breaking music down, pulling it apart and disrupting the key or time signature is used as a metaphor for the disruption

of conventions in relation to identity, race and social history. Conversely, violence within the narrative also becomes a metaphorical tool through which to explore the creative process – particularly the process of improvisation. Physical or visible violence may be a metaphor for psychological disturbance or suffering, while psychological or musical violence is at times a metaphor for deeper emotional concerns within *The Bear*. The history of *The Bear*'s "slavery" and the music he makes has an impact on how the music is both performed and received by the audience. The music embodies and sometimes absorbs the violations, breakages and damage from *The Bear*'s life.

Improvisation, then, is a tool through which Zabor suggests that violence is inherent in both the creative process and the search for identity. He represents the music making as violence and destructive, even through the reality of improvisation may be anything but. He creates an impossible character in a possible world, enabling a representation of improvisation that stretches the constraints of reality. The result is an enigmatic, genius musician whose violent "nature" makes him simultaneously the most creative artist and the most destructive social animal.

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AUTHOR BIO

Hannah Ianniello is an early-career academic and writer from Sydney, Australia. Graduating from her PhD in 2014, her research is based around the relationship between literature and music. She has delivered numerous seminars at the University of Western Sydney and University of Notre Dame Australia, and has had a research paper published with Peter Lang. In addition to her academic work, she is a novelist, poet and screenwriter and has won the 2013 West Field Screenwriting Award for a short film she wrote in collaboration with her husband.

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