

Vol 6, Issue 1, Aug 07

Writing

Buddhist Understandings of Subjectivity in Fiction

Buddhist Understandings of Subjectivity in Fiction by Victor Pelevin and Lynette Chattaway: An Exegetical Essay for a Novel-in-Progress

Introduction

As I begin writing this article I am also in the midst of beginning a new novel. The novel, tentatively titled *Fish and Orchids*, seeks to make significant intertextual links to selected stories from the *Therevada* Buddhist canon, particularly from the Pali work broadly known as *The Jataka*. The *Jataka* collection was well known in India in the third century BC and was first published in English in three volumes in 1905. It comprises an anthology of over five hundred stories ranging from simple anecdote to more complex epic. Each story in the collection is didactic in nature, purportedly narrated by the Buddha himself who frames and contextualises, identifying the different actors in the story in their present (at least at the time of the telling) births. The stories in the *The Jataka* are often fantastic in the tradition of legendary folklore: a fish swallows a sum of money and is later caught and sold in such a manner that the money is returned to its rightful owner; a jackal learns a lesson about gluttony through gorging on the carcass of an elephant. My challenge, as novelist, is to recast selected stories from *The Jataka* in a contemporary Australian setting and a single narrative, using a predominantly realist mode of representation.

I say predominantly realist mode, here, but the full extent to which the new work subscribes to realist conventions is yet to be determined. I suspect that an ancient mythological register, complete with talking animals and feuding kings, is bound to warp the realist mode of narration in some way. I am intrigued as to how this might work, in practice, and also as to how Buddhist understandings of subjectivity might be integrated into the Western tradition of the character-driven literary novel without propelling the genre toward fantasy or at the very least a sort of magic-realism. In considering the challenge I have set myself with the new work, I have begun to seek out work by other contemporary novelists engaged with Buddhist philosophy. I am particularly interested in the way conventional realism is disrupted in such fiction, especially via the decamping of the notion of the free and autonomous individual, independent of other causes and conditions, but also in the way Buddhist understandings of the nature of reality impact on causality and the 'plausibility' of the imagined world.

In this paper, I begin with a discussion of Buddhist notions of the self and relate these ideas, where relevant, to contemporary critical understandings of subjectivity. The majority of the paper provides a reading of two recent novels, examining the ways in which each novelist engages Buddhist understandings of subjectivity, and in so doing bring conventional realism into question. The first of these novels is *Noble Sindhu Horses*, by Australian novelist Lynette Chataway, set in Thailand and Australia and published in 2005. The second is *Buddha's Little Finger* by Russian novelist Victor Pelevin, a book that playfully examines personal and national identity in the light of modern Russian history, first published in Russian in 1996 and in English (translated by Andrew Bromfield) in 2000. My purpose in engaging in a close reading of these two texts is both technical and philosophical in nature. That is, I hope to consider the way in which technique necessarily reveals each author's philosophy, both of Buddhism and of subjectivity; but also to map what happens to realism in each case. I conclude with some discussion of how these two authors' treatments of subjectivity have helped me to consider Buddhist approaches to subjectivity in my own fledgling text.

Buddhism and subjectivity

"What am I referring to when I say the word 'I' (1)? This question forms the opening to Nick Mansfield's widely-consulted cultural studies text, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Harraway* (2000). Indeed, theories of subjectivity have been crucial to critical theory in literary and cultural studies during the last quarter century. Notions of the subject as a free and autonomous individual, developed during the Enlightenment, have been largely abandoned by postmodern

theorists, from Foucault through to Kristeva, from Bourdieu through to Virilio. This is despite widespread support for the idea of the free and autonomous individual in contemporary Western politics and rhetoric more broadly.

What is interesting about the kinds of questions that contemporary critical theorists have been asking each other about subjectivity is that many are precisely the same kinds of questions that Buddhist philosophers have discussing for centuries. Walpola Sri Rahula provides a useful summary of the Buddhist understanding of the self:

What in general is suggested by the Soul, Self, Ego, or to use the Sanskrit expression *Ātman*, is that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world. According to some religions, each individual has such a separate soul which is created by God, and which, finally after death, lives eternally either in heaven or hell, its destiny depending on the judgement of its creator.... Such a conception is called the idea of the self. Buddhism [denies] the existence of such a Soul, Self or *Ātman*. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism and other... problems. (51)

As Thai Buddhist, Ajahn Chah, has expressed it, the mind has "been trained and conditioned to turn away and spin out from a state of pure awareness. As it spins it creates conditioned phenomena which further influence the mind, and the proliferation carries on.... As the Buddha said, the mind is merely the mind. It's not a being, a person, a self, or yourself." (4)

What is of interest to me in this paper, is the way in which authors who are interested in representing Buddhist approaches to subjectivity, might employ the vehicle of the novel to do so. In fact, narrative fiction – particularly that written in what we generally recognise as a realist mode – generally relies on the idea of the free and autonomous individual. As readers, we anticipate the construction of a character capable of acting with a certain amount of free will, a character whose speech and actions reveal a consistent state of consciousness, a character who constructs, at least in part, his or her own "fate." Consistency, autonomy and a certain fixedness of identity are crucial to the construction of a plausible character in realist literature.

Lynette Chataway's Noble Sindhu Horses

Lynette Chataway's first novel, *Noble Sindhu Horses*, was published in 2005 by Pandanus Books, a publishing venture based at the Australian National University and one with a special interest in Australian writing that engages with Asia and the Pacific. The novel is loosely based on the author's personal experience of working in Thailand with Australian Volunteers International, and on the reverse culture-shock she and her family suffered on their return to Australia. The work takes its title from one of the verses of *The Dhammapada*, a seminal collection of Buddhist teachings. In part, the verse reads, "Mules are good, if tamed, and noble Sindhu horses; and elephants with large tusks; but he who tames himself is better still" (n.p.). And it is this principle that permeates the novel, that is, that contentment is not gained through materialism, marriage, career or cultural advancement. Rather, contentment reveals itself in our own minds once we transform the way we see the world.

Francis and Ava, the married couple at the centre of the novel, leave rural Queensland for a two-year deployment in Thailand, where Francis is to teach agriculture at a local college. The motivation behind the trip seems to be a desire to bring about positive change; the couple are characterised as having been actively engaged with human rights organisations in Australia, including Community Aid Abroad, Amnesty International, and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. Unsurprisingly, when they reach Thailand with their pre-school aged daughter, Elizabeth, in tow, Francis's job at the college seems ludicrously ineffectual, and Ava, at home with Elizabeth, finds herself under-occupied and completely isolated from the local women because of her clumsy grasp of the Thai language. If this "culture shock" is predictable, then what is less predictable is the sense of utter dislocation and loss the couple face on their return to Australia, when the pursuit of "ordinary life" in the Australian way, is called seriously into question. Francis has a breakdown; Ava loses all sense of purpose.

Throughout the book, Chataway writes in a detached third person mode of narration, relying heavily on summary and diegesis, so that Ava and Francis sometimes seem quite brittle as characters; we get the sense that they could be any left-leaning, well-educated Australian couple. Early in the novel, prior to the decision to go to Thailand, for example, Chataway describes their life in Queensland as

follows:

Ava and Francis do a lot of living. Ava plays tennis and takes Elizabeth to playgroup. She paints flowers on Vegemite jars and then uses them to hold hundreds and thousands, peanuts and birthday candles... And Francis, now working for the Department of Primary Industries, visits farmers, whose wives are intelligent and can bake chocolate cakes while taking care of triplets and doing the bookwork... [Ava and Francis] accumulate stuff: useful things like chairs and cutlery, and the not so useful, like doilies and pot plants (18-19).

This semi-ironic and detached voice, realist in the simple sense that it is "the portrayal of life with fidelity" (Cudden 553), is consistent throughout the book. Chataway is not concerned with idealisation, with rendering things beautiful when they are not, nor is she particularly interested in the transcendental or the mystical.

The author applies the same detached realist mode in her telling of the story of Nikkon, whose life-narrative runs parallel with that of Ava and Francis. Nikkon is a Thai whose life crosses that of Francis and Ava, during their stay in Thailand. He works at the agricultural college alongside Francis, though Chataway's narrative picks him up much earlier, as a child, and follows his journey toward suicide as a disillusioned adult some time after Francis and Ava have left the country. Nikkon's inculcation into Thai and Buddhist culture is dealt with matter-of-factly by the author. When he ordains, reluctantly, as a monk for a short period, as is expected of him by his family, "he learns things he does not fully understand: kill no living thing; if one is hateful or violent, rebirth is in hell; if greedy, it is as a ghost; if guilty of acts of delusion or confusion, the torment of life as an animal lies ahead" (28). These beliefs are no more passionately subscribed to by Nikkon than are Ava or Francis's beliefs in the Western idea that the accumulation of material goods is a meaningful way of life; each character merely seems to find themselves subject to (and, indeed, the subject of) the overarching system. And it takes their direct exposure to difference – that is, to each other – to call the system itself into question. If Chataway takes a risk in this novel in getting inside the head of Nikkon, that is, in speaking as a Westerner for and about the Other, it is not the only risk she takes, and certainly not the biggest.

The larger risk, in fact, is her ultimate disruption of the realist mode she has worked so carefully to maintain throughout the novel. The rupture comes on the final page, when Ava and Francis, back home in Australia, decide to have a second child. At the birth, it is Nikkon, several years after his suicide, who bursts into their world in the form of the newborn:

There is no air yet, no wider reality, but Nikkon is focused and knowledgeable. After so long, the time has come for him, too.... Upside down, cocooned in a no-man's-land of suspended animation, Nikkon begins again. Sleek and seal-like, his blind head butts at the dark. Bones mould to muscle. There is a light... Nikon works his way towards it and screams himself into existence....

... And when it is over Ava lies back in the full glare of the hospital fluorescents. Never again, she thinks. Never, ever, a-bloody-gain. While Francis, his arm caught awkwardly under her shoulders, gives into a sensation that sees him soar while still fixed firmly to the ground. He announces hoarsely, 'Another girl. Another little Elizabeth.' (231)

In delivering the reborn Nikkon literally into the arms of the Ava and Francis, Chataway disrupts the realist mode of narration that forms the basis of the novel up to this point; she also, simultaneously, places Buddhist understandings of subjectivity, causality and interdependence firmly centre-stage. The ending is such a radical recasting of the conventional "reality" of the text, the reader is forced to read backwards, in a sense, to fully reconsider everything that has come before.

James Phelan, in *Reading People, Reading Plots*, defines narrative progression in terms of its ability to "move, in both its telling and its reception, through time... [and] such movement is given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the... audience's interest in the narrative" (15).

Interestingly, then, those readers who are willing to believe the realist dream of the novel up to this point, but who are sceptical of the notion of re-birth, and I include myself, precariously, in that bunch, may judge the success (or otherwise) of the book as a whole in accordance with the plausibility of this final scene. It doesn't seem to wash with Tony Moriarty, for example, reviewing *Noble Sindhu Horses* for *The Australian*. For Moriarty, "Chataway's risky venture... is a tableau of subtle observation – of dislocation, impermanence and loss – but we're left grasping for a bigger story" (13).

In fact, you couldn't be left with a much bigger story than the Buddhist concept of rebirth, cast free of Heidegger's sense of being in time – hemmed in by the anticipation of certain death – and taking up

instead the boundless, transcendental concepts of ghost realms and an inevitable craving to return to life in some other form. Nikkon's rebirth defies Western scientific understandings of the corporeal, and therefore of the whole notion of the independent self. Here at the novel's conclusion it seems clear that Nikkon's whole purpose in the text has been teleological; his purpose has been to be reborn, and not in hell, or as a ghost or animal, but actually as a human child in the relatively peaceful realm of middle-class, first-world Australia. This ending, also a beginning, resolves certain aspects of the novel's narrative progression in a conventional realist sense – the three characters meet again and are irrevocably changed by the meeting – but at the same time, Chataway's conclusion opens up larger, far more radical questions, introducing significant instabilities that were hitherto absent from the world of her novel. The least of these questions is to do with the realist mode of representation the novelist has employed up to the fracture-point at the conclusion, and whether or not readers ought ever to have assumed that mode of narration to act as an arbiter of truth. Chataway's ending brings philosophy itself into focus, leaving the unstable nature of both subjectivity and reality fully exposed. But does it work? Ironically, the final question the reader asks herself is, "Is this plausible?" The sheer magic of Nikkon's rebirth comes as a shock in a work exhibiting such an otherwise down-to-earth – or we could say Western – realist register. Our willingness (or otherwise) as readers to accept this ending as the right one for the narrative events that precede it impacts enormously on what we perceive to be the success (or failure) of the whole novel. Personally, while I admire Chataway's bravado, I'm not certain that her risky ending pays off.

Victor Pelevin's Buddha's Little Finger

"Tell me, Chapaev, who are you in reality?" asks Pyotr Void, the first-person protagonist in Victor Pelevin's novel, *Buddha's Little Finger*, of his friend and mentor, Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev. Pyotr's question sets off the following exchange between the two:

'Better tell yourself, Petka,' [Chapaev responds], 'who you are in reality. Then you'll understand all about me. But you just keep on repeating "me, me, me" like that gangster in your nightmare. What does that mean – "me"? What is it? Try taking a look for yourself.'

'I want to look, but...'

'If you want to look, why do you keep on looking at that "me" and that "want" and that "look", instead of at yourself?'

'Very well,' I countered, 'then answer my question. Can you give me a simple answer to it?'

'I can,' he said. 'Try again.'

'Who are you, Chapaev?'

'I don't know,' he replied.

If this exchange seems absurd, it is not exceptionally so, at least not in relation to the rest of Pelevin's novel. The book itself is a convoluted meditation on the nature of reality itself, as much philosophical exploration as it is fiction. Pelevin invents worlds within worlds, a kind of Chinese-box effect, that have the reader reading across multiple realities. Pyotr Voyd (Pyotr Pustota in the original Russian version – his surname meaning 'emptiness' in Russian), a patient in a mental hospital in Moscow in the early 1990's, seems to be dreaming up another world for himself: a world in which he works for the real-life Bolshevik commander, Chapaev, during the Russian civil war in 1919. But which is the real world and which is the dream?

The novel opens with a focus on the Pyotr Voyd of 1919, who as a poet has published a work of verse in a national newspaper, rhyming 'red' with 'mad'. The government of the day interprets Pyotr's poem as a subversive act and seeks his arrest. As we follow Pyotr through the next twenty-four hours, while he madly avoids detection by the police, we witness an odd series of events which involves him taking on a false identity, getting drunk on vodka and cocaine ("Baltic Tea") and finishing up, at the end of long evening, in the service of the commissar of the legendary Chapaev. Eventually, he passes out, only to wake in 1991 in the Moscow mental hospital. His escorts from the previous night, now wearing white coats instead of pea jackets, lead him to an office where he is told by a man, who he suspects to be a clever interrogator, why he is wearing a straitjacket: "You know, the world around us is reflected in our consciousness and then it becomes the subject of our mental activity. When established connections in the real world collapse, the same thing happens in the human psyche," he is told (33). To cure him of his 1919 delusions, the head doctor subjects Pyotr to a battery of hallucinogenic drugs and shock treatments. These, of course, propel him straight back into the world of 1919, where Chapaev and he develop a close relationship marked by complex philosophical dialogues. Chapaev gradually becomes a kind of Buddhist mentor, encouraging Pyotr to recognise that not only is the world of the mental hospital an illusion, but so is all matter, including the self. The structural and representational games played in Pelevin's novel can be read as characteristically

postmodern, for it is a project wholly about the undoing of fixed identities. Chapaev, for example, seems able to read Pyotr's mind, and thus see into his dreams. But the Pyotr of 1991 has similar skills, so that the "realities" of several other mental patients are also represented in the novel. The imagined world of the (male) patient, Maria, for example, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a dubiously heroic role, abruptly interrupts the narrative of the sleeping/waking Pyotr for almost thirty pages early in the novel, and others follow. Thus Pelevin's novel contains worlds within worlds and a multiplicity of voices. While on the one hand the narrative constitutes a spiritual quest, on the other hand it simultaneously deconstructs its own narrative trajectory.

In this way, the book may also be read as critique, a text in which the story counts for less than the telling. It is a novel that could easily be labelled, in Michael Boyd's sense, as "antirealist":

If the realist pretends that fiction is life, the antirealist knows that life is fiction. (Antirealists are themselves involved in a contradiction here: how can they disavow all claim to reality and at the same time claim knowledge of that reality? Their one defense – which is at the same time their *raison-d'être* – is that they know that they cannot know). (Boyd 18)

If a critique of reality and fixed notions of identity are the main focus of the novel then Russia itself, is a kind of secondary subject, for the concept of the nation state faces the same kind of scrutiny here as any other kind of a fixed identity. At the novel's conclusion, when the Pyotr of 1991 is finally discharged from the mental hospital, he finds himself in an argument with a Moscow cab driver who is keen to have a discussion about contemporary Russian politics:

'You know,' I [Pyotr] said, 'if history teaches us anything, then it is that everybody who has tried to sort things out in Russia has ended up being sorted out by Russia instead.'

'That's right,' said the gentleman. 'That's precisely why we have to think about how to sort things out here – so that it won't happen again.'

'As far as I'm concerned, I have no need to think about it,' I replied. 'I know perfectly well how to sort things out in Russia.'

'Oh yes? And how's that?'

'It is all quite simple. Every time the concept and the image of Russia appears in your conscious mind, you have to let it dissolve away in its own inner nature. And since the concept and the image of Russia has no inner nature of its own, the result is that everything is sorted out most satisfactorily.' (326)

The argument in the cab develops into a debate about generational differences, and Pyotr is accused, along with rest of his generation, of being politically disinterested, his mind "poisoned" by Americans. "Of course it's stupid of me to try and talk to you seriously," says the cab driver, just before he throws Pyotr out of the cab, "Pretending that you doubt the reality of the world is the most cowardly form of escape from that very reality. Squalid intellectual poverty, if you want my opinion" (327).

If this dialogue is amusing to some, it appears it is not so to all. The reception of Buddha's Little Finger in Russia itself was quite controversial. The book stayed on the Russian bestseller list for thirty weeks after its initial release, cashing in on a cult following partly spurred on by its apparent exclusion from Russia's most prestigious literary prize. One of the judges of that prize is reported to have said of the book, "It's just too dangerous to support or transport this kind of cultural image. Works like this act as a cultural virus – they destroy the cultural memory" (qtd. in Lough 6). This act of exclusion is particularly ironic given that the novel's plot is set rolling by a similar act of cultural suppression. While the book was immensely popular with young readers, influential 'old-school' literary critics are divided over the worth of Pelevin's work. According to Jason Cowley, no other writer polarises opinion among Moscovians quite like Victor Pelevin. For Igor Shaitanov, a professor of literature at the Russian State Humanities University, Pelevin is a "phony" whose fiction contains a "dangerous emptiness" (qtd. in Cowley 20). Another well-respected critic, Pavel Basinsky, questioned how Pelevin could write something so "divorced from reality" while there was a war on in Chechnya and the communists were threatening to take power again (qtd. in Mozur 58). These comments are tremendously ironic in light of the nature of Pelevin's pre-occupations in this novel. One can't help but wonder, for example, which reality it is that Basinsky sees as being up for divorce.

Importantly, at the same time as Buddha's Little Finger can be read as a characteristically postmodern text, it is also, and primarily, a meditation on Buddhist philosophy. It is, as far as I am aware, the only recent novel to draw so clearly and overtly the parallels between Buddhist and postmodernist approaches to subjectivity, so much so, in fact, that it risks being read as a purely didactic text. Significantly, Victor Pelevin is himself a practicing Buddhist, spending several months each year on retreat in a Buddhist monastery in South Korea. "Part of the attraction of Buddhism for

me,” he told Jason Cowley in an interview for The New York Times, “is that it enables me to empty my head of all the junk of modern living... When I’m away in Korea, spending all day meditating, everything seems to disappear into silence” (20).

As a reader, I found myself amused by Pelevin’s textual strategies and often delighted by his clever philosophical games. But, as with my reading of Chataway, I came away slightly perplexed by the approach Pelevin had taken. It seemed to me that his novel had fallen into the trap of much postmodernist fiction. It was so caught up in deconstructing itself that there was little in the way of narrative intrigue. I found myself struggling to get involved enough in the text to care what happened to the main protagonist. Is it possible, I wonder, to construct a plausible character and an intriguing plot in a novel, at the same time as one reveals the whole concept of the autonomous self as an imaginary and false belief? Perhaps the two are mutually exclusive.

The Western novel & Eastern philosophy

As Mark Currie has pointed out, the novel has moved across the course of the twentieth century, from “an essentially historical realist mode, through a period of formal self-consciousness and experimentation, and into a new kind of ironic history” (65). Yet in the East, where Buddhism has a long tradition, the realist novel as we know it in the West has not enjoyed such an uninterrupted reign. In a sense, a project by Western writers to incorporate Buddhist understandings of subjectivity into the form of the contemporary novel is itself a form of cross-cultural experiment, perhaps just as subject to all the misunderstandings and capacities for error as early European writings on all things oriental. The difference between nineteenth and twenty-first century writers, however, is that the latter are unlikely to assume a realist mode of representation actually “reflects” the outside world. Contemporary literary fiction, even when employing a predominantly realist mode of narration, rarely lacks some kind of critical awareness in relation to itself and its own conventions. Realism, then, is rarely employed in contemporary fiction without a certain degree of irony.

But how easy is it to assume that writers such as Pelevin and Chataway sit squarely within the tradition of the West, and Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, remains corralled in the East? Buddhism has been said to be one of the fastest growing religions in the world in recent decades, but this growth is taking place largely in Europe and the United States, not in the traditional Buddhist heartlands of Asia. Where early European understandings of Buddhism reduced the philosophy to nihilism, the contemporary Western world has been forced to reconsider the privileges up until now granted to certain dominant forms of rationality. As Bernard Faure puts it, “such a revision is also encouraged by the tragic ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ that, from the eighteenth century to the black suns of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, have led us to call into question our naïve belief in scientific progress” (xi). For Faure, there is an interesting “play” going on between Western and Buddhist world-visions, one that cannot be fully understood by setting one tradition up against the other in a reductionist approach.

In some ways, however, the interest Western novelists such as Pelevin, Chataway and myself have in Buddhist approaches to subjectivity and non-self can only every be a fairly simple philosophical interest. A full and lived understanding of emptiness – the basis of the Buddhist concept of non-self – might be restricted to those beings Buddhists recognised as being fully enlightened, such as the Buddha himself. It can be argued that a non-enlightened being, in the Buddhist context, is severely limited in their attempt to represent non-self precisely because they themselves are not fully ‘awake’; such a person has no lived experience of non-self.

Stephen Le Barge, a psychophysicologist at Stanford University, supposes that the state of Buddhist enlightenment must be something like having a lucid dream:

Here you are in a dream that you don’t know is a dream, and so you have a very limited view of what your possibilities are, who you are, what you’re doing here, and what really matters. Suddenly you remember that you’re dreaming and that changes everything. And in the same sense with enlightenment, it’s said that one comes to understand a deeper level of unity. Normally we are acutely, uncomfortably aware of separateness... you’re over there and I’m over here; but there’s another level on which we both have something in common: not the self, but the ‘I’, the experiencer. When you tease that apart you find there’s no way to distinguish the ultimate nature of that experiencer... because the stuff that distinguishes – Stephen’s name, his birth-date, all his physical characteristics and all that – is the stuff which is not necessary to being who I am. (Blackmore 145)

I think it would be fair to say that any attempt by Western novelists to represent a 'true' Buddhist understanding of subjectivity in fiction, is limited not only by the nature and conventions of the novel as we know it, but also by our own limited understandings of the nature of the self and reality. If Chataway's text risks plausibility, and Pelevin's resists departing altogether from the form of the novel, both also risk misrepresenting Buddhist understandings of subjectivity.

Conclusion

I am not yet sure of the extent to which the characters in my own fledgling text, "Fish and Orchids", will depart from more conventional novelistic characters – those autonomous enough to demonstrate some kind of control over their fate in the narrative. What is clear to me, in considering the work of Chataway and Pelevin, is that taking a Buddhist approach to subjectivity can have a profound effect on so many of the basic conventions of the fiction – not just realism – but the structure and purpose of the novel itself. While there are certainly marked similarities between these novels and that fiction which we might label postmodernist, I would argue that the two novels I have discussed here represent subjectivity – and hence fiction itself – through something other than a postmodern lens. The lenses through which both Chataway and Pelevin are looking are actually the result of living with and through Buddhism in an everyday sense and, certainly in the case of Pelevin, in developing an experienced taste for the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

I would like to work towards a novel that sits somewhere between the fiction-as-critique approach taken by Pelevin, and the more subtle rupturing of the real as demonstrated by Chataway. I hope for a work that brings some very ancient Buddhist stories to a new audience and that reveals something about the conditioned and interdependent nature of the self along the way. While aiming to adopt the conventional shape and direction of the novel – introducing, complicating and resolving certain instabilities – I am seeking, also, to interrogate the real. As a writer, the technical challenges of such an intention can sometimes seem overwhelming. But the process needs to be framed as a kind of play. It is ultimately, as Faure has put it, a play between Western and Buddhist world-visions, one that seeks to enrich rather than simplify both traditions.

Works Cited

- Blackmore, Susan. *Conversations on Consciousness*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Boyd, Michael. *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983.
- Chah, Venerable Ajahn. "Theory and Reality." *Unshakeable Peace*. Warin Chamrap, Thailand: Wat Pah Nanachat, 2003.
- Chataway, Lynette. *Noble Sindhu Horses*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005.
- Cowell, E.B. *The Jataka: Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. Trans. By H.T. Francis et al. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1990.
- Cowley, Jason. "Gogol a Go-Go." *The New York Times*. 23 Jan. 2000. 20.
- Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Literary Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1998.
- Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Rev edn. London: Penguin, 1977.
- Faure, Bernard. *Double Exposure: Cutting Across Buddhist and Western Discourses*. Transl. Janet Lloyd. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- Lough, James. "Drift through dream, reality probes life's woes." Rev. of *Buddha's Little Finger* by Victor Pelevin. *The Denver Post*. 6 August 2000. 6.
- Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York: New York UP, 2000.
- Moriarty, Tony. "Other Voices." Rev. of *Noble Sindhu Horses* by Lynette Chataway. *The Australian*. 27 Aug 2005. 13.
- Mozur, Joseph. "Victor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism and Pulp Fiction." *World Literature Today*. 76.2(2002): 58.
- Pelevin, Victor. *Buddha's Little Finger*. Trans. Andrew Bromfield. New York: Penguin, 2000.
- Rahula, Walpola Sri. *What the Buddha Taught*. Revised edition. Bangkok: Haw Trai Foundation, 2005.

[Download this work](#)

By Julienne van Loon

Julienne van Loon has written 'Buddhist Understandings of Subjectivity in Fiction' for dotlit Vol 6, Iss 1.

Works on topics similar to this one:

- [Buddhism](#)
- [novel](#)
- [subjectivity](#)