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**Making the Statue Move.
How Might Creative Writing Bear
Witness to History? The East German
Doping Scam: Theme 14.25**

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**Making the Statue Move.
How Might Creative Writing Bear Witness to History?
The East German Doping Scam: Theme 14.25**

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Abstract

Creating a fictional world within an authentic historical framework demands not only the rigour of research: getting it right; but the painstaking re-imagining of character, voice, place, and cultural norm; in short the emotional landscape of a forgotten narrative. Imagining and writing a voice from a factual series of events demands that the writer come equipped with an authority with which to seek out documents, places and former writings, before weaving a narrative from such fact. Creativity is at the forefront of the writing process, yet this creativity comes with the weighty responsibility to do justice to the original event and its subjects. Creative writing (within the discipline of historical fiction) lives within this tension of bearing witness to past events: joyous or atrocious, before re-imagining a world; breathing life into the long ago in order for a present day reader to receive a story told through an authentic voice, a voice with all the immediacy of a believable character – as real as the girl, or boy next door. This place of creative imagining must hold, within it, the truth of history. The tension between historical reality and the writing of historical fiction is as creative as it is restrictive. Using my research and teaching experience as a template, this paper will seek to elucidate the process of authenticity and creative historical writing through investigation, research and the writing of a PhD and a novel based on the East German Doping Scam: Theme 14.25.

Keywords: Fact. History. Fiction. Authenticity. Creativity.

On the 9th of November 1947, my mother escaped from her home town in the former East German Democratic Republic, the GDR.

At 4 am, she walked across no man's land where escapees were shot, passing sentry posts where drunken Russian soldiers sprawled, head in arms, guns by their sides. Unknown her, that night the Russians celebrated a historical landmark: the storming of the Winter Palace.

She recalls some of her past in detail, the walk from East to West as a strange, silent, terrifying passage across no-man's land. She ended her journey in the tented coffee area in which the Red Cross served soup and, of course, coffee, as her welcome into West Germany. Other aspects of the war she forgets.

As she walked, my mother said she felt that 'a wiser being worked into her half-conscious mind, telling her she was doing the right thing'. She remembers the colour of this existential guide, or angel, as 'creamy white', a guardian somewhere near her right shoulder. This was her third attempt to escape.

My mother was twelve when the Second World War began. Coming from a family that made a fortune in weaving, she had lived in an exclusive world of privilege. She experienced totalitarian rule as delivered by Hitler. Lived through the chaos of Soviet dictatorship reinforced by the Red Army, and was nineteen when, in April 1946, The Socialist Unity Party was formed from a forced merger between the German Communist Party, and the Social Democratic Party of Germany. She was thirty four when, on the 12th and 13th August 1961, the Berlin Wall was built.

She and many from her generation have walls in their heads. They remember only a portion of what was – a coping mechanism perhaps. When telling me of her past, my mother gave contradicting versions of her escapes. There are, it seems, a number of misshelved books within her bank of memory. This notion grew in importance as I began the research for my novel: a story about remembering and crossing physical and mental borders.

So how, you might ask, does this historical biography lend itself to the writing of the East German Doping scam?

Looking for evidence about my family's Stasi Files, I stumbled across something called 'Complex 08', 'State Theme 14.25', or, even more confusingly DTSB 'The Association for Gymnastics and Athletes. I stared. Clicked on the link and was hooked: here was a story shouting to be remembered, a story waiting to be heard.

When I meet a new group of students who are about to embark on a fiction writing module, I begin by talking about writing a stream of consciousness – the initial idea of the story. I tell them how they need to get through to the end, in order to keep the novel alive in their minds.

"Hold each portion of the narrative in your mind, until the end," I say; never forgetting what a demanding task this is. 'Stream of consciousness' they

write, diligently, noting down how a writer develops the arc of a novel to contain the essence of change.

I talk about elementary particles, and the links between them. For example:

1: He glanced at her, 2: She looked away, 3: He blushed.

These tiny shifts of action, reaction, re-reaction, are the dynamics of narrative change; the noun and verb the staple of syntax.

All narrative is saturated in mystery, I say. The presence of the unsaid, untold, cryptic and tacit – in other words suspense keeps us reading.

This, then that happened.

Because of this, that happened.

My own writing corresponds to each of these ideas.

The story begins in 1990. The Wall has just come down, and my protagonist Sophia is a 30-year old displaced athlete who, with her father Petrus, a former GDR sports doctor, escaped to West Germany in 1977. The border escape from East to West followed the pattern, not only of my mother's flight, but that of many other refugees. There were however, differences. In 1977, the GDR was an established functioning state. When my mother escaped the state was still in its infancy, with plans in the process of being carefully drawn. When the protagonist of *Dark Mermaids* leaves East Germany, she escaping not only the East German dictatorship, but a doping programme called Theme 14.25.

When I teach writing historical fiction, I talk about how characters and plot might be fictitious but the landscape and history remain historically correct.

Research is key. For example:

¹The doping scheme, known as State Planning Theme 14.25, was conducted in alliance with the Stasi, the secret police. The issue of performance-enhancing drugs was known by the euphemism, "supporting means." Until the Berlin Wall fell, doping served its purpose. A country of only 17 million surpassed even the United States in the gold-medal count at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

The careful placing of that research is vital, getting the detail correct whilst enabling the story to move forward, demanding. Intricately placed exposition should introduce important background information to the audience; for example, information about the setting, events occurring before the main plot, characters' back stories, etc. Exposition doesn't call attention to itself. It simply is the world of the novel.

¹New York Times, 2001.

I tell my students how imagining and writing a voice from a factual series of events demands that the writer come equipped with an authority with which to seek out documents, places and former writings, before weaving a narrative from such fact.

In writing my novel I felt under scrutiny from every athlete who had been a part of the doping. I needed to get the politics, the place, the history, right. But I also had to imagine a character and a story into fictional life. However, before my protagonist could find her way through this maze of concealment, I had to go first and write it.

In April 1946, Erich Honecker was the Party Executive and Sec responsible for Sport. Under Honecker's rule, GDR politicians, scientists, sport trainers and the Stasi developed, honed and concealed their true purpose of this Sports plan under code names and deceit. They called it 'Supporting Means' and hailed the idea as a great way to get citizens healthy and proud to be in the GDR. Within this wall of lies the GDR carried out experimental engineering on children and young athletes, until they built an intricate systematic plan that could manufacture a master race in the arena of sport. The athletes' superhuman achievements were explained as a shining example of what their country could achieve within a communist manifesto.

My protagonist, Sophia, is a product of this master plan. In order to survive, she like my mother had to forget. However, in direct contrast with my mother, Sophia returns not only to her home town in the former GDR, but on her return she retraces her steps, and follows clues, breaking through her own barriers, her own borders – until she comes face to face with the girl she once was.

I wrote to Hajo Seppelt, a German Reporter who had written reports, even documented a series of interviews about GDR athletes. I wrote to Steven Ungerleider, author of *Faust's Gold*, a factual account of interviews with Brigitte Berendonk. From the Ungerleider archives in the University of Texas Austin, I found much needed documentation: secret informer meetings, doping lists, places, facts, names and addresses. Every athlete declined to respond. The 2009 Berlin World Athletic Championships resulted in stones being thrown at the windows of former GDR athletes who wanted their day in court and much needed financial aid and compensation for the myriad of illness they now faced: children born with defects, muscle and ligament pain, mental trauma, to name a few. They didn't want to add to their problems.

I flew to Berlin and walked the streets where I imagined Sophia living. I met Marcus Welsch, the film director whose documentary 'And I Thought I Was The Greatest?' about the GDR volleyball player Katharina Bullin was to be shown. I spoke two words to Katharina before she turned away. I wasn't from East Germany, therefore I couldn't understand. Her demeanour taught me more than any conversation. Her way of moving, her eyes, mouth, those big hands, so gentle to thank Marcus for all his efforts, were gold dust to me. She cycled off, telling us all how East Berlin was still home; far better than the Western side.

When I present my lecture on characterisation and the arc of the novel I talk about how characters must change. The writer can start with an impossibility of change, however, by the end of the novel a change should be worked out in partial or in full. The potential for change has to be there from the start as complexity and contradiction. A character of singular thought and process is unrealistic, one dimensional. Character is created through conflict and struggle that is conscious or semi-conscious, even dualistic. Characters are inconsistent, under scrutiny every solid character divides into bad/good/honest/dishonest. This is intimately related to the process of change. Consider the idea of an Achilles heel – a fatal flaw. Character is a process of unfolding.

Compartmentalised and afraid (at the start of the novel) to move forward, Sophia is also afraid to look back. She inhabits a place that is forever in-between, a place that defies historical or geographical change. Even though the start of the novel establishes that the Wall has been dismantled, psychologically Sophia is unable to register this fact.

In order to overcome the ‘walls in her head’ I wrote an event that forced Sophia to begin to change. A young girl, called Mia, comes to find her.

‘Something lumpy and awkward lay on the floor next to her door. No one delivered anything upstairs unless you paid. A flash of fear: had father come to leave something and fallen? But he never visited without arranging first. Plus he was in perfect health.

Keep the shape in sight. Creep up the last set of stairs. A curved outline, a slight body curled up fast asleep beside a bag. Step over the lumpen shape, reach for the bag – the shape moved. Quick. Move. Sophia jammed her knee into the intruder’s side, shoving her against the floor.

A child! The small shape gasped and tried to wriggle free.

“No you don’t.” Perhaps she should ease back? Allow the girl – she was definitely a girl (pink and purple fluffy jumper) – to sit up? Young, no more than thirteen at a guess. Brown hair, deep blue-grey eyes. A pale face: mouth opening like a baby bird.

“Don’t you dare scream.” Sophia yanked the girl’s arms up behind her as she searched the bag one handed. There’d be a knife or drugs – something sharp and dangerous.

“OW. Give it back.” The girl tried to stand, making a wild grab. “You’re hurting.”

“How did you get in?” Damn. If she questioned the girl there would be another report to write. She backed away, tossing the bag down the stairs. “Get out before I change my mind and arrest you.”

The girl jumped up and flew down the few steps and out the door. Thank goodness.

Heart racing, she sat on the top step. How the girl had managed to get in? Frau Weiner was ever vigilant. Never mind that now. Get inside, change and eat. Hang on. The child had left her rucksack behind. What to do? Run after her? Wait for the doorbell to ring? The bag was new: pale blue plastic with a clumsy purple flower print. A child's school satchel. The label said Intershop. If she placed it by the front door the girl could collect it, no need to see her, or listen to the inevitable pleading: my mother knew your mother, my uncle knew your aunty, blah blah.

During their scuffle a well-thumbed photo had fallen on the floor. Shove it in the bag.

Her mother's dead face stared back. No. What was this girl doing with a picture of her mother? It couldn't be, could it? This woman was old. Not her mother, someone with grey hair and permanently sad blue eyes. But there was that gentle downturned mouth, pursed into a tight line that suggested recent pain. On the back, written in a careful slanted hand: Dagmar Künstler, October 1989.'

With this uncomfortable companionship, she must return to a place she wanted to forget and find out who she was, and therefore, who she is now.

Even on her return, Sophia tries to separate her present life from her past. I wrote her suffering from a form of traumatic amnesia, a way to focus and explain her apparent lack of memory. Her bordered mind mental state needed careful layering as a way to inform the reader of a past she hardly knew, because she chose to forget.

In my teaching character I point to eight key areas:

1. Name symbolism.
2. Where the character exists in the world. How will this affect character and story?
3. Physical appearance, clothing, body language.
4. Internal thoughts. Who they think they are. This may be different from who we think they are.
5. What they say and how they say it. Verbal tick.
6. What the characters think about each other. Intimate permeations of thought. Private views. Sensations. Critical. Loving. All are partial views of a whole that is always changing. We exist in a web of reputation.
7. Each character shakes and wobbles, behaves out in character. Surprise establishes character.
8. Characters make mistakes, then change.

I say: don't let characters march as if in a masquerade, keep them real, and allow each one to read the other correctly, or incorrectly. People's motives are always questionable. Look at yourself in a spoon or kettle; we all warp under scrutiny. Character change is at the heart of empathic characterisation.

The name Sophia means wisdom. Yet when we meet her she is anything but wise. She is afraid, at the start of the novel, to move forward and, at the same time, afraid to look back. To add to her walled in mind-set, I wrote her as a Western police officer. Someone who followed a code, a certain set of rules, someone who is equipped with the necessary specialised skills and links, with which to search and find. But I wrote her inner world, her walled in rule-following police coda, as being only one side of the wall. The other side of the wall haunts her. The time long past that calls her is from when age thirteen she was given mass doses of anabolic steroids such as Mestanolone and Oral Turinobal that had such lifelong effects on the like of Andreas Krieger, formerly Heidi Krieger, champion GDR shot put thrower.

Like any addict Sophia craves that feeling of power and finds a semblance of that 'happy sexy steroid high' when she goes (in disguise) to nightclubs and buys drugs, seeking out the same boy from her training camp, by finding young men with blue eyes and a cruel mouth. These nightclub memories stay locked inside a small book, under the sharp knives, in her kitchen draw. The writing of her opposing characteristics took on a new dimension, when, in writing her as a young athlete, she told me how age 13 she would cut herself, as a way of keeping the fear of failure at bay. This way she could build a wall between herself and the circumstances she found herself in. The following excerpt wrote itself. At the time I felt I was no more than a conduit through which my character could speak.

'Glad to be alone, her body folded sideways on the narrow bench (feet high so no one would see them) Sophi relaxed into the smell of damp tiles, old urine and sweat. She let her head sink to her knees, waiting to make sure no one had noticed she'd stayed behind. The changing cubicle remained blissfully silent and warm, as if the narrow space was just for her. However, she was a child inside the body of a giant – and couldn't stretch out without either breaking through the door or reaching high over the cubicle wall.

She flexed her broad shoulders round and back, pulling back bone, moving thick muscle, as much as the space allowed; placed her feet on the floor. Next to her sat a box of plasters. Innocently skin-coloured, they were her secret companions, accompanying her where no one else could. Sophi lifted the box. Shook it gently. Only three left; somehow she'd have to get more. Her fingers were thick and clumsy as she fumbled to take one out. A prickle of tension began at the base of her neck and she reminded herself: it's all right – you're made of saltwater and speed: a torpedo under the waves, inside the tide you can move through water. You're a dark mermaid.

One of the cleaners had already moved to the men's changing room. Not long, she didn't have long. To her left, between the wall and the seat, was just enough space to keep and hide the blade. She wedged two fingers into the gap and the razor slid to her greedy fingers; ready to soothe, cut, let tension out.'

Throughout the novel Sophia and Mia are crossing mental and physical borders, searching for themselves. They tunnel into the story from different points looking for somewhere to belong, somewhere where their lives and their memories make sense. Ultimately, Mia is looking for her mother – and in a sense so is Sophia, whose mother-loss darkens every horizon and cannot be remedied.

Historical writing lives within a tension of bearing witness to past events: joyous or atrocious, before re-imagining a world; breathing life into the long ago in order for a present day reader to receive a story told through an authentic voice, a voice with all the immediacy of a believable character – as real as the girl, or boy next door. This place of creative imagining must hold, within it, the truth of history.

I was lucky to be allowed to visit Kienbaum, a former GDR sports complex near Berlin. Here, finally I had the chance to visit one of the main bases of the doping programme, and to see what was concealed – in this case under a wall of concrete.

There is nothing like walking the same path your fictional character may have walked. The sensory detail, vivid to the point of being surreal, captivates. My tour guide was less than enthusiastic. He wanted to show me the new complex, a world away from the nasty embarrassment underground. State of the art sauna, steam rooms, running track. A famous boxer, squeezed into acrylic purple shorts, his trunk-like chest bare, waved as we drove by. I made a promise to my absent friends; the ghostly athletes I was trying to represent. I would do them justice and write them into life as truthfully as I could, and show them in all their athletic glory, and frailty. I wouldn't exaggerate or fabricate the potentially sensational material.

As I climbed the nasty steep stair underground, I held Sophia firmly in my mind, and wrote:

'The entrance to the labyrinth looked just like any door to the back of a store. Sophia knew the column of windows played tricks with reality: the window-line remained horizontal whilst the passageway sloped steeply down to a hallway where stairs led your further into the ground. There was, she noted, the added option of a miniature, yet modern, lift.

They took the stairs, Sophia taking the torch from Mia to shine a circle of light on damp walls and icy steps. Somewhere in the darkness below, water dripped, a steady trickle whose lonely sound was reminiscent of her life in water. Now, even though they were

walking into danger, Sophia began to feel vital and alive. Here at last were the answers she needed. Eleven months ago the athletes would have been told to leave. Was she too late? The underground rooms may have been destroyed. If that were the case, would the staircase not have gone, she reasoned, conscious of falling back on her years of police experience to mitigate the sense of danger. The government had spent a fortune on wave pools, bikes, treadmills, surveillance cameras, treatment rooms and, of course, the Barochamber. They'd want to get all the equipment out first. Either way, if they were caught, she and Mia could be killed down here. If they were, they would be entombed, buried forever, and no one would ever know.

“Come on – if we're going?” The girl prodded her forward.

I'll look after her, Sophia promised her mother. I won't let her get hurt. She sensed all the fallen athletes were with her, floating in the musty air; all those young men and women who hadn't had a chance to escape.

“You were always such an idiot.” True to form Diertha's voice mocked, no doubt enjoying the spectacle of Sophia tripping on the stairs, swearing as she bumped into Mia. The hallway was dark and narrow, the smell of damp overwhelming. Mia's torch picked out mushrooming orange algae at the top and bottom edges of the wall.

At the end of the corridor, on their left, a narrow room had been split by a dirty mustard curtain. To their right a thick white metal panel lined the far wall. Each section was covered with buttons, gauges and dials. Tracing her hand along the wall, Sophia found the light switch. Overhead the strip-lights flickered on one by one, throwing shadows across the floor.

“Yuck, that's weird.” Mia stayed very close.

Crammed just below the ceiling, the 25 cm square monitor screens were there to display the athletes' heart rate as they cycled or ran on the treadmill. Each reading scrutinized in order to improve performance. The ghosts turned their faces towards the mustard curtain. Was whatever lay behind that drapery better seen alone?

“Is this what we're looking for?” Mia picked up a flag inscribed with ‘DTSB der DDR.’ “What does DTSB mean?”

“German Gymnastics and Sports Federation.” Sophia leaned over to get a better look at the various triangular gold, green, yellow, red and blue flags pinned to the wall. On the floor a poster soaked up damp.

She could just make out the features of ‘Swimmer Number Twenty-Five’, a pretty blonde girl who regularly appeared on a West German sports channel, a GDR star who’d swapped her swimsuit for a television microphone.

“Come on, nothing here.” With the flags and posters came the uncomfortable reminder of how much she’d wanted to be the very best.

“Everything smells of mushrooms or dead things.” Mia dropped the flag and followed her into the rest room with its black faux leather sofas arranged in a circular design. From here doors led off into different treatment areas.

The Barochamber hatch was the same cream colour, but there were more gauges, monitors and bolts surrounding the mean opening that led inside. Through a second portal on the far side, was a larger recovery area with soft chairs. Sophia’s nerves shimmered with panic. Enclosed inside the cramped room, the heavy sound of the bolt closing had made her believe each time that no one would ever open it. They were below twenty three feet of earth. Above them worms and beetles slid through the wet ground. There could be a landslide, a burst pipe, poisonous gas.

“Can I go in there? It looks like a prison cell.”

“Yes, okay. Sit inside if you want.” The girl climbed in as Sophia explained that, if the Barochamber were working, it would decrease oxygen and encourage Mia’s body to make more blood cells.

“But why?”

How could she but not warm to this irrepressible child? “To help you work even harder in the gym.”

Mia shook her head. “That’s so pointless,” she said, climbing out to follow Sophia through the double doors into the gym. “Didn’t you hate it?”

“Sometimes I loved it.”

Now Mia sat astride one of the fifteen training bikes neatly lined up along the left wall. Each bright blue metal frame supported a crossbar and handles. On the crossbar a yellow box with black wires linked the bike to sockets built into the wall. Metal screeched as the girl pedalled furiously, eyes glued to see whether the gauge moved.

“Mia, Stop!” The noise was unbearable. If someone had come in after them, they’d now know exactly where to look.

“Sorry.” Mia grinned and jogged across the dimly lit room to the first of the five running machines. Each treadmill was enclosed by three foot ply-board frames. Sheets of white plastic had been stapled over the cheap wood: above this peculiar design only Mia’s head and shoulders appeared as she bobbed up and down inside the oblong box. Even stranger was the heavy television set that had been fixed to the front bar so the athlete could watch TV while exercising. The girl was laughing, moving on the spot in an exaggerated slow motion run, but Sophia didn’t see Mia, she saw Ebbe, beautiful Ebbe, pitting his strength against the machine as a throng of athletes urged him on.

“Bugger off and leave me alone,” Sophia muttered.

“Sophia! Who are you talking to?” Mia’s face mirrored the white plastic. “Have those people found us. Is it my fault?”

Some athletes had escaped to the West; others had simply disappeared. Alive or dead none had been like Diertha: boiling up from the deep lake.’

In taking responsibility for the story, and staying true to Sophia, I didn’t write her as magically cured and living happily ever after. Ultimately, I was conscious of the many stories that made their way into my reading, by way of research: Andreas Krieger, formerly Heidi Krieger, Katharina Bullin, and Ines Geipel who stated in November this year how athletes are still suffering:

¹‘We are talking about serious organ damage, especially heart, lungs and liver. There are also cases of disabled children and many cancer illnesses, fat metabolism disorders and so on. Because of the steroids they took, they could train a lot more and for that reason the wear and tear on the body was much worse. We have cases of damaged backs, arthritis and damaged joints. But the saddest thing is the list of deaths continues to grow. These athletes are just dying. Recently, a former weightlifter Gerd Bonk, who was once celebrated as a hero, as the strongest man in the world, died due to multiple organ failure.’

I gave my protagonist an opportunity, no more, no less, the possibility of change. At the end, when she has faced all manner of horrors, she could step away from the old pathology to a new place, a place where her father and the old GDR hold little sway. A place where she and Mia could be whoever they wanted to be.

¹<http://www.dw.de/the-victims-of-east-germanys-doping-program-are-still-suffering/a-18038630>. Accessed - 06.11.2014

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