



Telling tales: Helen Demidenko and the autobiographical pact & The Pact.

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## Description

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## Abstract

As arguably the most notorious liar in contemporary Australian literature, Helen Demidenko has been the subject of hundreds of articles, and at least four books. Her 1995 novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* had already won three literary prizes and attracted significant critical attention due to its controversial subject matter, when her fraudulent identity was revealed.

The critical section of this thesis draws out the implications of the 'Demidenko Affair' by exploring Philippe Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact, genre theory and contemporary book promotion and marketing practices.

Using Gerard Genette's notion of paratexts, and Stanley Fish's idea of interpretive communities, I argue that many reviewers of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* read the novel as though it was an autobiography, and that this reading position contributed to the vehemence of the condemnation its author received when her fraudulent identity 'Helen Demidenko' was revealed. I use genre theory to analyse the tendency to 'read autobiographically', which emerges from a cultural context which includes the growing popularity of non-fiction books and the prevalence of book promotion strategies which draw on the author's persona to lend credence to their book.

The creative section of this thesis has a narrator who shares much of my biography: she is around the same age, grew up in the same area as I did and has a similar name.

When she returns to her hometown after a decade-long absence and reunites with old friends, she discovers that the story she has told herself about her past is only one version of events. The exploration of a notionally autobiographical theme is overlaid by a fictional narrative structure which enables an ambiguous rendering of the 'identity' of author, narrator and protagonist proposed by Lejeune.

## Keywords

Helen Darville; Helen Demidenko; Hand that signed the paper; autobiographical fiction; authorship; creative writing; genre theory

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