

## Guest Editorial:

# Preface to “A Strange and Earnest Client” Part One of The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery

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*Ladies and gentlemen, the story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent (mytvmemories, 2012).*

This phrase, so familiar it long ago lapsed into cliché and parody, announced the beginning of every episode of the long-running, and decidedly un-ironic, police procedural television series *Dragnet*. I revive it now, in its original earnestness to maintain that the story that I am introducing in this editorial is true as well. The story is part one of a serialized publication of my PhD thesis - a hermeneutic exploration of the educational category of slow learner written as a hard-boiled detective novel in the style of Raymond Chandler (1888-1959). It is essentially a fictionalized and stylized narrative of my ongoing journey (through research and direct experience) into special education thought and practice as it pertains to students named “slow learners” and, more broadly at times, to educational classification and sorting. If the story has “worked,” the narrative should largely imply some justification for this approach. In this editorial, I articulate why I chose to present hermeneutic phenomenological research in this way. In my candidacy exam, I was asked about the hermeneutic warrant for presenting research in this way and my response, after invaluable participation and augmentation from my doctoral supervisor Dr. Jim Field as a co-author, was published as a paper in this journal (Williamson & Field, 2014). This was a fruitful exercise as it helped me develop the set of hermeneutic principles that I tried to follow in composing the story as well as yielding several insights that made their way into the final novelization in fictionalized form. I return to some of the themes to offer the main hermeneutic warrant for this form of presentation in a piece of writing that stands alone as an introduction to Part One of the novelization. It is also an opportunity to reflect back on the hermeneutic warrant for the piece as a completed work, a vantage only available upon completion.

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## Speculation

In the Williamson and Field original paper, it was discussed how, while often imbued with artistic truth, fictional writing obviously surrenders some amount of what might be considered truth as correspondence. What is gained in this surrender is an abundance of speculation, an essential and life-giving characteristic of all acts of communication (Gadamer, 2004, p. 452) as well as those of imagination (Gough, 2008, p. 338). Speculative flights of fancy help us see and understand differently and they occasion discoveries. Speculation has been responsible for philosophical thought experiments that have helped us re-examine our behaviour and moral intuitions. Singer (2009), for example, speculatively equated the reluctance of many in the developed world to do very much to help starving populations on the other side of the world with an urban citizen who encounters a child drowning in a shallow pond and willingly ruins a new pair of shoes to wade in and save the child. In doing so, he asks why if we would readily sacrifice the value of a pair of shoes to save a life in this situation, so few of us contribute this same monetary amount that we would spend on a new pair of shoes (which he calculates could go a long way in providing for an impoverished child) to eradicate the epidemic of extreme poverty across the world (pp. 1-5). Mary Shelley, in a query that continues to haunt bioethical reckoning, wondered what the consequences would be if a brilliant scientist usurped the power of creation (Srouf, 2008). Beyond these tests of moral principles, Einstein, as a generative scientist wondered impossibly if he could chase a light beam at the speed of light in a vacuum, whether the light would appear still or oscillating to him, and in this thought experiment found “the germ of the special relativity theory” (Norton, 2004).

In this particular circumstance, the issue in need of re-imagining is primarily a moral one. It involves a psychological category of students who cognitive tests (that the education system endorse as sacrosanct) evaluate as below average in full-scale intelligence and in need of additional support to succeed in school. Despite this evaluation, slow learners are a group of students for whom the education system in Alberta has ironically failed to provide any of the funding and support it offers other categories of students said to have exceptional needs.

It is true that a special education/inclusive education system that claims to support students in reaching their full potential, but that often results in social exclusion and negative self-fulfilling prophecies has been often been a topic of more (ostensively) traditional academic research (e.g., Armstrong, 2012; Couture, 2012; Gilham, 2013; Graham & Slee, 2008). Though roughly conforming to expectations of standard academic formatting, much of this work is troubling, insightful, and highly original and I found several texts about the excesses and deficiencies of special education/inclusive education systems indispensable to my project. When it came to my particular topic, and my unique relationship to it, however, it was felt that much more could be “unconcealed” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 147) via an additional speculative turn. As framed in the previous paper, this speculation was “what would happen if we perceived and treated mysterious gaps in programming for students the same way we treat hard-boiled mysteries involving crimes such as homicide, or in this particular case, missing persons?” What understandings might this occasion?” (Williamson & Field, 2014, p.15).

### **Mysteries, Hermeneutic and Hard-boiled**

The concept of mystery is integral to this speculation, and is, indeed frequently discussed in hermeneutic philosophy (e.g., Caputo, 1987; Davey, 2006; Gadamer, 2004). Mystery, a word that means and/or has meant, “religious truth via divine revelation, hidden spiritual significance, mystical truth, secret rites, secret worship, to close or shut, a trade or craft, a secret or hidden thing, and most recently, a detective story,” (Harper, 2001) fits very naturally into the philosophy of interpretation, the philosophy devoted to the humble and reverent study of the endless interpretability of the life-world. “Mystery” is a rejoinder of the tendency toward positivism in the human/psychological/social sciences, a way of thinking that finds certainty in its knowledge claims through the reduction of the contamination of human complexity and through the disavowal of any kinship between the researcher and the studied (Jardine, 1998). It is this positivism that can turn a concept like slow learner, arguably a useful tentative description of a certain style of academic struggle potentially leading to a set of assistive possibilities to explore in practice into a categorical enclosure that entraps student, his or her school career, and the staff that work with this student (Mehan, Herweck, & Meihls, 1986). Remarking on the difference between the interpretive and positivistic way of thinking, Ricoeur scholar, Blundel (2010), has noted

A problem can be laid in front of me and examined at my leisure. A mystery on the other hand is something in which I am unavoidably implicated. It is not laid out in front of me but rather encompasses me in such a way that I find myself inside of it. (p. 60)

This novelization also sought to integrate the philosophy of the hard-boiled detective with a hermeneutic appreciation of mystery. This is not a difficult integration as the concept of “hard-boiled” functions not so much as an addition to hermeneutic thought, but more as a tool with which to affect a slight dusting off of hermeneutics to reveal something that was elemental all along. Hard-boiled detective took a genre that had previously been characterized by quaint, though often well crafted, puzzle games that did little to speak to the deeper human experience or challenge the existing social order (Williamson & Field, 2014), and adjusted its outlook to reveal corruption, inequity, moral complexity, and something dark, tragic, and ultimately unknowable beneath all the provisional case resolutions. Similarly, as Caputo (1987) has reminded us, the function of hermeneutics is not to make our problems easier to deal with, like a benign and forgettable detective story might distract us from the worries of the day or like the reduction of teaching to a few sterilely understood techniques might distract us from pondering our awesome responsibilities as educators, but to “offer a reading of life...that restores life to its original difficulty” (p.1).

Beyond those which I that have already described, we will leave the reader to discover which hard-boiled difficulties related to this topic that the work unconceals. One thing I can reveal without spoiling any of the surprises, however, is something unexpected, and hard-boiled, that happened to me after I completed the work. I had during most of the writing held my topic, the category of “slow learner” in some ambivalence, thinking that even as it did not provide access to formal services, and even as it did sometimes result in self-fulfilling prophecies, that it at least pointed concerned educators in the direction of some students who needed support. But during my oral examination I was asked if the category “slow learner” held any continuing relevance in conversations about supporting students, inclusively, in Alberta’s schools. Before I knew it, I

heard myself saying “no” and then providing an explanation that I do not remember the details of but that an exam committee member told me basically suggested I’d like to see the category “blown up/destroyed.” Like the leaps that detectives make, how and when I came to this intuition is still a mystery to me. While I had thought that during this journey I might discover many things to confirm my ambivalence about the label, I could not have predicted that, in the words of Gadamer (2004), beyond my “wanting and doing” (p. xxvi), this work would lead me to this realization. I remain curious if readers will feel similarly. This hard-boiled intuition certainly has not made life any easier for me, as I continue to witness this label function as a currency in schools.

### **A Note on Rigor**

Researchers considering non-traditional approaches to presenting applied hermeneutic phenomenological research may be interested to note that, at least in my case, the approach called us toward rigor instead of away from it. A part of this was simply the pragmatic urgency to fight the inevitable perception that a member of the supervisory committee expressed memorably and candidly when he warned that readers might develop the prejudice that this “was just screwing around with a detective story.” Beyond this, however, the two masters of hermeneutics and hard-boiled mystery writing constantly pulled me in the direction of finding more difficulty, more messiness, and more uneasy interpretability in “The Case of the Appearing/Disappearing Slow Learner.” From January of 2011 when I first arrived at the idea of approaching the research this way to April of 2015 when it was submitted, I researched, wrote, and rewrote this novelization in daily writing sessions, often experienced as grueling. In terms of sources, hard-boiled hermeneutics pushed me to interview eight teachers, administrators, or curriculum leaders, and twice interview a small class of four students who were labelled as slow learners. I drew on 18 years of experiential data as a teacher as well as experiential data from being a student with a learning disability and parent of a child with a disability. I studied disability history going back to medieval times, 100 years of programming for slow learners in Alberta, and the most current (at the time) educational reforms in Alberta and their relationship to slow learners and Inclusive Education. I reviewed and interpreted depictions of slow learners in popular media including the films *Forrest Gump*, and *Being There*, and the novel *Lottery* and read all the primary texts (Alberta education documents, manuals for teachers, psychology texts) I could access about the supposed characteristics and needs of slow learners as well as related disabilities including learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (2004) have both reminded us that a complete view of any scene is never possible, in part because different vantages unconceal different phenomenon, but I would like to think that at least from the vantages this particular approach provided that I, like the gumshoes in the novels that inspired me, left relatively few stones unturned.

### **How the Novelization Works**

The narrative strategy used to present the research in this novelization involves depicting a version of myself, exploring my true concerns with exaggerated angst, in the role of a special education coordinator who hires a detective to find this category of students that the narrative claims have been lost. I explored my more critical side through the character of the incredulous detective, who plays the role of the provocateur, making observations and asking questions about

educational categorization, disability, and bureaucratic process. Additional characters include informants to my research, whose names, indeed, have been changed, even as I tried to faithfully represent their actual beliefs about, and roles in, the educational drama of slow learners. It is with less verisimilitude that I, under their real names, people the story with various writers and thinkers who have guided my quest. By and large, the thoughts they express on this topic are my own hermeneutic appropriations – applications of their philosophy to topics they did not have opportunity to comment on more directly. Additional characters include villainous personifications of the toxic institutional discourses and practices that I claim have led to the disappearance of slow learners.

As mentioned, the story is written to, as closely as possible, resemble a hard-boiled detective fiction novel. To preserve narrative flow, there is an avoidance of parenthetical references, instead opting for footnoting to acknowledge the intellectual property of sources, demonstrate the robustness of the research, and, occasionally, to provide more elaboration on a particular theme than the action of the narrative would allow. Whether the reader approaches these footnotes as a part of the first reading of the narrative, or reviews them later, I hope that they provide adequate conversation of the research that guided the interpretations of the larger narrative.

### **Publication and Serialization**

When I began to explore the possibilities for finding an appropriate publisher for my work, the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* stood out to me because of its history of publishing eclectic and often provocative hermeneutic scholarship. Since its inaugural issue in 2011, this journal has provided readers the opportunity to engage with the theorizing of esteemed hermeneutic philosophers such as Richard Kearney and Nicholas Davey, leaders in the enterprise of bringing the wisdom of hermeneutics into professional practice such as David Jardine and Nancy Moules, and a very wide range of intriguing applications of hermeneutics (for e.g., discourses of dementia, hermeneutic understandings of oncology, the value of specialized summer camps for children with cancer, genuine school inclusion of students with diagnosed behavioral disabilities, First Nations education, and applications of Buddhism to nursing).

Feeling that it might be overwhelming to the reader to open and engage with an entire novel, replete with academic footnotes, all at once, especially considering that readers often engage with digital copies of the journal's articles, I considered the possibility of releasing it in several editions. I have always been intrigued with the Victorian tradition of serialized novels and how it mirrored my own experiences as a child (before technologies allowed for binge watching) awaiting new episodes of my favourite television shows, particularly the "cliff hangers" that usually marked the end of one season and the painful wait for the next. I have also had similar feelings awaiting new releases of my favourite film franchises, and, returning more closely to the subject at hand, the newest novels by my favourite hard-boiled detective fiction authors, with the fresh hard-boiled dilemmas these works are sure to place in the familiar, oft put upon, character. With the advent of on-line technologies, I have learned that the serialized novel is experiencing something of a re-emergence. Its popularity is coming from the ground up with amateur writers of fan fiction realizing unparalleled popularity with their serialized releases (Streitfield, 2014), but also in new forms such as the serialized web comic *Homestuck*, which is garnering millions of followers as well as favorable critical comparison to *Ulysses* for its depth and complexity

(Knode, 2012). Additionally several prominent publishers are exploring serialized publication for their latest novels (Alter, 2013). I proposed the possibility of a serialized release to the journal's editor and was honored when this idea was favorably received. In a further innovation, Dr. Moules suggested we seek out the scholars from my committee, all important voices in applied hermeneutics or disability studies, and inquire if they would be interested in writing editorial introductions to frame and contextualize each new release. I was elated when all of them agreed, and feel that the commentaries these scholars will provide are as much cause for excitement and anticipation as the various parts of the novelization.

### **A Warning**

Brace yourself for this journey. As Detective Max Hunter remarks the mystery of the appearing/disappearing slow learner was, and is, a messy case and one that requires hard-boiled resilience. The world of educational classification can be dark and, in its own way, violent. Be careful, however, not to become too hard-boiled as readers. The best operatives realize that, though it makes for greater suffering, a keen sense of empathy is not a weakness; it is an essential tool of the trade. There are, after all, missing persons to find.

### **Note from Journal of Applied Hermeneutics editor, Dr. Nancy Moules**

It is with excitement and the experience of privilege that we welcome the work of Dr. John Williamson in presenting his doctoral thesis in "instalments" in the journal, trusting that we capture the integrity of the mystery and rigor of his important doctoral research. This work won the 2015 University of Calgary Chancellor's Graduate Medal. In future instalments as we engage in this hermeneutic mystery, we will offer, as editorial comment, reflections from the scholars who informed and vetted this work.

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