

# **FOOTWORK**

A Novel

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing  
The Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

**Danielle Brett Potter**

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Coordinator, MFA in Writing  
University of Saskatchewan  
Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity  
College of Arts and Science  
Room 509  
9 Campus Drive  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 5A5

## ABSTRACT

My thesis is a contemporary realistic novel using alternating perspectives. *Footwork* explores the modern day-to-day struggles and temptations that face monogamous relationships. How do we negotiate truth within society and expectations that others have of us? What are the deals we make with ourselves and each other in order to live within society? *Footwork* examines how truth and pain interact. Does truth always have to come forward at the cost of pain? There are three books that represent the contemporary cannon where *Footwork* could be situated. *Infidelity* by Stacey May Fowles encompasses alternate perspectives and deals with an affair as the central theme. *Love and the Mess We're In* by Stephen Marche focuses on two perspectives of an affair and much of the book uses dialogue with the characters' inner thoughts also written. Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* concentrates on a dysfunctional family, infidelity and is primarily dialogue. All three novels explore realistic portrayals of truth and infidelity. *Footwork* goes further by examining the intricacies of how people deal with deception and also forces the reader to have an emotional reaction. One of the ways this emotional reaction is achieved is by *Footwork* primarily being written in dialogue form. The dialogue encourages the reader to become emotionally invested in the characters' struggles. The novel does not employ flashbacks, but instead focuses on the immediacy of the characters' lives to create a story authentic to contemporary relationships. *Footwork* also uses alternating perspectives as a device to make the reader question which character he/she should be fighting for or against. All the characters have motives for why and how they deceive. The reader understands one character's perspective only to be challenged by another character's perspective. All three main characters at the end of *Footwork* find and/or speak their truth despite the pain that is inflicted.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my supervisor and program coordinator, Dr. Jeanette Lynes, a person who cares very deeply about her students. She made this journey both a profound pleasure and a challenging quest.

The Writing in MFA, we are truly blessed to have this program in Saskatoon.

My mentor, Sandra Birdsell, who has the remarkable ability to observe, ask questions and make just enough space to allow you to see where you need to go next in your work.

My peers in the MFA in Writing program, who provided insightful feedback and inspired me with their own writing.

Tennessee Williams for writing *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

My father, Leslie Potter, who with his huge heart has always told me to follow my dreams and who inspires me every day with the art and music he creates and shares with the world.

My dear friend, Vince Bruni-Bossio, who encouraged me to go to university, taught me how to find my truth and has been an unwavering support for me to write. He gives away some of his best ideas helping people brainstorm and some of those are in this novel.

All of my friends and family who have helped me through this time, with words of encouragement, listening to ideas and patiently asking when they can read my book.

And last, but not least, I thank the prairie sky. A continuous source of reflection and truth can be found in the vastness and beauty of it.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My thesis is a dramatized realistic novel about the intricacies of relationships and desire called *Footwork*. I call it realistic because one of the central themes of the novel explores aspects of truth. I wrote it with the intention of trying to capture the authenticity of contemporary relationships. I call it dramatized because it's heightened. Each scene focuses on characters going after what they want. This is what people do in life. People are always playing an action in their interactions with others. Dramatized also refers to the sense that *Footwork* reads almost like a play or screenplay. Therefore dramatized relates back to drama and making sure that each chapter involves a struggle or conflict. In other words, each character in the scene has an objective and an obstacle to attaining that objective.

*Footwork* is primarily dialogue and focuses on the interplays between the three main characters. My intent is for the reader to feel immediacy for the characters and their struggles. The way I felt best able to achieve this was to make dialogue and conversations between the characters the most prominent part of the book. Michael Kardos describes the role of dialogue in *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, "Dialogue carries meaning. It moves the story forward, or reveals character. It never does nothing.... That's because fiction is a concentrated, highly focused version of reality, and dialogue a concentrated form of speech" (70). I believe that fiction being a 'highly focused version of reality' is one of the most important components and the best way to accomplish this is to focus on dialogue.

There are three books that represent the contemporary cannon where *Footwork* could find a home. All three books would also fit into the category of a dramatized realistic novel. *Infidelity* by Stacey May Fowles encompasses different perspectives, deals with an affair as the central theme and takes place in Toronto. *Love and the Mess We're In* by Stephen Marche focuses on two perspectives of an affair and much of the book uses dialogue with the characters' inner thoughts written beside. Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper* concentrates on a dysfunctional family, is primarily dialogue and was made into a movie. All these books would also transfer easily to film as *The Snapper* did in 1993.

My desire to write three compelling people came from a decision to create characters I would want to act. This allowed me to envision the characters from an acting perspective. Part of my research has been to read novels that were made into films. Were they successful? If so, why? If not, why? Who wrote the screenplay? The author or a hired writer? Some of the books and films I studied in this regard were; *Gone Girl*, *Fault in Our Stars*, *Before I go to Sleep*, *One Day* and *The Snapper*. I plan to try and get *Footwork* published and after I will write it into a screenplay. Then I will decide who I would cast in the film version and go knocking on some Hollywood stars' doors and say, 'here's a great script, with a good part for you, help me get it produced.' I know how hard it is to find a good story as an actor, especially as a female actor once you are in your thirties. I wrote *Footwork* with this intention in mind and part of my process was imagining how the story would transfer to the screen.

One of the main reasons I undertook the MFA is that I wanted to discover how to meld everything I've learned as an actor into writing. I had the good fortune to be raised by two artists and grow up in what was essentially a studio in the country. The home was (and still is) open concept, which meant the kitchen, living area and studio all blended into each other. It was not uncommon for my mother to position her latest painting in a place where she could look at it

while we were eating. I had the freedom at a very early age to explore any and all art forms. I trained in dance, music, and art, but eventually found a love in acting and writing one-woman shows which I toured across the Fringe Festivals for three years. I moved to Toronto when I was eighteen and continued my training and worked professionally until my early thirties.

I became an actor because I wanted to explore what it means to be human. I was fascinated about the choices people made in life depending on their character, how they were raised and life events. The ability to observe is also a skill necessary for being a good writer. Kardos says that as a writer you should hone “your ability to closely observe and carefully consider *everything*, taking nothing for granted” (4).

Acting and writing are not that different. *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* is a concise and clear description of how to act and many actors refer to it as a guide. The book sums up acting perfectly in one sentence, “Acting is living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of a play” (8). To me, writing is the same concept. I want to write truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of a story. The art of analysing a play and a character and the art of writing characters and a story encompass many similarities. The major difference is that as a writer, you are creating a story and as an actor you are acting out a story that has already been created. Also, a writer takes on the whole story and all of the characters, whereas an actor is primarily focusing on one character, although still has to have an understanding of all of the other characters and the script as a whole. It was a natural progression for me to use what I had learned as an actor and transpose that as a writer.

Much of my training and experience as an actor involved analysing a script or ‘breaking it down.’ This was done by finding a through-action, an action in each scene and finally mini-actions or beats. A through-action or super-objective is “The single overriding action that encompasses all the actions an actor pursues from scene to scene, from the beginning of the play to the end” (Bruder 88). An action is “The physical pursuance of a specific goal” (Bruder 87). People play actions all the time. In every interaction we have with another humans being we want something from them and they want something from us. We may not be conscious of it, but it is there. If you watch two people interact you can see it their body movements. Uta Hagen in *A Challenge for the Actor* puts it like this, “I have stated that an action must be designated by an active verb. If ‘I want to convince you’ to come over to my side of the argument, I might achieve my objective if I try to persuade, or to bully, to coax, or to implore you to do so” (282). The best example I can give is when you watch a child try to get something he or she wants from a parent, like a toy. I worked in a couple of stores that sold children’s toys and I was continually amazed at the actions or tactics a child could come up with and commit to until he or she finally got what they wanted. Children know when something does not work and they have no reservations about moving on to the next action. A child will ask, plead, demand, reason, bargain, justify, pout, accuse, charm and if all else fails will throw a tantrum.

Like the child wanting a toy, the important part of acting is to always play a positive want. One of the reasons *The Godfather* was so successful was because Marlon Brando played the character as a man who did everything (including killing people) for the love of his family. That character was not written to be sympathetic. Respected actor and teacher, Uta Hagen, in *Respect for Acting*, says to make sure to “work positively. Don’t search for what the character won’t or wouldn’t do. But what he might or must do” (189). All actors in a scene (if they are good) should be going after a positive want and playing to be successful the entire time, even if

they know that at the end of the scene they will not get what they want. Another example is Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* and how the play "is not about three sisters who didn't make it to Moscow; it's about fighting like hell to get there all through the play" (Shurtleff 42). This is what creates tension, excitement and drama.

No matter how a script is written and what the outcome is at the end of the scene, each actor in the scene must play for win. In *A Passion for Narrative* Jack Hodgins describes this in terms of writing, "In key scenes we often witness people having a conversation in which each tries to get something out of the other, each tries to come out a winner in a competition" (113). I believe this should be true in every scene and not just the 'key' ones. In every scene, every character should be written to play the scene to win. It can be subtle or the character can be disheartened, but he or she must still be fighting for what they want.

Stella Adler, a renowned actor and teacher says that "An action should be broken up into smaller actions or steps" (38). These smaller actions are sometimes referred to as beats. And it is an actor's job to go through the script and break each scene into these beats. *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* describes it best:

A beat is a single unit of action, and a beat change is the point where a new action begins. A beat change occurs when a new piece of information is introduced or an event takes place over which the character has no control and which by its very nature must change what he is doing. (23)

When I went to write I employed the same principals. What is each character's through-line in the novel or their overall want, what are they shooting for? What is each character's action in each scene? What are the beats in each scene and how is each character going about getting what they want?

There are three main influences for *Footwork* and all three authors are known as playwrights first. The first author is Anton Chekov. I read, watched and performed his plays, but it was not until I took my first university class in my early thirties that I read one of his short stories. I studied *The Lady with the Dog* and it has stayed with me. It is a story about affairs, love and finding truth. Similar to what I tried to achieve in *Footwork*.

John Patrick Shanley is another playwright who I studied and performed. He is also a screenwriter and wrote the screenplay for the 1988 film *Moonstruck* starring Cher, Nicholas Gage and Olympus Dukakis. The film won three Academy Awards. Like many of Shanley's works, *Moonstruck* has an almost lyrical or poetic sensibility and language to it, but also is situated in real life. *Moonstruck* and *Footwork* have similarities in themes. *Moonstruck* examines choices people make regarding love and life. The main character is engaged to the older brother and falls in love with younger brother. There is also a focus on family dynamics and much of the movie takes place in the kitchen.

My primary influence was *A Street Car Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. After going for a very long lunch with my mentor, Sandra Birdsell, I realized that the first story I was writing was not working and did not excite me. I came home from Regina and knew I had to start from scratch, which meant throwing out over a hundred pages and coming up with new characters and a new story. I strongly believe that this is part of the artistic process, the willingness to throw it all away and start fresh. In that sense, nothing is lost, because everything you did led you to the point where you are now. I tried to recall stories that I felt held up over time and remained passionate and relevant. *Streetcar* was the first that came to mind.

The play is made up of complex and contradicting characters and is set entirely in a two-room apartment. *Streetcar* explores truth, desires, family and transgressions of domestic space. The play encompassed the triangle of love I wanted to explore. Stanley and Stella are married and Stella's destitute older sister (Blanche) comes to stay. There is an immediate attraction between Stanley and Blanche. At one point in the play Stanley says to Blanche, "If I didn't know you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you" (Williams 41). I knew that I needed to come up with a story as quickly as possible and I decided to study *Streetcar* to understand why it worked. I looked at the actions of the characters in each scene and the arch of the plotline. I did something I have never done. I made an outline. It was a painful and difficult experience for me. I resist form and would rather have the characters tell me where they want to go. But I knew if I was going to write eighty pages in ten days and send it to Sandra, if I was going to start over, I had to know where I was going. I decided to loosely base my story on *Streetcar*. I pay homage to Williams in *Footwork* in chapter nineteen where I have Steve reading *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and chapter twenty-one when he accuses Carina of having no shortage of 'gentleman callers' and Carina makes reference to Williams.

*Streetcar* takes three characters and forces them to interact in a very tight space. I wanted to put characters in a confined space and see what would happen. *Footwork* takes place in modern day Toronto and focuses on Gemma and Carina (sisters) and Steve (married to Gemma). There becomes a negotiation of space and boundaries. Trespasses of space are explored in the novel. For instance the living room converts into a bedroom and Cara sleeps everywhere in the house, (so does Steve to some extent). The security of the home as a domestic space is disturbed. The characters experience domestic claustrophobia. Charles Baxter in *The Art of Subtext* says that "In some respects, plot springs directly from our characters' desires or their fears and what they are willing to do to fulfill those desires or to avoid the objects of their fears" (35). I used the story from *Streetcar* as a base and then I let the desires and fears of Gemma, Carina and Steve speak to me.

The novel is called *Footwork* for a variety of reasons. Steve has a foot fetish, Cara expresses herself through her feet and Gemma is finding her feet. Each character is at a crossroads and could go either left or right. They all find themselves in situations where they will need some fancy footwork to get out of them. When dance is performed on stage, dancers go to the front and then blend into the back. The characters dance around each other. Lastly, sometimes we need to take a couple of steps backwards to take a step forward.

I took a couple steps back to take a step forward when I decided to throw my first story away and start over again. I needed to be honest with myself about what my strengths and weaknesses were in terms of craft because time was limited. I have weaknesses in the area of plot and setting and my strengths are dialogue, characterization and dramatic tension. As already stated, for the first time in my life I made myself write an outline of the plot. I knew it would be the only way for me to be able to write in the amount of time I had left. I wanted to have the action fast paced and I had to know what each character was going after in each scene and what direction they were headed. Kardos talks about the importance of structure for the reader, "A story without structure might intrigue us at first with its situation or characters. Before long, however, it loses focus. We're reading a scene and wondering, Why am I reading this scene? Or the plot takes a turn that feels unmotivated or strains credibility" (89). I will probably always



resist the notion of doing an outline, but it proved to be invaluable to me. It gave me the freedom to explore the characters more, because I did not have to worry about their next move.

Setting became a difficult problem for me. Sandra Birdsell encouraged me in the first story I wrote to make sure that I situated the characters. She told me that without the reader understanding where the characters are, it is hard for them to imagine the scene. Kardos says something similar, “The fundamental purpose of setting is to present a believable and vivid world for the reader to imagine” (49). I knew I had to write about a world I was already familiar with and so I chose to set the story in Toronto. Toronto became an obvious choice because I lived there for eighteen years and knew it well. Another benefit of having the story set in Toronto is that I could explore some of the multiculturalism that I fell in love with when I lived there. This can be seen in Steve’s parents emigrating from Ireland and buying a house in Corktown and then moving back to Ireland because they got homesick, but their children choosing to stay in Canada. Gemma and Carina’s mom grew up in Italy and moved to Toronto as a teenager. I allowed myself not to get too caught up in elaborate setting descriptions. I quickly understood that this was going to be a novel focused primarily on the interactions of the main characters.

My main strength is my ability to write dialogue. Kardos discusses the importance of dialogue, “It’s fundamental because it happens in real time, is immediate, and is particularly useful in revealing the personalities of our characters” (73). This was how most of the book was written. I took my outline and looked at who was in the scene and what I needed to happen and I wrote only dialogue. I concentrated on the exchanges between the characters, what was being said and what was not being said. What each character wanted from the other. I knew where they were, I could visualize their movements, but I waited to fill in all of the character tags and the setting until I was happy with the dialogue. Sometimes I would speak it out loud to make sure the characterization was truthful. When it came time to fill in the actions, I would often physically place myself in the position of the character and say the line to see what they would do.

I trained and worked professionally for many years as an actor. I was taught to live and breathe the characters I was playing, to know everything about them; what they want, what frightens them, what they ate for breakfast, what happened to them when they were five, what their favorite song is and what was in their junk drawer. Good characterization is the difference between a character that stays with you – a character you feel you know or could meet and a character who is not believable or real. I did detailed work for the characterization of the three main characters. I wrote dozens of monologues for them, asked every question I could think of about them and tried to understand and communicate their essence. King says that “every character you create is partly you. When you ask yourself what a certain character will do given a certain set of circumstances, you’re making the decision based on what you yourself would do. Added to these versions of yourself are the character traits, both lovely and unlovely, which you observe in others” (191-92). Every part I played as an actor had a part of me from which I formed a living and breathing person, this is the same way I approached writing characters in *Footwork*.

One of the reasons *Streetcar* remains such a profound piece of literature is the constant dramatic tension throughout the play. Every moment seems alive with possibilities. I wanted to create a story that kept the reader compelled. I wanted the reader to become emotionally invested in what would happen next. All of the dramatic tension had to come from the struggles and complications of the actions and choices the characters make. I also decided to stay away from

flashbacks and instead focus on the immediacy of what the characters are living in to create a story that moved in a fast pace and compelled the reader. Orson Scott Card in *Characters & Viewpoints* talks about the risk of flashbacks, “If we’re well rooted in the story if we know enough and care enough about the character for the flashback to be important to us, then it can work very well. But it still has a serious cost. It stops the present action” (146). *Footwork* opens with Gemma texting which immediately sets the tone. It is an in-the-present moment story about contemporary life.

After I had written an outline, the next major problem was point of view. I knew I wanted to tell the story in third person limited because I felt it was the best way to create the emotional immediacy I was after. Card relates how this works, “Even though most third-person accounts are told in past tense, they feel quite immediate. There is not necessarily any sense of the narrator remembering the events. They are recounted as they are experienced. There is no distance in time” (193). He also says that a limited third- person narrator will get “your readers emotionally involved with your main characters, with minimal distraction” (212). In a movie or a play point of view does not matter. But when you are writing a book you need to decide how to tell it. In the outline I knew the only character I could tell the whole story from was Steve.

I had reservations about writing the whole story from one character’s perspective because I felt that all three main characters should have a chance to tell their story. I finally arrived at telling the first third of the story from Gemma’s point of view, then Steve’s and finally Carina’s. The decision to write the three perspectives is because I want the reader to learn about the motivations behind each character so they could understand and hopefully relate to them more. But I also wanted the reader to be angry at times at all three characters. Each character has a secret and there are no easy answers.

Some of the books I studied that were told in alternate perspectives were Caroline Anderson’s *Ellen in Pieces*, Sandra Birdsell’s *Waiting for Joe*, Emily Chenoweth’s *Hello Goodbye*, Paul Coelho’s *Veronika Decides to Die*, Tish Cohen’s *The Truth about Delilah Blue* and Christos Tsiolkas’s *The Slap*. These books all explore different perspectives, although I was unable to find a book that did only three perspectives in a continuous fashion as I used for a structure in *Footwork*. Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, breaks the book into two perspectives of a married couple and makes the reader question the truth and motivations behind each character. Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* and Anne Lazuko’s *Dollybird* use two perspectives as well, but alternate back and forth between the two characters.

What is the story about? Stephen King says to ask “why you bothered – why you spent all that time, why it seemed so important. In other words, what’s it all about?” (201). *Footwork* is essentially about truth. When truth is told, no matter the pain it may cause, it allows the potential for change or hope. In my thesis I wanted to examine what it means to be true to the heart. What is the cost, the fallout? How do we negotiate truth within society and expectations that others have of you? What are the sacrifices that are made? What does it mean to be truthful? What does it mean to follow your truth? What happens when you speak truth? Is it better to live a lie and not hurt someone you love? Part of the enjoyment of writing is the ability to examine people in all of who they are. Baxter puts it like this, “Fiction is that place where human beings do not have to be better than they really are, where characters can and should confront each other, where they must create scenes, where desire will have its day, where all truth is beautiful” (130). In society people tend to be defined by what they do. I wanted to explore characters who are not what they seem.

Carina is an actor and represents the Entertainment/Art industry. She comes across as being shallow, but all she really wants is connection and a family. Gemma is a lawyer and represents the corporate world. She thinks she wants power and money, but realizes she needs love and understanding. Steve is a woodworker and a construction worker. He represents the working class. He thinks he wants a family, but realizes he needs to express himself as an artist and that he needs a sense of security in order to do it.

In her book *Cruel Optimism* Lauren Berlant explores aspects of people holding on to desires that cause harm, even though they feel like they give them the “sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world” (24). Are people willing to change? To sacrifice security or comfort for the possibility of new life where they might find happiness? What are the deals we make with ourselves and each other in order to live within society? Truth has the ability to break through this, in the sense that when you find your truth and are able to voice it, there is a sense of peace. All three characters at the end of the story find and/or speak their truth to some degree.

Writing *Footwork* in under a year proved to be an intense and gratifying experience. Although I feel the essence of the story and all of the necessary components are in place, I am planning to revisit the work. I want to create more of a life for some of the secondary characters like Jerry, Declan and Gemma and Cara’s Mom. I also want to explore the subtext of dialogue more. Kardos refers to subtext as a meta-message, “Often, the deeper meaning of a conversation is conveyed through subtext. Linguists tell us that we never say exactly what we mean. We couldn’t even if we tried. There’s always a ‘meta-message’ going on underneath the words that get said” (71). I’d like to spend more time with Gemma’s and Steve’s house and even Toronto as seen through each character and how it changes depending on whose perspective we are in. Also, I like where the ending is at, but I would consider lengthening the final six chapters.

Nothing in the world is black or white. Life can be messy. *Footwork* became a journey in discovering three very different characters’ truth and trying to make sense of it so that I could tell their stories.

Danielle Brett Potter  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
September, 2015

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of my mom, Alicia Dawn Popoff, who taught me the importance of being an artist. She is a constant reminder for me to follow my heart and never stop taking risks. And as she once told me, if you have to hang upside down in a tree for a day, so be it, because that's what it means to be an artist.

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