WRITING EDUCATION

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Whither the Workshop? Andrew Cowan, Sam Kelly, Richard Beard

NAWE Northampton Conference Collection: Julie MacLusky; Vanessa Gebbie & Sieneke de Rooij; Danielle Jawando & Bernie Howley; Heather Richardson; Caroline Murphy; Susan Greenberg, Hilary Jenkins & Julie Wheelwright; Nigel Smith; Wes Brown with David Tait & Daniel Sluman

plus: Linda Anderson; Dave Attrill; Ardella Jones; Derek Neale; Ian Pople; Siobhan Wall; The Writer's Compass; news; reviews

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Cover Image: from Quiet Amsterdam *by Siobhan Wall (see p74)*

EDITORIAL

Welcome to what is the last edition of *Writing in Education* as the NAWE journal under the aegis of the Arts Council. From now on we stand on our own or rather on our own but obviously with the support of all of the writers and teachers who are evidence of the things that NAWE stands for. This edition is a good example of the stretch and breadth of NAWE's interests and activities and contains articles which arose out of sessions at the NAWE conference in Northampton in November 2011, together with a range of articles which highlight how writing is alive and well in communities, schools and universities in spite of restrictions, financial, administrative, pedagogic and environmental.

As Siobhan Wall says, writers need quiet places, so how pleasing that Vanessa Gebbie and Sieneke de Rooij managed to find enough of these to produce the amazing guessed translation by Vanessa of Sieneke's poem written in Dutch. And how good to hear from Nigel Smith that he has found a silent tongue to give voice to mute characters in his own writing for young adults. It's the discovery of those unexpected places, literal and imaginary, that make writing so worthwhile for writer, teacher and reader. Wes Brown has found a place for new voices through the Young Writers' Hub, Ian Pople has recognized the vitality in the non-native speaker's accidental and unconventional choice of vocabulary and syntax. Derek Neale champions the writer's need for uncertainty, mystery and doubt, and Linda Anderson asks us to take the risks that will lead us to unusual places in our writing and teaching. Heather Richardson suggests we need not be afraid of explanations and exegeses and gives us the example of Umberto Eco and Kate Grenville.

Sam Kelly asks in her discussion with Andrew Cowan and Richard Beard on the usefulness of workshops in Higher Education teaching:"What about the rest of us?" Her question refers to how academic teaching differs from market-led teaching undertaken by the National Academy of Writing. But we need as well to ask about the "rest of us" who are outside both the academic and the NAW top-end of the market. Caroline Murphy has some answers in her report about how the North-East is getting teachers to become writers though this is nothing new: I have to admit that I was involved in similar NATE projects some forty years ago. But perhaps every generation has to discover America for themselves. Ardella Jones has set up her own teaching company though her account of administrative red tape in the small business world sounds no better to me than the red tape that tied her up in FE. David Attrill, a writer without any Higher Education qualifications, writes about his experience of completing a novel in a WEA group and then publishing it himself through Lulu.com. He has been able to capitalize on the Internet just like the writers and editors who contribute to Wes Brown's article, 'The Future is Words'.

By contrast, Danielle Jawando and Bernie Howley describe how achieving a BA and MA in writing has turned them into professional writers and teachers. And Julie MacLusky, lecturer in HE, who has spent several years like a good many school teachers do, facilitating students' writing without doing her own, praises the NAWE conference for allowing her space to think about her own writing.

I'd like to end with an endorsement of Ian Pople's attempts to value the accidental voice of non-native speakers. Here is a poem I wrote as a result of an email from a Japanese friend whose English is far from perfect, but whose language afforded me that imaginative space to write the poem.

Email from the East

And today a Japanese voice floats into my inbox:
Dear Liz, how are you? Japan became cold.
Japan is autumn, the time when coloured leaves
are beautiful. It is my wish that there is always you
for happiness well. The check of a sentence
and the word is not possible precisely.
If there is a mistake, please permit it.

So I write back: Dear Fukoko,
Thank you for your email. It is not cold here yet
but it is autumn and the leaves are starting to colour.
In fact, I have a flaming Japanese acer in my garden.
I am not sure if flaming is precisely possible.
I hope you too will permit my mistakes.

Liz Cashdan

NAWE NEWS

CHAIR'S REPORT

Research from Iowa University in 2002 suggested being a writer is an essential part of our identity. "Creative writing," concludes Susan X Day, "is fully imbued in a writer's sense of self, as perhaps gender is in most of us, and not to be a creative writer would feel alien and inauthentic in a most disturbing way." We are simply not ourselves if we are not writing; whether or not we are published, whether or not we are acknowledged, we see ourselves as writers.

A few years later, I was interviewed by a Romanian student for her MA Dissertation. I found myself explaining the relationship between myself as teacher/ academic and myself as writer. I said, "When I retire I will no longer be an academic, but I will always be a writer, till the day I die."

Both of these came into my mind recently at our Annual meeting with the Arts Council, where a question arose which seemed central to what NAWE actually is and what it does for its members. There was a suggestion that NAWE members were teachers foremost, rather than writers, and that NAWE was using therefore its funds to support education.

I explained that NAWE members were writers, writers through and through, but that few writers are in the luxurious position of earning a living by their pen (or keyboard.) Some writers may choose to work in jobs which are not taxing, and leave brain space for the writing. But a large, and increasing, number of us choose teaching because it has a circularity which feeds our own writing, and also, crucially, allows us to use our experience to help develop the next generation of writers.

Artists and musicians have long understood the way that teaching your craft not only gives satisfaction, but also keeps you on our toes with new developments and young ideas which in turn provide inspiration for your own work. Despite the marking, the beaurocracy, CRB checks, writers in education find the same.

So when NAWE supports its members, it is supporting two groups of writers: it directly supports the established writers who are also teachers, and indirectly supports the fledgling or emerging writers who we teach in schools, universities and community settings. Both of these groups produce 'works' – poems, short stories, novels, plays, screenplays – which wouldn't have been written without the support of NAWE.

I explained to the Arts Council some of the ways in which we provide that dual support: through the workshops at our conferences which support, develop and share our own writing as well as the workshops and talks which enable us to better inspire our students; through the articles in our magazine; through all the events organized by the Writer's Compass, and last but not least, by our Writers' Retreat, which allows the writer-self an oasis of creative peace.

Our plan is to continue supporting both our writer and writer-teacher selves, to enable us and our students to write, and write and write.

Maggie Butt

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Curriculum Review

When we read Michael Gove's comments about 'making sure children... do better than the average', we inevitably wonder about the particular type of numeracy at which he wishes pupils to excel. Delving further, however, I've been surprisingly encouraged by some of the more specific statements such as below, taken from his oral evidence given to the Education Committee –

On intervention: *One of the areas where there is a case for us intervening ... is to encourage schools to have libraries, and by libraries I mean proper libraries with proper books that encourage wider reading.*

On professional development: *It is important that teachers should think about aligning themselves with or benefiting from professional associations.*

Most compellingly, in relation to NAWE's own view about education as a continuum, Gove has said:

Also, when we are thinking about teachers, we should end the division between people who work in nurseries, people who work in primary and secondary, people who work in FE and people who work in higher education. Whether you are a Regius Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church or you are working with two-year-olds in Aberdeen, you should be part of one fused profession that sees its job as safeguarding the intellectual life of the nation. It is important that we uphold and support that. Within that, there may be different professional associations that suit the needs of teachers depending on the areas in which they work, but trying to say that you are just as important a professional if you are working in a pre-school setting as you are if you are working in a Russell Group university is important.

He went on to admit that it was wrong to split universities away from the Department for Education.

I was invited to represent NAWE at a Curriculum Review meeting for the English subject community and again there were heartening signs. It's good to know, for instance, that pupils may finally be rid of the labelling that insists they are pegged at a particular *level*. And 'oracy', often treated as an English subject requirement, is likely to become a focus across the curriculum – on which point I did say how NAWE would like to see *writing* recognized in the same way, the benefits of creative writing in subjects other than English being increasingly well demonstrated.

With oracy and dialogic teaching being freshly highlighted, there is perhaps a danger of confusing them. Yes, they are connected, but oracy is not the sole means of gaining from dialogic teaching. It might be preferable to describe a more triangular relationship, with dialogic teaching supported by – and enhancing – both oracy and writing skills.

In response to these and other points, I received written thanks from DfE staff who said that the comments would be 'taken on board when preparing advice to Ministers' (on curriculum structure generally) and also play into their thinking on the development of the content for the new Programme of Study for English (on which NAWE will also be specifically consulted). Who knows, at this stage, whether or not any of that will make a difference; something at least though has changed, namely the level of recognition of our work, and the subsequent lines of respectful communication.

NAWE Conference

At our AGM in Northampton in November, considerable time was given to discussing future conference plans. There was agreement that the model of recent years had been a great success and should continue – if costs could be restrained. So we are pleased to have secured a venue for 2012 that enables us to keep all delegate rates at much the same level as last year while also providing a number of additional benefits, such as free wi-fi internet access. The riverside venue in the very centre of York is within easy walking distance of the railway station, served by the best train route in the country. Free parking is available for anyone travelling by car. A Call for Proposals has now been published (see p4) and we look forward to hearing from any members wishing to be part of the programme.

NAWE Membership

As you all know, we introduced new membership rates on 1 January, and we are pleased to report that membership has continued to rise (see the remarkable list on pages 18-20). We do believe that the rates are still very reasonable but we're delighted by the clear endorsement of our value to so many writers at all levels. We welcome the many new e-members, joining simply to receive the Writer's Compass e-bulletin, and hope that many will become increasingly involved in other aspects of our work.

Some of you (Associate Members) will be reading this magazine for the first time online. We have always published articles, individually, within our archive, but now the whole publication is available to all members as a downloadable pdf, with an e-pub version for Kindle and iPad readers in the pipeline.

We are also keen to provide NAWE members with other publication offers. As launched at our conference, publications from the Professional & Higher Partnership are being offered to NAWE members at a discount (see p11) and the special issue of *New Writing* that features a substantial chapter on the history of NAWE (together with contributions from AWP, AAWP and other international associations) is also freely available via our website, with access now extended until 31 May 2012. Do please visit www.nawe.co.uk/DB/nawe-news/new-writing-special-issue.html while the offer lasts.

Paul Munden

NAWE CONFERENCE, YORK, 2012

9–11 November 2012, Park Inn by Radisson York Hotel North Street, York Y01 6JF

For our 5th residential conference, we are returning to York – this time in a prime city centre riverside location

NAWE members are invited to submit proposals to this essential UK event for writers working in all educational and community contexts.

The conference will run from Friday lunchtime through to Sunday midday. There will be special events on both evenings.

Proposals should consist of a brief (100 word) outline, exactly as you would wish the session to be described in the conference programme, together with any further detail (250 words max) to confirm its merit, plus biographical information on all presenters (50 words each). The suggested length of a session is 75 minutes (though sessions may be shared). Please also specify exactly what technical equipment you require. All presenters need to register as delegates but benefit from a significant discount.

Booking open: 1 April
Deadline for proposals: 1 May
Decisions on proposals: 1 June
Programme published: 16 July
Booking & payment deadline: 8 October

Please email proposals to conference@nawe.co.uk.

Visit the NAWE website www.nawe.co.uk for the booking form, directions and further updates, plus exhibiting and sponsorship opportunities.

WRITERS IN SCHOOLS

Writers in Schools Project Managers Network

As is now well established, the NAWE Conference will include a meeting of this network, which is currently in its fourth year and continues to provide a useful meeting place for organizations and individuals involved in making 'writers in schools' activities happen. Various shared projects have also been generated, including the Writers in Schools Skill Sharing Day (see opposite) and a template for evaluation of writers in schools projects. The latter is being led by colleagues from First Story and Bath Festivals and promises very shortly to provide a simple set of questions that will enable evidence from different projects to be gathered together in a meaningful way. It will, for instance, ask for measures of improvement in young people's willingness to engage with creative writing as a result of writing in schools projects and also capture the degree to which creative writing activity can prepare young people to learn. While these outcomes are not necessarily 'art' outcomes they will certainly be useful when persuading the education sector to invest in creative writing activity and hopefully to pay for professional writers to work with their schools.

The Network's Spring meeting, on 6 March, was hosted by the Poetry Society at their offices in London. It included a presentation from Felicity Woolf on Arts Awards and the latest news on how writers in schools stand to benefit from the new regional 'Bridge Organizations' funded by the Arts Council. It was suggested that another Special Edition of *Writing in Education* might once again be 'guest edited' by members of the Network, focusing entirely on writers in schools (as with No. 46, published in 2008). Anyone wishing to contribute to this edition should contact the editors via editorial@nawe.co.uk and the deadline for submissions is 1 May 2012.

Any organization or individual involved in the management of writers in schools activities is very welcome to attend the Network meetings. Please contact either Justin Coe of New Writing South or Jonathan Davidson of Writing West Midlands, who are jointly convening the Network.

justin@newwritingsouth.com
jonathan@writingwestmidlands.org

Writers in Schools Skill Sharing Day
Leicester, Saturday 16 June 2012, 10am – 4pm

NAWE, in partnership with Writing East Midlands and Writing West Midlands, is delighted to present a second Writers in Schools Skill Sharing Day, very kindly hosted by De Montfort University in Leicester on Saturday 16 June 2012. The day is designed to give creative writers who work in schools (and those who are keen to be involved in such work) an opportunity to share skills, knowledge and experience with their peers through a series of workshops and seminars.

This year's Skill Sharing Day will cover a range of issues of interest to writers in schools, including child safeguarding, working with rhyme, children writing autobiography and combining creative writing with other subject areas. The Skill Sharing Day will also include two 'open ideas sharing' sessions to allow any participant to quickly share a workshop technique or activity. There will also be an opportunity to hear the latest news on the position of creative writing in the curriculum.

Booking is now open, via the NAWE website at www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/training-and-events.html

Anyone leading on presentation of a session will receive a free ticket to the day. Tickets are priced at £24 for NAWE members and £28 for non-members, and this includes a buffet lunch.

The event is being hosted by De Montfort University, and will take place in The Clephan Building, off Oxford Street, Leicester, LE1 5XY. For directions, please see www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/study-documents/undergraduate-study-documents/visit-us/campus-map.pdf

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'Getting Started as a Writer in Schools'

We are pleased to announce the publication of a new resource, commissioned by NAWE and written by Roz Goddard. How to 'get started' is a frequent question posed to us, and we hope that this new briefing will be of great use to the many new writers coming into the field.

The document is available as a downloadable pdf from the Writers in Schools section of the NAWE website.

The Write Team Research Report

Emma Metcalfe, of Bath Festivals, who regularly attends the Project Managers Network meetings, has shared with us the final report of the Write Team project that aimed to engage pupils 'who keep a low profile; invisible pupils who are quiet and undemanding'. The project was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and was also supported by Bath Spa University's Initial Teacher Training Department, which enabled the project to work over two years with 754 of their Initial Teacher Trainees, developing both awareness of the 'invisible pupil' and the skills developed by the Write Team to support these pupils through creative writing.

The report is available from the Writers in Schools/Research section of the NAWE website.

YOUNG WRITERS

Sharking: or, What it's like to publish a first novel

Wes Brown, our Young Writers' Co-ordinator, tells of his own experience as a debut novelist.

It wasn't until recently that I worked out what *Shark* was even about – or at least be able to articulate it. To *shark* became a verb for a particular kind of working-class, libertarian, stoicism. It was a Yorkshire version of William Burroughs' 'Johnson Code'. In the Foreword of *The Place of Dead Roads*, Burroughs' writes:

The original title of this book was The Johnson Family. "The Johnson Family" was a turn-of-the-century expression to designate good bums and thieves. It was elaborated into a code of conduct. A Johnson honors his obligations. His word is good and he is a good man to do business with. A Johnson minds his own business. He is not a snoopy, self-righteous, trouble-making person. A Johnson will give help when help is needed. He will not stand by while someone is drowning or trapped under a burning car.

So John Usher, the hero, or *anti*-hero of the novel is a Sun-reading ex-soldier, too proud to work in menial jobs, too manly to submit to the service economy; he spends his days hustling, sharking pool players in his local snooker centre. John has a difficult relationship not

only with himself but with women, with alpha males, with *the Other*. He is sincere in his belief that he was doing good in Iraq and saddened to see that far from return to a hero's welcome, his involvement there is condemned and even considered *un*-British by the far right activist, Carl Brown, who is desperately trying to recruit the disaffected and play on community tensions. It is with ambivalence that John regards the inner city suburb he grew up in. Sentimentalized, a place of nostalgia, family-orientated, industrially working-class: the area is now home for professionals, students, migrants, gangs, out of town leisure and shipping facilities. There is no public space. No industrial work. No male role models. The Britain he has returned to is angry, divided, and getting worse.

I started writing *Shark* four years ago. It came to me not as a novel, fully formed, but a series of slow-moving images. There was the muddle of influence and inspiration: the first words came, present-tense, third-person localized, like the opening of John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* and John bundled onto the page.

Martin Amis claims writers are marked by 'anxiety and ambition'. I would say this is especially true for young writers. You write with the excellent recklessness of somebody who is part man, part child. The excitement of pre-publication always outweighs the reality of *being* published. The reality is attended to by life. There are the artistic and commercial pressures. The sense that you are offering up a great chunk of self, unprotected. Worries about the production of the novel: whether the final act really hangs together, and whether or not *Shark* needed another draft (it certainly did). Then the need to sell the book, to perform at events. I'm grateful to Kester Aspden who invited me to read alongside Ian Duhig and Anthony Clavane in a Waterstones event he was hosting.

This was great exposure and led into a number of new opportunities. I found people were very accommodating to a young author, and wanted to do everything they could to support you. Headingley Literature Festival and the Yorkshire Post were also particularly helpful. In some sense, nothing has really changed. I have a new confidence in my writing given the validation of critical appraisal, book sales and having well-attended solo events. I get overly respected. It feels more natural, vocational. Then there's the sense that when a work is really finished, it doesn't belong to you. It's public property. It belongs to the community of imagination.

To glance through the papers, the blogosphere, to follow the social media, you may be forgiven for thinking we live in the most censorious and sententious of climates. For it seems that anybody accused of saying anything interesting, or beyond the impossible and conformist confines of 'non-offense' is called controversial. Much of this is media hysteria, though the process of having a work in the public domain brings praise and encouragement as well as thoughtful and thoughtless criticism. It was pleasing to see that *Shark* was a book that could appeal to critics and to pub landlords. A sign of aesthetic and demotic authenticity. I was also pleased to see how rhino-skinned I was. Some didn't like the book or the portrayal of the working classes, ethnic minorities and (or) women. Though if novelists can't depict life at its rarest, it's most unpleasant, life at its richest, its most luminous, how can we do our job properly? That is not to say a writer has a duty or a licence to offend, but in an age of polite fictions, it seems right that fiction should be impolite. It should be coarse and truthful; give you things as they are, unedited. Literature is about telling secrets.

*

NAWE is now offering additional membership benefits for young writers subscribing at the Student/Associate rate of £20 per year. In addition to the weekly e-bulletin and full website access, including *Writing in Education* online, young writers will have access to specific workshops, advice and feedback from the Young Writers' Co-ordinator, an author profile page designed to help you create an online presence and a free copy of a new bimonthly app magazine for the under 25s. If you are an existing member, please contact us to ensure that you gain from these new opportunities.

Wes Brown, in addition to his work as Young Writers Co-ordinator, managing the Hub, has taken on the role of Information Manager for NAWE's website overall, and the production of the weekly e-bulletin. Please send all information about events and opportunities for writers to Wes at w.brown@nawe.co.uk.

NALD

As we go to press, NALD is preparing for its Spring Conference, 'The Space Between Us', 27-28 March, 2012. We look forward to sharing news about this in the next edition, together with an update on NALD's plans generally, now that it faces – like NAWE – life without regular Arts Council support.

HIGHER EDUCATION NEWS: USA

Dizzying: NAWE delegates at the Annual Conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), reflected in Anish Kapoor's 'Cloud Gate' sculpture in Chicago

In a multi-angled, extended Letter from America, we bring you a glimpse of AWP 2012.

Steve May:

It's always the same. And in case you think you're the odd one out, just tune in to twitter and the blogosphere. The AWP conference is so big (9,000 plus delegates, 500 plus events, with up to 20 running simultaneously in 75 minute slots throughout the day), and so full on, and so overwhelming, everyone ends up with conference fever. Conference fever means your head fills up with a kind of electric goo. The walls of the elevators ripple. You don't know where you are, who you are, or what you came there to do. Your mouth works like a puppet and words come out with varying degrees of coherence, relevance and sincerity. You feel "like a deranged bat trapped at a racquetball tournament" (to quote Ru Freeman, www.huffingtonpost.com/ru-freeman/awp-writers-conference-_b_1319755.html).

You get used to turning to the person sitting next to you half an hour into a session, and asking, "What panel *is* this?"

You go to a session on Soup and the Novel at 9am, a session you weren't really interested in, and the experience so paralyses you that you miss the next session about The Poetry of Shame, the one you really wanted to go to, because the soup overran, and by the time you get to Shame the room is an overflowing soup of bodies.

There's so much going on, you get that Millennium feeling, namely, it's got to be better (and with more happening) somewhere else than the panel you're watching. Everyone has a flinchy nervous habitual reach for the conference planner, even while watching something interesting, like Flatbread and Narrative. So, when you see you're missing Non-fiction and Donuts, you do the AWP scuttle get-away. The scuttle is depressing to watch, especially if you're on the panel that's being scuttled from. As scuttler, you surreptitiously gather all your papers, handouts, freebies, you rustle them into your hessian unthreatening-to-planet conference bag, you roll your coat over your arm, and then you duck sideways off your chair, and hunch your way at a lope out of the room. However hard you try, the door will slam.

You have to find time for the Bookfair.

The Bookfair is a vast subterranean network of identical but very different caverns and carpet, each guarded by a calm but intransigent Security person who knows the intricacies of your halter name tag. The halls are hot, and connected by corridors borrowed from the Alien spaceship, rumbling with big pipes and concealing dark nooks, rusted taps and empty boxes. There are over a thousand stalls. You can wander for some time without finding the one you wanted, or the exit. As one blogger observes (http://towerofbilliam.tumblr.com/post/18795952500/what-i-learned-at-the-awp-writers-conference):

1. The book you want is not for sale.
2. The book you don't want is free.

The AWP conference started in 1989 with 300 delegates, seventeen events, and Allen Ginsberg performing live. Though it has grown somewhat, the Executive Director, David Fenza, feels it has more growing to do. In his presentation for Program Directors on the first morning of the conference he uses a series of graphs and pie charts to show just why this expansion is necessary and desirable. He points out that the Modern Language Association has about double the $5 million turnover of AWP. As for the Poetry Foundation, he can't even find a

Manhattan high enough to represent the financial status of that organization. He shows a picture of the AWP offices, housed in a converted garage, and the Poetry Foundation skyscraper. That's the aspiration.
How to achieve growth? First off, dispense with elections to the AWP Board. Only 3% of membership voted last time, and Fenza warns that low turn outs can enable the election of nutty candidates. Someone asks why no turnout is better than low turnout, and the answer is that the Board will become self-appointing. There's some confusion about this: at what point does the Board become the Board that has the power to self-appoint? The rationale, explains Fenza, is to enable the appointment of two kinds of person lacking on the current Board, and indeed in the membership in general. Firstly, persons with business experience in fund-raising; and secondly, persons who have funds themselves, and are willing to donate them to the organization.

Given the financial circumstances we have found ourselves in over the past year, maybe we have things to learn from these approaches. And can draw some comfort from the spectacular rise of AWP from those early, small days.

Helena Blakemore:

"Well I'll be darned – you do Creative Writing PhDs in the UK? I didn't know that." Well, you do now, and if we achieved nothing else at this year's AWP Conference in Chicago, the 20 or 30 times each day those staffing the NAWE booth repeated our explanations of how it works over here, to the amazement of American students and faculty alike, will have spread the news somewhat.

It was disheartening, however, given the number of times NAWE has been represented at AWP and told this same story, to hear how little about the post-graduate provision in the UK is known or understood across the pond. Perhaps this has something to do with the sheer scale of the opportunities in the US, reflected at AWP by the high proportion of the 560 or so booths and tables in the Bookfair dedicated – primarily – to recruiting to US Creative Writing MFA programmes.

However… I attended a session entitled 'What to know before you start your PhD', during which the five panellists, having completed MFAs and fairly recently been awarded their PhDs, outlined their experiences. Each discussed the elements of their study which had to be 'negotiated' – the "classes in 18th century study which weren't immediately relevant to my research on contemporary fiction but may be useful in the long run", the "many ways in which my research is very different from my coursework", and they way "people are uncomfortable if they can't fit you to either creative or critical study". These graduates came, typically, from programmes of study that include qualifying exams, compulsory general classes and coursework, and a common length of five to seven years, frequently located within a Literature department where Creative Writing is a subsidiary. One does start to wonder why they aren't flying over here in droves.

The explanation, I think, is two-fold: firstly, it is no surprise that US colleges and interested parties want to keep their students, and keep them in the US, so they are unlikely to promote opportunities over here; and secondly, there is the funding issue. Many post-graduates in the US are on part or fully funded courses, and the situation in the UK is variable, although there certainly are some UK scholarships and bursaries, as well as US funding opportunities for overseas study, such as the Fulbright Award.

Hopefully, as I mentioned, this is beginning to change, due in no small part to the efforts of Barbara Large (Winchester), Sam Kelly (Edinburgh Napier), Steve May and Tim Middleton (Bath Spa) and Anouska Munden (valiantly standing in for Paul at late notice) in spreading the word, and NAWE's excellent new *Studying Creative Writing in the UK* brochure, this year. With luck and a following wind we should be able to follow this through next year in Boston, where an emphasis on the differences – in particular, of duration and focus – may outweigh concerns about ever-present funding issues.

Issues around post-graduate study aside, the conference was wild, overwhelming and unmanageable in turn – much as usual. With around 20 panels running simultaneously, all day, every day, from 9am to 5.45pm, for three days, plus evening and off-site events, it was tough keeping track – or identifying recurrent themes. Issues concerning teaching in creative writing classrooms or workshops, however, seemed to be common – dealing with difficult students or difficult material, for instance – and there may be a resurgence of interest in creative non-fiction, and in translation, and it was not surprising to see a number of panels discussing writing for new media. The AWP Conference is always a heady mix: part sales convention, with enthusiastic grad students promoting their publications, and colleges and

universities selling their wares; part academic conference, with panels ranging from the sub-standard to the sublime. Add the constant buzz of gossip and chat – who's doing what, and where, and maybe even why – and the hunting for friends and colleagues, the quest for coffee, the searching for the lost panel session, and precious little contact with the outside world, and it can be a disorienting experience. But always good, and always surprising. Margaret Atwood's keynote speech was a joy – a rumination on her writing life, and on dealing with the seemingly widespread myth of her demise. "I want to welcome my Twitter pals and Margaret Atwood Society folks," she said, "which, by the way, I'm thankful for, since you usually only get a 'society' when you're dead." Lively, engaging and inspiring – everything a great conference should be.

NAWE's stall at AWP, where 500 booklets advertising UK Creative Writing courses were distributed

Anouska Munden:

Having been informed by many US delegates that the standard length of their PhD is 7 years, it would seem to be worth marketing UK programmes even more widely. Students take approximately 3 years at the beginning of a US PhD to decide what the focus of their thesis is going to be. The fact that, with a UK MA and PhD, they would be permitted to pursue their doctorate focus straight away, and could be fully graduated in half the time, would surely be appealing, especially since UK courses are also considerably cheaper, and there is more freedom in choice of subject matter and approach.

Many US delegates seemed unaware of extra-curricular writing activity in the UK, such as groups, organizations and events. Many seemed to be under the impression that all courses take place in London. So promotion of the range of locations and opportunities might be in order. In turn, NAWE's own conference should surely learn from AWP and explore the bookfair option to give a wider focus and generate income from exhibitors.

Writing from Start to Finish: The Story Workshop method of John Shultz and Columbia College

Hannah K Chapman, a Creative Writing student from Bath Spa University on an exchange in the USA, explores the teaching methods of her host institution Columbia College, Chicago.

Learning in the Fiction Writing department at Columbia College Chicago feels very Zen; as if I have entered into a Buddhist state and once we've perfected the art of model telling we will, as a group, move on to levitation and advanced meditation.

But what is it about Columbia that makes me feel so 'centred'? Believe it or not, it's got a lot to do with attendance. Something that is sure to baffle most students in the UK is the idea that turning up is actually the key to passing a class. At Columbia there is a three-strike policy. No exceptions. If a student misses more than three classes in a semester it's an automatic fail, regardless of how good their work has been. It may seem severe but it has a strange power; students actually show up. One of my professors pointed out that if you're missing four sessions, that's a quarter of the classes you've missed out on. What started out as something that scared me into attending has led to me engaging in my classes, keeping up with the assigned reading so I can hold my own in discussions, and submitting quality work each week knowing there is an improvement.

The classes follow the Story Workshop method created by John Shultz, once a professor at Columbia. It was a way of teaching that he began working with in 1965 and used in classes throughout his time at the college. Its influence is still seen throughout the Fiction Writing department. Not only is his book, *Writing from Start to Finish*, still the key set text used in the Fiction Writing classes but nearly 50 years on and the Story Workshop is still being used to teach aspiring writers how to engage with their craft.

The workshop method is barely recognizable from the ones used in my classes in the UK. While we aren't sitting on yoga mats practising our half lotus there is still a reflective mood, a uniformity that is refreshing and a structure that is used by all members of the faculty, even the peer tutors. This approach means you always know what's coming; you're mentally prepared and waste no time complaining that one person's workshop is better than another's. Each session opens and closes with recall, whether it is a journal entry or piece of writing by

a student, assigned reading from the week before, or writing the professor has chosen to share with us. We describe the events as we see them, trusting our voice and trusting the voices of the group. There are games too; reading aloud the work of an anonymous student and then trying to guess who the writer was from the stylistic devices and voice. We are learning to recognize the work of others and learn how our own work is recognizable. We share words, unmodified objects, locations and sounds and in doing so add a depth to our stories that might not have been explored otherwise. As a professor at Bath Spa University said to me, “We spend too much time hiding behind the paper” – here at Columbia, we are liberated from it.

Of course I miss the workshop method of Bath Spa University and hearing praise and criticism for my work each time it is read. I miss the discussions we would have about each student’s styles and the often brilliant insights of my peers. There are parts of Shulz’s method I don’t agree with, parts that I think could be improved, but there are most definitely parts that I wish we could integrate into our workshops at Bath Spa – and elsewhere in the UK.

In his book Shulz said, “One of my hopes is to get teachers, many of whom feel a quiet desperation about teaching writing, to believe in the abilities of their students…” However, Shulz achieves more than that; he teaches the students to believe in their own abilities. I am learning the value of trusting myself as a writer and relying less on validation from others. And while I don’t think I’ll have perfected typing out my prose in downward facing dog by the time I return to Bath Spa – I *do* think I’ll be bringing some of these teaching methods with me.

AWP 2013, Boston, MA

In 2013, AWP will take its annual conference and bookfair to Boston, Massachusetts at the Sheraton Hotel & Hynes Convention Center, 6-9 March.

The deadline for proposals is traditionally 1 May. Please refer to the website for further announcements.

http://www.awpwriter.org/conference/index.php

NAWE plans once again to represent UK universities, and will mail all HE members with details in due course.

AUSTRALIA

The Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) enters 2012 in a spirit of cautious optimism about the university sector here. The Australian economy is not exactly buoyant but to date we have avoided the economic difficulties besetting some parts of Europe while the Australian government has stated that it is committed to expanding the university sector in order to ensure that a greater proportion of the Australian population have university degrees. The government’s target is to increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-old Australians with a qualification at bachelor level or above to 40 per cent by 2025. Strategies for achieving this goal include demand-driven funding for undergraduate student places, as a result of which public universities are now charged with deciding the number of places they will offer and in which disciplines.

Following its 2011 Annual General Meeting, the AAWP has a new executive and details are available at http://aawp.org.au/about-us-aawp-executive. The organization has a busy agenda for the year, which includes updating its constitution and developing a new mission statement. We are very pleased to have recently become the Australasian (rather than Australian) Association of Writing Programs and are looking to make more of our international affiliations and connections in coming years. We are in the process of forming a Publications Subcommittee and an Advisory Group, each of which should assist us in achieving this aim. We are also in the process of enhancing our website, including adding a dedicated link on the AAWP website to the *TEXT* journal, the creation of a template for writing courses updates on the website and the improvement of website membership functionality.

I urge everyone to consider attending our 17th annual conference. Last year’s conference at Byron Bay was one of the year’s highlights and included convivial social occasions not far from Byron Bay’s superb coastline as well as many fine papers, readings and presentations. This year’s event promises to be just as enjoyable. The conference title is Encounters: place | situation | context, and it will run from 25–27 November 2012. It will be hosted by Deakin University at its superb waterfront campus in Geelong and delegates will be asked to

address such issues as context and place in writing; the settings of pedagogies; the philosophical understanding of 'situation'; and writing as a kind of staging, a curation or as the trace of certain collisions—within culture, between agents, in our current historical moment.

The AAWP conference will follow immediately after the renowned Bedell NonFictioNow conference organized by Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). The RMIT event runs until Saturday 24 November, leaving just enough time for wining and dining in cosmopolitan Melbourne prior to a comfortable 50-minute train ride down to Geelong on the Sunday morning. The Encounters conference will be launched with a keynote address and cocktail function on the Sunday evening, around sunset, and will continue during Monday and Tuesday. Registrations will open shortly and the deadline for submission of abstracts is 24 April 2012, with details available at www.deakin.edu.au /arts-ed/scca/events/aawp/index.php.

Paul Hetherington (University of Canberra), Chair of AAWP

NonFictioNow, 21–24 November 2012
hosted by RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

NonfictioNow is one of the most significant gatherings of writers, teachers and readers of nonfiction from around the world. Three full days of panels, screenings and events will centre on the practice, thinking, communication and writing of nonfiction in all its forms. Keynote Speakers include Helen Garner (Australia), Margo Jefferson and David Shields (USA).

The conference seeks panels that showcase the diversity of the genre. Panels should have a minimum of three panelists, including the moderator. Panels can explore any aspect of nonfiction ranging from the celebration, discussion or tribute to the work of a particular essayist, or a discussion an aspect of memoir, ethics, the lyric essay, literary journalism, travel writing, food writing or regional writing. Panels that explore nonfiction at or beyond the margins of the literary, such as film, radio and online forms, are also welcome. In addition, a small number of proposed readings will be accepted for the conference.

Panellists will pay a reduced conference fee of $200AUD. The call for panels is open until 15 April 2012. Registration open from February. For full details and to submit your proposal visit www.rmit.edu.au/nfn2012.

CANADA

'Creative Writing in the 21st Century: Research and Practice', Toronto, 10–13 May 2012

CCWWP (Canadian Creative Writers and Writing Programs) is Canada's newly formed organization devoted to supporting the teaching of creative writing. Their conference is being hosted in Toronto by a variety of academic institutions including the Humber School for Writers, York University and the University of Toronto. The event is dedicated to the study of creative writing pedagogy and the promotion of creative writing standards and practices. It will include academic papers and keynote talks by national and international writers and creative writing teachers, researchers, and students.

http://ccwwp.ca/conference/

THE PROFESSIONAL & HIGHER PARTNERSHIP

Rethinking creative writing in higher education

Where has creative writing reached as a higher education discipline? What are the strengths and weaknesses of existing provision? What examples of best practice are there to learn from? Above all, how can the discipline most fruitfully engage with contemporary culture?

These are the questions that Stephanie Vanderslice examines in *Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education* (ISBN 978-1-907076-31-2). The book – endorsed by NAWE and launched in paperback at NAWE's annual conference – is the first from our Creative Writing Studies series and is included in our special offer to NAWE members. Members may buy this book at 40% discount direct from the NAWE website: www.nawe.co.uk/DB/resources-2/rethinking-creative-writing.html.

The next two titles in the series are both being edited by NAWE members and include many NAWE contributors. This summer sees the publication of *Teaching Creative Writing: Practical Approaches*, edited by Elaine Walker. The book provides fifty ideas for teaching the subject in colleges and universities.

It will be followed at towards the end of the year by an anthology, *Creative Writing: Writers on Writing*, edited by Amal Chatterjee. The book includes both original literary works (in the form of fiction and poetry)

together with their author's reflective commentaries on the processes by which they were written.

As publishers, we're keen to work with NAWE members – as contributors, authors, editors, or reviewers. If you would like to get involved with our publishing on creative writing, please contact us via our website: http://creativewritingstudies.wordpress.com.

Anthony Haynes
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HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

This column replaces the English Subject Centre column. Although the ESC was closed in July 2011 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) is committed to continuing discipline specific support for teaching and learning and my new role is 'Discipline Lead for English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing.' I will use this space to provide updates about the HEA's activities and opportunities that I hope will be of interest, use and value to NAWE members working and studying in HE and FE.

The HEA is keen to engage with individuals, departments and institutions through its support for discipline-focused events, through its various other funding opportunities such as the Teaching Development Grant scheme, and its support for professional recognition and accreditation. Please visit the HEA website at www.heacademy.ac.uk for further details of the Academy's work.

If you have ideas for workshops, pedagogic research, projects and collaborations, if you would like some help with aspects of learning, teaching and assessment strategy and practice, and if you have some news and information about the work you do that might be of interest and use to the wider sector, please do get in touch by contacting me at nicole.king@heacademy.ac.uk

Funding Opportunities

You may wish to bookmark the funding pages of the HEA website and to check it regularly. Full details of upcoming funding opportunities can be found at www.heacademy.ac.uk/funding. Here are three opportunities to consider now:

Workshop and Seminar Series – rolling deadline *up to £1500 available*
UK Travel Fund – rolling deadline (open to both staff and students)
Teaching Development Grant – Collaborative Scheme – deadline 22 April 2012

HEA Events

All forthcoming HEA events can be viewed at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/events. Please note that Creative Writing and English Language are currently subsumed within the category of 'English' throughout the HEA website. Three upcoming events of particular note are:

Networking Day for Subject Leaders – 19 April 2012 St Anne's College, Oxford

The Networking Day is an annual event creating an opportunity for colleagues in Creative Writing, English Literature and English Language who lead departments to share ideas, experiences and concerns in an informal context. Confirmed guest speaker: Professor John Joughin, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of East London.

Great Expectations: An Introductory Day for Postgraduates Beginning English Literature and/or Creative Writing Teaching – 10 May 2012, Manchester

This one-day workshop is designed to help graduates who are new to teaching in Creative Writing and/or English Literature and have recently faced, or will soon face, their first seminar. The day will include both plenary sessions bringing together Creative Writing and English Literature specialists and parallel sessions focusing on each of the two subject areas independently.

Pedagogies of Hope and Opportunity: The Higher Education Academy Arts and Humanities Annual Conference – 29-30 May 2012, Glasgow

Unprecedented changes in UK higher education have placed Arts and Humanities subjects under particular scrutiny and pressure. This conference aims to celebrate the Arts and Humanities in higher education and to highlight and share the many creative and innovative

ways in which Arts and Humanities courses, and those who teach and study them, are meeting the serious and complex challenges that confront them. Deadline for submissions is 12.00 pm Friday 16 March. Details can be found at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/academyevents/AH_Conference_2012.

The English Subject Centre Website

The English Subject Centre closed its doors on 31 July 2011 after working for and with the subject community from 2000-2011. Happily the ESC website is still accessible at its regular address, www.english.heacademy.ac.uk and is now in the care of CCUE, the Council for College and University English. The ESC website houses a large proportion of the resources generated or collected by the Subject Centre. You are warmly invited to explore its contents. They include a wealth of resources organized in thematic and curriculum areas; case studies, project reports, and links to electronic versions of printed guides and other publications. The former Subject Centre team hopes that the richness of these resources will continue to influence and inspire colleagues in the development of inventive teaching and imaginative procedures for learning. Also, if you would like to order hard copies of ESC publications, please e-mail the English department at Royal Holloway, University of London: english-department@rhul.ac.uk

Supporting and working with you – request a visit

If there are matters of interest and/or concern in regard to learning and teaching that the HEA might be able to help with, please contact me. I can visit individuals, groups or departments to have an in-depth conversation or presentation about how the HEA can, for example:

- help to support your work on teaching and learning;

- help you to become involved in the HEA's work as an Academic Associate, researching, writing, carrying out projects, or contributing to other events, such as the annual conference;

- support your ideas for presenting workshops and seminars and disseminating findings;

- recognize the quality of your work in teaching, learning and curriculum development, through the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) by becoming a Fellow or applying to the National Teaching Fellowship scheme;

- provide advice on your application to its call for HEA grants;

- support your ideas for carrying out research and scholarly activity on issues, themes and pedagogies that can then be of benefit to the HE Creative Writing community;

- support your ideas for organizing a HE Special Interest Group.

Staying in touch

At the moment my main way of communicating with the subject community is with the following JISCMAIL list: English-heacademy@jiscmail.ac.uk. If you are not already subscribed to this list, or have not received posts from me in the past month, please sign up or update your email address right away at: www.jiscmail.ac.uk/help/subscribers/groupsubscriptions.html
This is an open list and you can post to it as well, regarding HE or FE issues, events, conferences having to do with teaching, learning and pedagogy in Creative Writing, English Literature and English Language. Please tell your colleagues about this list too and encourage them to sign up.

Nicole King
nicole.king@heacademy.ac.uk

OTHER HIGHER EDUCATION NEWS

Oxford University: two students on the MSt in Creative Writing have signed two-book deals. Prajwal Parajuly Sharma, a second-year student, signed with publisher Quercus in September. *The Gurkha's Daughter: Stories*, and *Land Where I Flee*, a novel, will be published in December 2012 and 2013 respectively. James Benmore, who completed the MSt programme in 2010, also signed a two-book deal with publisher Heron in October. His novel *Dodger* will be published in 2012, with the book's sequel due out in 2014.

The Open College of the Arts (OCA), which offers degrees in creative arts subjects through open learning, has chosen the northern Irish essayist and religious studies academic Chris Arthur as its creative writing curriculum lead. He succeeds NAWE member and Man Booker long-listed writer Jane Rogers, who has stepped down to concentrate on her writing following the success of 2011 novel *The Testament of Jessie Lamb.*

LAPIDUS

Bridges and paths: the scope of writing for wellbeing

Writing for wellbeing occupies a different space, physically, psychically, linguistically and politically from other writing. It tends to seek out spaces – physical and mental – that are distinct from the pressurized marketplace where words are bought and sold as commodities. It values the individual voice and recognizes the uniqueness of that voice. As one participant in an NHS setting commented: ''I have found a voice I hadn't realized I'd got'. Another said 'It's like having another sense awakened – you get a different way of thinking about things'.

Lapidus website and the Lapidus Journal describe some of the exciting projects in this field. One participant makes profound readjustments in relation to her family history writing in response to a painting. Another uses the weather to examine how she understands her cancer and to navigate treatment. Another makes a words and pictures album for his wife, whose death he is struggling to come to terms with. A group reads its collective poem out loud together.

I was speaking recently to a participant who found great value in facilitated writing while coming to terms with disability. She likened the initial reawakening of her senses to 'the feel of a butterfly walking on your hand'. Close observation with a writer's eye made visible the teeming life in her garden. She found through writing 'you begin to see a trail, pattern or shape that wasn't visible before' and 'it led somewhere I didn't expect'.

But writing for wellbeing, whilst affirming the individual, is in many ways a collaborative activity with strong affinities with poetry in ancient traditions. Writing for wellbeing brings into the foreground the interconnectedness of people and environments. It also challenges the notions both of journalistic 'objective facts' and publishing's 'literary quality'. Language is celebrated for its capacities to convey multiple meanings and to mobilize transformative metaphors rather than give a single authoritative account. Quality is recognized as being also about authentic expression and diversity.

Writing for wellbeing carves out spaces where different kinds of discourse can happen. Clinical narratives can be accompanied by personal ones in healthcare settings, for example. It seems a small and simple thing – merely to offer a room in a building for some writing to happen in – but it is not that simple. Virginia Woolf in 'A Room of One's Own' talked about the obstacles for women writers. Today, carving out creative or contemplative space is unusual, in some ways radical. It involves turning to oneself and the world with a different gaze.

To engage in writing with a 'wellbeing' focus you may or may not be facilitated or in a group. You could be on your own scribbling or writing 'in your head' while walking along. The point is, your focus involves the wish to further your understanding of 'the big issues', your stage in life, or a relationship, or your environment; to think laterally about a problem; or look for new and more satisfying meaning.

Writing for wellbeing is a bridge-builder. It spans literature and medicine, poetry and psychology, writing and ecology. Geopoetics is one area where concern for the earth is linked with writing. Theoretical understanding is developing through work in the field of creative writing for therapeutic purposes, and related areas such as social sciences, medical humanities and narrative therapy.

For poet John Donne in 'The Good Morrow', love is capable of making 'one little room an everywhere', opening its occupants' eyes to infinite possibilities. No walls and no structure would spell chaos. But imaginative writing uses the 'walls' or boundaries to gain freedoms and explore wider universes, internal and external, personal and political. Development organizations promoting literacy in poverty-stricken countries are doing more than teaching children to read and write – they are giving them tools with which to navigate life's challenges. They are giving societies resources for creatively devising solutions to problems. In wealthier societies, writing for wellbeing is reminding disjointed communities what connects them and offering ways of engendering new perspectives while not forgetting old wisdom.

The themes in this column are explored further in an article in the Spring 2012 issue of Lapidus Journal www.lapidusjournal.org

Fiona Hamilton is Chair of Lapidus, writer, facilitator in the NHS and tutor with Metanoia and Bristol University.

POETRY BOOK SOCIETY

After the TS Eliot Prize

The TS Eliot Prize hasn't, for once, completely dominated our lives over the last few months. Like NAWE, the Poetry Book Society has been trying to work out how you survive when your funding support from ACE has been withdrawn. We've come up with some of the same answers too – increase membership fees, cut staff, trim back some activities and hope you can make it – but it hasn't been an enjoyable experience and life lived precariously is not the best environment for creative work in support of poetry.

In this situation, this year's TS Eliot Prize has been truly astonishing. The story starts with the news of the shortlist in October, at which time we also announced new support for the Prize from Aurum Funds, an investment manager. We were so pleased to get this support for poetry from the financial sector to replace the previous funding we had from the John S Cohen Foundation and the broadcaster Five. In our current situation it is especially welcome and means that the Prize has an assured future.

The storm-clouds were gathering though and some weeks later Alice Oswald announced that she would withdraw her book from the shortlist because she didn't approve of our new funding, with John Kinsella following soon after. We spent two weeks caught up in a media frenzy, with national press coverage every day. It was uncomfortable, quite painful and rather distracting as a background to intensive fund-raising. Eventually the press lost interest and we worked our way through Christmas and got to the TS Eliot Prize itself, with a highly distinguished shortlist consisting of John Burnside, Carol Ann Duffy, Leontia Flynn, David Harsent, Daljit Nagra, Esther Morgan and Bernard O'Donoghue.

The TS Eliot Readings in the Royal Festival Hall commanded a large and enthusiastic audience of 1800, making it by some margin the biggest event of the poetry year. The judges made their decision, which the Chair Gillian Clarke announced at the friendly and supportive party held at the Haberdashers' Hall. For the first time we had live television coverage on Channel 4 News, broadcasting an interview with the winner John Burnside from a satellite truck outside.

The sensational thing was that we had an enormous amount of media coverage. The poets' withdrawal had made the TS Eliot Prize into a news story which was then picked up all round the world. In the end we had a massive 140 separate pieces of coverage of the Prize, giving it, the poets, the winner and the PBS the kind of huge international visibility that poetry prizes can usually only dream of. So this only shows that the opportunities for creative work in support of poetry and writing in general don't always come at you as you'd expect. Life can be quite surprising.

Chris Holifield

FOYLE YOUNG POETS AWARDS

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is an opportunity for any young poet aged 11-17. It has kick-started the career of some of today's most exciting new voices, including this year's judge Helen Mort, whose next collection is to be published by Chatto & Windus.

The top 15 poets will be published in an anthology going out to over 24,000 people worldwide in March 2013. There are two prizes available for the 15 overall winners of the award; 14-17 year olds get the chance to attend an Arvon course at The Hurst in Shropshire. The younger age range winners (11-14 year olds) will receive a visit to their school from a professional poet, followed by mentoring. All 100 winners (15 top winners and 85 commended) benefit from ongoing support via publication, performance, promotion and internship opportunities.

Deadline for Submissions: 31 July 2012
Judges: Helen Mort and Christopher Reid
www.foyleyoungpoets.org

POETRY BUSINESS COMPETITION

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2011 Book & Pamphlet Competition, sponsored by NAWE.

Rosie Shepperd, Suzannah Evans, Julie Mellor and Kim Moore will all receive cash prizes and publication. The 2012 Competition will be launched in the Summer.

www.poetrybusiness.co.uk

NATIONAL FLASH-FICTION DAY

16 May will see the launch of the first National Flash-Fiction Day. The brainchild of NAWE member Calum Kerr, writer and lecturer at the University of Winchester, the day will bring together writers, readers, teachers, editors and general fans of the up-and-coming form which is flash-fiction. Events including readings, workshops, slams, anthologies and competitions have already been organized all over the UK within universities, schools and the wider writing community, with more in the pipeline. But there is plenty of room for other events and people to do something. So if you want to take part, set up an event, or just find out more information, please go to the website at www.nationalflashfictionday.co.uk or send an email to Calum at nationalflashfictionday@gmail.com.

AUTHORS ELECTRIC

With around 550,000 ebooks available for download, many of them US imports or unedited manuscripts, new owners of e-readers can be overwhelmed. Endeavouring to point UK readers towards books of a professional standard is the new blog, Do Authors Dream of Electric Books? (http://authorselectric.blogspot.com), which brings together a variety of published UK-based authors of fiction and non-fiction for adults, teens and children. Many of these writers are now bringing back their much missed out-of-print books as ebooks, with others publishing new titles at affordable prices.

The site offers a daily blog by this team of professional authors, talking openly about all things to do with writing and what it is like to be an author in this digital age. Each month, the blog also hosts a guest author talking about their work.

www.authorselectric.co.uk

PUBLIC LENDING RIGHT

Public Lending Right celebrated a great milestone recently when the 50000th author registered. This is a tremendous achievement for the small team at the PLR office in Stockton-on-Tees who try to publicize the scheme whenever possible.

PLR is a legal right to payment from government funds each time your books are borrowed from public libraries. Eligible applicants include writers, illustrators, photographers, editors and translators. Anyone resident in the EEA (European Economic Area) can apply. The amount payable is based on the estimated number of times registered books are borrowed nationally during the PLR year. Payments are made annually each February. There are no joining or membership fees.

All NAWE members who are published authors are encouraged to register. For more information on the scheme, visit www.plr.uk.com or telephone 01642 604699.

SHAKE THE DUST

Shake the Dust is a national performance poetry project taking place in schools and youth groups across England from February to July 2012, inspired by the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Commencing in schools and youth groups in February, participating teams of 13 –16 year olds will be given the opportunity to work with an established spoken word artist to learn about poetry and performance. They will write, craft and devise performance poems to be showcased as part of a slam competition in their region, happening in June 2012. The highest scoring team will go on to represent their region at The National Shake the Dust Weekend held at the Southbank Centre, London 5 – 8 July 2012.

Shake the Dust is managed by Apples and Snakes. It is supported by Arts Council England and is being delivered in partnership with venues and slam producers in Birmingham, Leeds, London, Manchester, Nottingham, Norwich, Plymouth, Southampton and Stockton-on-Tees.

www.shakethedust.co.uk

MEMBERS' NEWS

John Alcock's new poetry book, *Timestop*, is published by Poesia. The poems take the reader on a journey across time: from the English countryside to post-wall Berlin and the prehistoric caves of the Dordogne. Interlinking his personal poems are translations, found poetry and poems derived from his own wide reading. Copies (£5.00 to NAWE members) available from johnalcock1@btinternet.com.

Leo Aylen's new book of poetry is *The Day The Grass Came*, published by Muswell Press in April 2012.

Martyn Bedford's first novel for teenagers and young adults, *Flip* (Walker Books, 2011), was shortlisted in the children's books category of the Costa Book Awards, has been named a Red House "Pick of the Year" title, and longlisted or shortlisted for a further nine awards, including the CILIP Carnegie Medal.

Steve Bowkett's new book, *Using Comic Art to Improve Speaking, Reading and Writing: Kapow!* is published by David Fulton. The aim is to show children how the organization of comicbook panels and pages can be used as a visual analogue to help young writers generate, organize and refine their ideas. He is also working on a series of books to be published by Continuum, including *Get Them Thinking Like Writers* and *Get Them Thinking Like Scientists*, and is series editor for subsequent titles.

Iceland Stories, **Liz Cashdan**'s poems on iceland and Pat Hodson's digital images of Iceland will appear from Roman Books on 24 April 2012. Advance notice on Amazon and Waterstones.

Phil Emery's new novel *The Shadow Cycles* has been published by Immanion Press. The follow-up to *Necromantra* and *Blasphemer*, the book includes a ground-breaking appendix on the nature of fantasy and genre. His poem on the trials and tribulations of teaching creative writing, 'A Poor Thing', is due to appear in *New Writing*.

Roger Garfitt's memoir, *The Horseman's Word*, will be coming out in paperback from Vintage on 7 April 2012.

Vanessa Gebbie's novel *The Coward's Tale* was published by Bloomsbury in November and chosen by AN Wilson as his 2011 novel of the year in *The Financial Times*. The paperback edition comes out in March. Vanessa is planning a residency on the island of St Helena in 2013, partly for her own writing but also running workshops in the island's four schools.

Christopher M Geeson won 1st place in a Christmas short story competition, with his festive piece, 'One Corpse Too Merry', published on www.thegreatesc.com. His violent futuristic story, 'Punchbag', was published in the British Fantasy Society's Journal, Autumn 2011.

Andrea Holland has been commissioned to write two poems (about hopscotch!) for the Live Art Collective East (LACE) as part of a project called 'Hopscotch to Victory', for the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. http://liveartcollectiveeast.com/hopscotch-to-victory/ She has also been commissioned to write 2 poems for the exhibition, 'Family Matters: the family in British Art' at Norwich Castle Museum (a Tate Museum project). http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk

Joan Johnston's new poetry collection is *The Daredevil: Scenes from a Bigamist Marriage* (Red Squirrel Press, 2011)

Ann Kelly's YA novel *Koh Tabu* was shortlisted for the Red Book Award. Her latest collection of poems, *Telling the Bees*, illustrated by Mark Foreman, (Oversteps) was launched last month.

Jason Lee was conferred the title Professor of Culture and Creative Writing at the University of Derby in 2011. His crime novel, *Unholy Days,* is being published by Roman Books in March, and Cambria Press are publishing his edited collection, *Cultures of Addiction,* in April. His collection, *Seeing Galileo,* is available from Gylphi, and he is currently working on *The Psychology of Screenwriting* with Bloomsbury.

Fiona Linday won the Unique Writing Publication's 'Love' short story award. Horus Music Limited is publishing her YA short story anthology, *The Heavenly Road Trip,* as an ebook for Amazon Kindle. 978-0-9571868-0-4

Char March has two new poetry collections published: *The Thousand Natural Shocks* has won two awards and *The Cloud Appreciation Society's Day Out* is the culmination of her year as writer-in-residence for the Pennine Watershed Landscape Project. Currently writer-in-residence for Hull University Business School (HUBS), she is also working on a poetry and sculpture project for the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

Maria C McCarthy's poetry collection, *strange fruits*, has raised over £680 for Macmillan Cancer Support. Cultured Llama Publishing, set up by Maria and veteran publisher Bob Carling, is now open to submissions of book proposals for poetry and short story collections. Proposals for anthologies of the work of writers' groups are also welcome. www.culturedllama.co.uk

Frances McNeil (writing as Frances Brody) has a new novel published in paperback by Piatkus. *Murder in the Afternoon* is the third novel in the 1920s Yorkshire-based mystery series featuring First World War widow turned sleuth, Kate Shackleton. It was published in hardback and ebook last September. *Dying in the Wool*, the first novel in the series, is now published in the US.

Jane McNulty's new play, *Our Lady of the Goldfinches*,

will be toured by Small Mercies Productions at selected venues in April/May 2012. Directed by Bill Hopkinson, the play is about the killing by the IRA of Jean McConville, and is the result of a ten-year dialogue between the writer and Jean's eldest surviving daughter, Helen. www.smallmerciesproductions.co.uk

Andrew Melrose's new book, *Monsters Under the Bed*, focuses on critical and contemporary issues surrounding writing for 'early years' children. An investigation of the cult and culture of the child and childhood in fiction and non-fictional writing, it also contains a wealth of ideas and critical advice.

Joan Michelson is Poet Laureate, Thornton's Budgen's Crouch End London, 2011- 2014. The American edition of *Toward the Heliopause* is published by Poetic Matrix Press, CA, 2011.

John Mole has two new books out: *The Point of Loss*, a collection from Enitharmon, and *The Memory of Gardens (Amintirea gradinilor)*, a bilingual collection from the Contemporary Literature Press, Bucharest – translated poems plus interview and essay by Daniela Calinescu.

Kate North has poems in *This Line is Not for Turning*, the first Anthology of Contemporary British Prose Poetry, published by Cinnamon. www.amazon.co.uk/This-Line-Not-Turning-Contemporary/dp/1907090517

Tom Palmer's *Squad: Black Op* is out this May. Set in Poland on the eve of the Euro 2012 football tournament, it is published by Puffin Books for readers aged 9+ . Accompanying 'The Squad' series is a free Schools Pack to encourage children to engage more with writing. www.tompalmer.co.uk/index.php?page_id=62

Julia Pascal's plays, *The Yiddish Queen Lear* and *Woman in the Moon* have been reprinted by Oberon Books.

Julie-Ann Rowell has a poem in *Shadows of Our Ancestors, poems from the heart of neolithic Orkney*, an anthology published by Braga Press.

Robert Sheppard's set of three short stories about poets, *The Only Life*, is available from www.knivesforksandspoonspress.co.uk

John Siddique was recently appointed Honorary Fellow in Creative Writing at Leicester University, for two years. His work appears in the forthcoming anthology from Bloodaxe, *Out of Bounds*, edited by Jackie Kay.

Angela Topping was highly commended in the High Sherriff's Prize for Children's Literature, run by the University of Chester. Her monograph on John Clare is to be published this year by Greenwich Exchange and a ninth solo poetry publication is forthcoming from Lapwing Press, titled *Paper Patterns*.

Siobhan Wall's latest book is *Quiet Amsterdam* (Frances Lincoln, 2012) ISBN 9780711233423, £12.99, paperback. (see article on p74)

Max Wallis received an Arts council grant in November to write his next collection. Aged only 22, his first pamphlet, *Modern Love*, was published in July.

Anthony Wilson has two books out, relating to his treatment for cancer and slow return to health: *Riddance* (Worple Press), a book of poems, and *Love for Now* (Impress Books), a prose memoir.

Jacqui Rowe, **David Calcutt** and **Deborah Alma –** under the mentorship of John Killick and with the Courtyard Theatre in Hereford – have been awarded a Highly Commended from the Praxis and Creative Remedies Arts and Health Awards 2011 for their project working with poetry and people with dementia.

Oliver Comins and **Patricia Wooldridge** are amongst contributors to *A Roof of Red Tiles*, a collection of stories and poems published by Cinnamon Press.

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A NAWE Conference

It may not be what you think you want, but it could be exactly what you need

Julie MacLusky

I'll admit it – I attended this conference because my university was paying, and my line manager wanted me to. She thought I was a little isolated, as the only Creative Writing lecturer within an English Literature corridor. Working with colleagues every day, I did not quite get what she meant. Having taught writing (including Screenwriting, Creative Writing and Professional writing) at universities in North America and the UK since 1999, I also thought the conference might provide some opportunities to network.

What I did not expect was that the conference could kick-start my own writing, re-connect me with my community, of writers, and re-energize my own teaching.

It took a weekend away with fellow writers to remind me of my original motivation for starting down this path – the reason why I had given up a career as a journalist with the BBC in 1992 and take up a place on the Masters in Professional Writing at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles. Back then there were very few British universities offering any kind of courses in the subject – now the landscape is transformed, with over eighty British Universities offering Creative Writing as a component of an English degree, or as a post-graduate degree.

The NAWE conference took me back to the energizing experience of being involved with a writer's workshop again. Of course, as a lecturer in Creative Writing my working day is spent running such workshops for my students. But I had not participated in one myself for almost twenty years.

In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron prescribes the 'Artist's date' as a way to nurture our own creativity, and writes that we should 'think of the child of divorce who gets to see a beloved parent only on weekends. (During most of the week, your artist is in the custody of a stern, workaday adult.) What that child wants is attention, not expensive outings.' (1992: 19)

You could expand upon Cameron's theme here to suggest that not just the working week, but the working life, and spare time of a lecturer working in academia, is in the custody of a 'stern, workaday adult.' As writers working in education, our energy, time and creativity is used to develop courses, teach modules, support students, and generate ideas that might improve student work and take it to the next level. With three modules to deliver, plus course leadership, I average about 60 hours a week.

Not complaining, not at all. In this job I get to watch students transformed over the course of a three-year degree, their lives changed radically for the better. The back of my office door is decorated with thank you letters from students for whom Creative Writing has been the catalyst for radical progress, and whose academic experience has been utterly transformed by my efforts. During marking season I get to sit in a coffee shop, reading some of the best (and of course, the worst) writing I will ever encounter. A few pieces have been so incredibly strong that they have left me shattered, wanting to call the student's mobile phone immediately to congratulate them. Compared to work in many areas,

the holidays of academics are lavish, our working days concentrated and intense.

The tiny little catch is, that as writers working in academia, our writing time is eaten alive, literally, by the University's schedule.

And the killer rider here is that writers in education are in a very separate category from their fellow academics. If a colleague with a PhD has not published any research for twenty years, this will not significantly affect their ability to teach in Higher Education. As long as your department is not chasing a 5* RAF rating, and even then it need not declare you 'research active'.

However, if you are a Lecturer in Creative Writing and are no longer, yourself, writing, then you really have no justification for teaching writing. At all.

The tools in Cameron's book have been extremely useful as a way to encourage my students to start writing. For years I have been telling my students that they need – they deserve – to take the time out to 'heal' their creative selves, to give themselves permission to create, to write.

The conference was billed with a sub-heading of 'Back to the Workshop', which was explained by organizer Paul Munden as an opportunity to reinstate the status of the writing workshop at a time when it had come under scrutiny, and to underline the social enterprise that is involved in *sharing our art, craft and imagination* with other writers.

This would turn out to be the defining statement of the conference for me.

Paul referred to the idea that the more recent embrace of academia has meant that the conference has begun to let in the traditional academic paper, which has its place, but that there was a feeling that something more special was possibly under threat.

This concern speaks to my experience as a writer working within a traditional English literature subject area. My module guides, published outcomes, programme specifications, and student assessments are reviewed, critiqued and revised with input from colleagues whose training has been entirely within the Academy, mostly as specialists in Literature.

External examiners and colleagues second mark my students' writing, and then, uncertain as to how grades can be arrived at, request further instruments of assessment, and the demonstration of learning outcomes. Thus, if workshopping is a learning outcome, then I must ask students to include examples of critique upon another's work with their final assignment. If students are supposed to incorporate techniques generated from the study of literature, then externals and colleagues want examples of this included. Then they ask that each component of the expanded assessment be given a weighting, to help them understand how a grade was arrived at. Then they receive the very much extended piece of student assessment and ask for it to be more streamlined and the word count reduced, as clearly now the assessment is too large to be justified in a year 1 module. And so on.

It is possible to argue that this extra work is being asked for because colleagues are just not comfortable with the existence of Creative Writing as a legitimate module to be assessed alongside their own. Thus the extra effort is being demanded as kind of salve to their insecurity about attributing marks to creative work. A colleague from Drama, aware of these problems, suggested to me that Creative Writing should have been housed within departments of Fine Art, or Drama, subject areas where staff are more comfortable with the assessment of artistic practice.

This extra assessment is also a burden for myself, for my students, and for many other writers in HE, judging by informal conversations I was able to have with peers at the conference. These conversations developed into discussions about the reception of Creative Writing within English Literature departments.

It became clear that Creative Writing is not always given a warm and friendly welcome into the academic departments, (usually English Literature), where it is housed. Colleagues in both my department and at universities across the country are still challenging the justification for the inclusion of Creative Writing at universities.

It was a delight to find how universal my experience has been. One Senior Lecturer who works in a prestigious Writing programme described how the Creative Writing staff were at first isolated down one end of an English Literature corridor and then moved, to their great delight, into another building, far away from any day-to-day contact with other English Literature staff.

The problems encountered by fellow writers resonated with my experience at the University of Southern California, School of Cinematic Arts. When I worked in

the School's Writing Division, my boss, John Furia, former President of the Writer's Guild of America, had to attend a cross-campus meeting with assorted academics from traditional subject areas. In the midst of the discussion, one eminent gentleman, possibly from Philosophy or some such subject, looked at John Furia across the table, and demanded, 'Tell me when Film became a fit subject for study at a University?' The School of Cinematic Arts was actually founded in 1929 by movie veterans including Douglas Fairbanks, DW Griffith, William C De Mille, Ernst Lubitsch, Irving Thalberg and Darryl Zanuck. This question was asked at a university where about 9000 applications are received each year for each of the 45 places on the Undergraduate Film Production programme, and where Cinema School applications drive admissions across the whole, extremely expensive, university.

During discussions with writers working in education, I like to tell a story about a traditional Oxbridge academic, who gave a paper at a prestigious West Coast university, the theme of which was that his classical university education had prepared him perfectly for the life of a fifteenth century knight. Thus his degree programme had been perfectly aligned to the job market that it had been originally designed for. He applauded the way that North American universities generate degree courses to help their graduates adapt to rapidly shifting job markets – with a sensitivity that traditional British Universities could not hope to mimic. Thus as recently as the early twentieth century, the study of English Literature was looked down upon. Today the newcomer is Creative Writing.

This is at a time when the 'creative industries' in the UK make up the fastest growing sector of the UK economy and 7.9 per cent of the UK gross domestic product (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) 2006). (2011:14)

The bottom line is that – in departments of English Literature across the country – Creative Writing is becoming the bottom line, in times of fierce competition for students. Traditional academics may not like us to be allowed to work in a university – and some of the most traditional English departments, where recruitment is still very strong, are in a position where they need not feel obliged to offer any modules taught by writers.

Sometimes I have thought the resistance to writers working on university English courses has some mileage in it – studying literature because you want to write, has sometimes been compared to dissecting a dog because you love animals. It has been perceived that there is a dis-connect between the creation of good writing, and the analysis of literature. Any possible cross-fertilization between the two would not be worthwhile.

Meanwhile, students are taking A-Level English courses that contain Creative Writing coursework, the subject has been foregrounded as key to future progress in the Primary Curriculum Nationwide, and demand amongst students for Creative Writing to be included in their degree level coursework is increasing. During Open Days at the University of Worcester, students want to know when they will be able to take the newly added joint honours in Creative and Professional Writing. This has been developed to respond to student demand and bolster recruitment in challenging times.

Against this backdrop, to be able to meet with writers from every area of education was a very welcome relief. At the conference I met writers from a range of backgrounds, some taking the odd class, some like myself, working in a similar level of isolation, and all of us working amongst academics whose welcome can be summed up as ranging from bemused, lukewarm, resigned, or incredulous, to resentful and hostile that Creative Writing has been even 'allowed' into universities, is 'taking away' their modules and somehow watering down their specialism. This served to put my own experience into a broader context of change. Dealing with day to day interactions with colleagues has become more enjoyable, knowing that at universities across the country, fellow writers are meeting with the same kinds of challenges.

A vast range of workshops were also on offer – and every one that I attended has had a lasting impact upon my work. For example, 'The Creative Space 1: a time to write', run by Karen Stevens, acknowledged that as teachers of writing we need the 'sparks' that might feed our imagination and creativity. The workshop focused upon a short, short story by James Lasdun. We were encouraged to use elements or characters within the story as a starting point, or simply use the time to begin a piece of our own writing.

I joined this workshop only a few hours into the conference and this simple instruction was a catalyst for my own writing. This was because for once I was given permission – actually asked – to write. Since the conference, the story by James Lasdun has been used in both my beginning and intermediate Creative Writing modules, generating a wonderful range of stories, some of which were submitted for the final assessment.

At the ‘Catching Words’ workshop, run by Kate Wolstenholme from Stratford’s Discovery Centre, I found out about a literacy intervention project with ninety Year 2 students across three schools in Newham, who are not meeting expected levels in literacy. In May last year, I was invited by BBC TV show Midlands Today, to attend a Worcester Primary school and give a demonstration of writing exercises from my book, co-written with Dr Robyn Cox, *Teaching Creative Writing in the Primary School: Delight, Entice, Inspire*. When the cameras paused, we overheard the class teacher saying ‘I have never seen those children so engaged, or even writing before!’ This remark provided the impetus for a body of research that we have presented at conferences in the UK and Australia, that demonstrates the potential that lies in Creative Writing to engage pupils and drive up standards across the curriculum, amongst all ability groups. Kate’s workshop provided me with the chance to catch up on a range of projects that are employing a similar framework, to achieve the same goal. A chat after the workshop ended led to a visit last month to the Discovery Centre, where I spent time finding out more about how writing is being used as a catalyst for change, and where I developed the idea of providing support to local primary school teachers.

Kelly Connor, in her workshop, ‘Telling True Tales’, shared tools that have enabled me subsequently to get students to access the fabric of their own lives, the stories of their parents, and those of their grandparents, as inspiration for the development of fiction, scripts and poetry. The framework provided by Kelly helps me to provide a feeling of safety amongst students being asked to share risky, life-changing moments with others in a workshop setting, and experiencing this creative workshop myself has enabled me to gain an insight into how students feel to be on the receiving end of exercises that are incredibly challenging. This workshop served to remind me that students can access the most painful and personal elements of their lives and this information can have a powerful impact upon the quality of work produced and engender a positive improvement of group dynamic. Working within Departments of English Literature since 2004, I realize that I have constrained the teaching of Creative Writing to fit within a framework that my colleagues can easily understand and respect, providing students with examples taken from literature as a starting point for their own writing. The exercises that I was introduced to in workshops like Kelly’s, reconnected me with the fundamental well-spring for great writing – that it can, and should, be generated from the student’s own life experience.

In the workshop ‘Inspiration and Collaboration,’ run by Jocelyn Page, we were provided with a range of techniques that can invoke inspiration in writing practice, including unorthodox models of collaboration and their platforms of delivery (Facebook, e-mail, Skype, texting). I gained another tool that can be employed in my own teaching, and time was again allowed for writing. This was factored into many of the other workshops that I attended.

A chat after the workshop ended led to a visit last month to the Discovery Centre, where I spent time finding out more about how writing is being used as a catalyst for change, and where I developed the idea of providing support to local primary school teachers.

A range of events framed the workshops. The NAWE Debate and AGM, led by Maggie Butt and Paul Munden, gave delegates the chance to see below the ‘skirts’ of the Association, and to provide input into its future development. I appreciated the fact that we were genuinely provided with an opportunity for all members to take a lead in shaping NAWE’s future, and felt that our opinions were valued. Broader conference discussions reported on projects like Writing on Location, through which NAWE members devised CPD sessions and resources for teachers and museum staff at locations across England.

During breaks I met writers from Columbia College Chicago’s Fiction Writing Department, keen to develop possibilities for international exchange. Readings were provided by Carol Ann Duffy, Paul Munden, Anne Caldwell and Kate Mosse. All provided incredible insights into different writing systems and approaches, from interviewing descendants of the Alexander Palace internment camp for German citizens during World War One, to Mosses’ writing practice, which involves rising at 3 am every morning. During another coffee break I homed in on a stall where a team from The Writer’s Compass were offering materials on professional development, and a NAWE book stall. A ten minute meeting with Jonathan Davidson from Writing West Midlands has enabled me to join a network of Writers in Higher Education with a growing calendar of meetings

at which ideas, skills and theories are shared and developed.

And thus – from a conference where I perhaps expected at the most to network, and compare notes, I discovered:

A reconnection with the impetus that had taken me down the track that led to my present work as a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing.

I got what I did not know, that I most needed: that most precious gift (the one I spend my working hours building for my students) – the permission, and the time, to creatively re-charge, and write.

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Julie MacLusky *is a Senior Lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing and Course Leader for the BA (joint Hons) in English Language, at the University of Worcester. She has worked as a broadcast journalist with the BBC and has most recently written, together with Dr Robyn Cox, 'Teaching Creative Writing in the Primary School: Delight, Entice, Inspire' 2011. Open University*

A Poem in the Space between Languages

A writing experiment at the NAWE Conference 2011

Vanessa Gebbie and Sieneke de Rooij

Dutch writer and teacher Sieneke de Rooij arrived at the NAWE Conference with a poem written in her mother tongue and the intention of writing an English version over the weekend. In conversation, she and fellow delegate Vanessa Gebbie decided to enjoy a little international collaboration, but not with the sole aim of producing a suitably poetic translation. They decided to see if there could be a meaningful 'mirror' response to a poem written in a foreign language, a language unknown to the respondee, who would be given only minimal information.

Using Sieneke's Dutch poem as inspiration, and without knowing what it was about, Vanessa (who does not read or speak Dutch) would 'respond' with her own quick 'translation'.

The results were, we think, worth sharing. The process can perhaps be divided into five stages.

1. First, Sieneke translated the title – *Ik ben een kind*, 'I am a child'. She then read the poem out loud, in Dutch, and Vanessa followed the Dutch text. Vanessa would say later that hearing the poem read, whilst not 'understanding' on the most immediate level, was an extraordinary experience. It had been hard to find a quiet corner in the hotel, somewhere they could escape the tinned 'music' in the public areas. So the first words to drop into the space they found were those of the poem. It broke down for her into a flow of sound without overt meaning. Inflection, rhythm and tone took on a heightened significance.

Sieneke then translated the short very simple first lines of each stanza, viz- *Ik zie een wolk*, 'I see a cloud' (which Vanessa promptly forgot, remembering it as 'sky'...!), *Ik zie een kat*, 'I see a cat', and *Ik zie een golf*, 'I see a wave.' And without further conversation, Vanessa took this Dutch text to her room to see what would happen...

Ik ben een kind

Ik zie een wolk
ik denk: zo vredig te vliegen
verwondering boven de wereld
maar een wolk
hagelt van woede
regent machteloos leeg
vervliegt in mist.
Ik ren krachtig
ik ben een kind.

Ik zie een kat
ik denk: zo door tuinen te sluipen
op rooftocht op donkere daken
maar een kat
verspilt acht van zijn levens
aan slapen en spinnen
zijn wilde geest getemd.
Ik mag razen
ik ben een kind.

Ik zie een golf
ik denk: rollen en schuimen en bruisen
vermengen met wereldzeeën
de continenten omspoelen
maar de golf
die wil bonken en beuken

vervloeit in het schelpige zachtzand.
Ik kan reizen
ik ben een kind.

Ik
ren
raas
reis
door het leven,
kind.

Sieneke de Rooij, Nederland

2. A short while later, Vanessa returned with her 'translation'. She began to read it to Sieneke and they were both surprised by the emotional intensity of the experience – the reading of, and the hearing of a first draft poem written 'off the cuff' as a response to a mainly incomprehensible stimulus, an attempt to mirror it in some way.

I am a child

I see the sky
I think - how endless it is
hovering, holding the world
but the sky
is pierced by trees
and shredded by the flight of birds
whose wings stir the mist.
I just remember
I am a child.

I see a cat
I think - how he uncurls and slips
over the rooftops, over high walls
but the cat
will not always land in safety
one day he will spin, and fall
his freedom must end.
I can imagine
I am a child.

I see a wave
I think – how it rolls and heaves and shines
in its journeying
and ties the world together
but the wave
must crash and break
one day – nothing is for ever.
I have a journey
I am a child.

3. Sieneke and Vanessa then discussed the two poems. They were both stunned by the effect of this experiment, as they discovered all the layers of content in Vanessa's new poem, purely based on sound, visual impression of text and four 'clues' only.

It became obvious that there were both expected and unexpected similarities between the two. The overall shape of each English stanza was roughly the same as the Dutch inspiration. The vocabulary was very different, the images too – but there was a surprise to come.

In each verse, the English version mirrored the Dutch thematically – in that the simple thing seen by the child, introduced in line 1 (which Vanessa knew) was followed by the thought process of the child 'narrator' over the next two lines. The thought process then pivoted at maar / 'but' into a consideration of change/ impermanence/loss of potency/a death metaphor.

It was very clear to Sieneke how Vanessa's new poem echoed the atmosphere and feelings of her first poem, and that the images of nature that Vanessa breathed in from her *Ik ben een kind* were breathed out in Vanessa's new *I am a child*. Also, the second poem reflects the feeling of invincibility and everlasting life of a child, as opposed to the crumble and fall it sees in nature, in the original poem.

4. The writers were very intrigued at these similarities, and looked at how this might have happened.

Remembering the process:

Vocabulary clues: There were several words whose meaning crossed the Channel – *ik denk* sounded like 'I think' to Vanessa. And it fitted. *Wereld* sounded like 'world' and *rollen* like 'rolling', but all other words were just shapes on the page, and sound. Vanessa studied French a long time ago, and *maar* in its repeated position in each stanza, prefacing a repetition of the subject of the first line of each, felt to her like mais/'but'.

Tone/Sound clues: Sieneke's reading was very important. The tone used indicated that the poem thoughtful, not intended to be dramatic, or light and amusing. Perhaps Sieneke had paused before *maar* and emphasized that word in its place, where each stanza turned a corner.

The inexplicable element seemed to be the similarities in theme. The focus on impermanence, change and loss,

when the title, and the first lines only mentioned *kind*, *wolk, kat*, and *golf* - child, cloud, cat, and wave.

Of course, those themes are not infrequently found in poetry – but both Sieneke and Vanessa were struck by the echoes via which deeper levels of 'meaning' were communicated somewhere in the space between their respective languages.

5. To escort this poem back to its mother language, Sieneke then translated Vanessa's new poem into Dutch. She tried to keep Vanessa's content in images and atmosphere, while bringing into her translation the rhythm and sound she likes to use in her Dutch. This may take the form of connecting consonants or vowels, rhythm in sentences or stanzas, and double meanings of words.

Kind

Ik zie de lucht
ik zie ruimte zonder einde
maar de lucht
wordt doorboord door bomen
versnipperd door vogelvlucht
hun vleugels scheuren de mist.
Dat zie ik,
ik ben een kind.

Ik zie een kat
ik zie hem strekken en sluipen
over daken en hoge muren
maar de kat
is niet altijd meer veilig
ooit zal hij tollen en vallen
zijn vrijheid kapot.
Dat weet ik,
ik ben een kind.

Ik zie een golf
zie rollen en stijgen en dansen
zie hem de wereld verbinden
maar de golf zal zijn reis
moeten breken
en neerslaan - niets is voor eeuwig.
Mijn reis gaat door,
ik ben een kind.

Ik zie
weet
reis
door het leven,
kind.

Sieneke and Vanessa were very much inspired by this experience. They both felt it would make a useful exercise to do with students. A teacher could take poems in unknown languages (or even script) and encourage students to reflect and write from them. Ideally, a reader should provide the sound experience. And just like twelve students in a painting course will produce twelve completely different paintings of the same vase with sunflowers, here, the differences in the new poems that students create will be interesting and worth exploring.

Vanessa Gebbie*, freelance writer and writing tutor, author of* The Coward's Tale *(Bloomsbury) two collections of short stories and a text book on the art of the short story.*

Sieneke de Rooij*, writer, writing coach and Creative Writing Consultant with Kunstfactor, the Dutch National Institute for the Amateur Arts*

Making It

What a Degree in Creative Writing Has Done for Me

Craig Batty, Danielle Jawando and Bernie Howley

It was during a NAWE Higher Education Committee meeting early last year that we stumbled on the idea of running a student-led session about studying Creative Writing. I can't remember the specifics (though I can remember the sandwiches), but we were discussing the usual woes of funding, recognition, respect. It was all getting a bit negative, when one of us reminded the group why were were involved in teaching in the first place; and how we loved seeing students 'make it', (more on that definition later). And so, in my usual go-getter way, I suggested bringing together a group of students and/or graduates from Creative Writing courses who could give us a real sense of why Creative Writing and its teaching are important. Eventually titled 'Making It: What a Degree in Creative Writing Has Done for Me', the session for the annual conference was planned and had a positive vibe about it. Students from Bath Spa University, Bournemouth University and the University of East London, hosted by some of their lecturers (myself, Steve May and Helena Blakemore), would tell us 'from the coalface' why it really is great to study Creative Writing.

The result was better than we could have expected. Crowded room and lack of chairs aside, the students – four in total – spoke passionately and honestly about their experiences of undertaking Creative Writing degrees. They spoke about professional ambitions; personal achievements; creative developments; critical advancements; skills acquisitions; all ways in which they had 'made it'. The session was extremely well received, and hopefully instilled back in us all confidence about what we do.

In this article, then, two of the students involved in the session – Danielle Jawando (University of East London) and Bernie Howley (Bath Spa University) – speak about their experiences of undertaking degrees in Creative Writing. Their accounts are personal and inspirational, and I'm sure you'll agree, tick many boxes that we don't often see on the various piles of paperwork we often encounter. I would encourage you to share these experiences with you own staff and students. Enjoy!

Craig Batty

I was one of those children that loved books. Words, characters, the world, everything seemed to interest me, to fascinate me and I'd spend hours making up stories about people and places that didn't exist. I wrote a review of *Titanic*. My teacher didn't believe I had written it. She thought that for an eleven-year-old it was 'too emotional, too passionate and too moving' and gave me detention for copying it from the back of the video.

In secondary school (like most writers) I was useless at everything but English. I enjoyed the books, I enjoyed reading, but most of all I enjoyed the freedom of being able to write creatively. My teacher would often choose me to read the stories I'd written and I hated it. Half the class couldn't be bothered to listen, and the other half would snigger and call it "gay". This made me feel that writing should be something kept to yourself and that there was something wrong with me for writing in that

way.

At college, I picked the subjects you were told you ought to take. Ones that put you on a clear career path or sounded impressive; Law, Psychology and then (my two loves) – English Language and English Literature. But even then, it wasn't the same. The freedom I once had to be able to sit and play with words, to tell stories, to explore, was gone. It was all about other people's stories, the grander side of literature, their creativity. Being able to express myself was gone. I began to lose interest in English, in the subjects I was studying, in education.

It wasn't until I attended a one hour 'creative writing' enrichment class during the gap between my Psychology and Law lessons that my love of writing really took off. In a way, this was my first 'proper' experience of a writing course, of being in a creative writing environment. We were writing stories, poetry, sharing work, giving feedback, and when I was forced to read something aloud I was surprised when I was accepted. My tutor instead said that I had "a way with words", and my writing was "beautifully descriptive." I felt as though for one hour I fitted in somewhere, and although the rest of college was difficult for me, that one lunchtime a week was something I couldn't wait to experience.

When I was applying for university as a young adult I was stuck at a crossroads. I was told to choose something I was passionate about, that would lead me on to a career path, but so far I didn't have that. All I knew was the enjoyment I felt from those 60 minutes of constant scribbling. By chance I stumbled across the University of East London's Creative and Professional Writing degree.

Everyday I am thankful that I picked that course. Had I not I believe I would be very miserable, very unhappy and my life would be very unfulfilling.

When I arrived I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I didn't come from a family of academics, I wasn't naturally academic, and I was one of few within my family to go to university. My 'friends' at the time sneered when I mentioned what I would be studying, saying it was an 'easy option' and a 'Mickey Mouse' degree.

Within the first week I found myself in an intensely academic environment with English Literature students, Journalism students and even some History students. We were looking at the 'making of the self' through literature, who we've come to be, theorists, feminists – lots of 'ists', how you write with power, how you critically analyze yourself as a writer, the choices you make and why you make them. In the beginning I found this very difficult. Having to analyze yourself, compare yourself, place yourself and your writing in the world of literature.

UEL took you seriously as a Creative Writer; you didn't just create, you had to justify and research what you had created and why you created it. This was something I wasn't used to, and if I'm honest I found it intimidating. It made me question whether I was any good, whether I actually belonged, and whether I could actually learn all these things.

I felt clunky, clumsy and that I knew nothing. What I once thought you could just sit down and blurt out I saw needed work, honing, styling. As a result, what seemed once upon a time to come naturally had to be learned from scratch.

To say the least it was a struggle. I was too scared to ask for help, and I found some of the tutors terrifying. I thought I would be seen as less intelligent so I kept my writing and my opinions to myself. I began to feel (and I can't believe I ever felt this way) like I had picked the wrong subject and began to dislike writing.

It wasn't until the second year, when I was forced to share a piece of work that something seemed to shift. I remember reading and the whole class falling silent. I thought the piece I had written was probably done in the wrong way, but instead my tutor told me it was "moving, emotional and extremely passionate." That moment I felt like perhaps I had made the right choice, that actually I was lucky to be in a place full of other writers who could support and help me to grow and that academia was something I wanted to get to grips with.

I began growing into myself both as a person and as a writer. I started to ask questions when stuck, to find out how to do things better, take risks and learn how not to be intimidated by a different use of language. Things which came naturally to others were hard for me. But I persisted and as a result my marks went up, and the comments on my work became more and more positive. That in itself urged me to do better, to try more things. I no longer spent hours thinking about writing, I just did it. I became comfortable with receiving criticism and comfortable with giving it. I became more passionate

about things, ideas and opinions, and I wanted to address these even more in my writing. By my third year I didn't want it to end. I wanted to stay forever writing, being challenged, and being surrounded by a whole writing community. Now, it's quite strange that I felt like I had to be in university to be able to write. I was in fact always a writer.

After university I felt like part of my identity had disappeared. What was I supposed to do? Especially as I truly wanted to have a career as a writer. No one wanted to hire me, because although I did have a degree I had no experience and although I had come a long way, I was still this timid, slightly introvert newly graduated writing student.

Stuck, I remembered what my personal tutor (a typical poet) had once said to me: 'Follow your bliss.' And although at the time it was abstract and quite annoying something clicked. My bliss was indeed writing.

I began to search on the web and came across a small writing organization based in London and volunteered there.

They began to see how passionate and hard working I was, how I just went in and got on with what I was supposed to do (using the skills I'd acquired whilst studying) and as a result they offered me some paid work. Eventually I received an email asking if I knew anyone who could teach a Creative Writing course. I'd never thought about teaching before, or had any experience of teaching but I knew I had acquired three years of knowledge on writing so I said yes.

From that, things started to take off. I was funded to be mentored by a professional poet, I began running writing workshops within colleges, and I began to enjoy it. My tutor, who once terrified me, but now I class as a friend, talked me through lesson plans. The numbers in my class went up each term, the participants in the workshops I ran demanded more and I tried to create for them that buzzing, stretching, learning environment I had at university. The things I had learned, such as the narrative arc, the writer's voice, and the seven basic plots were things people who hadn't studied a degree were fascinated by.

But I didn't want to stop learning. So I decided to go back to UEL and study an MA in Writing. This time it was very different. My experience before was to come into myself as a person, discovering what I wanted to do. Whereas now on the MA, it is an exploration of coming into myself as a writer.

What I expected from postgraduate study was to learn more about the craft, technique, my own work, and I have. Throughout these two years I've been able to take my time and really commit to this practice as a writer. I feel comfortable on the page and the marks I receive have never been higher. I'm no longer afraid to ask questions or take risks. I've been given plenty of opportunities such as reading my work, and having a play performed, which has reinforced my commitment as an artist.

I now know what I write, what my genre is, what my themes are. I can talk about my work and have no doubt that that is who I am. I can even pinpoint what section of Waterstones my novel can be placed in.

Soon I will have finished my MA but the difference is I now have a clear understanding of where I fit in the world. I have learned by being a student, not only how to teach, what to teach, and the passion in which it must be done, but how to write, how to communicate, how to meet deadlines. I can read through a piece of work and mark it with a large cross scribbling things like 'cliché', 'show don't tell', 'attention to detail'.

Had I not taken the BA and MA I dread to think how different I would be, how stuck I would feel. I really am following my bliss.

Danielle Jawando *is studying an MA in Creative Writing. Her play* Q *adapted from David Foster Wallace's* Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, *was performed at Stratford Circus in May last year. Danielle has read at various open mic nights including: 'Write Now' and 'Come Rhyme with Me,' and her short story 'Paradise 703' was shortlisted for the Finishing Line Press competition. Danielle also runs a creative writing course and facilitates workshops within Hertfordshire. She is currently working with adult carers, helping them to write short stories which will then be published in an anthology in order to raise money for charity.*

Studying Creative Writing at Bath Spa University – A Surprising Experience
by Bernie Howley

In preparing to speak on the subject of 'Making It: What a Degree in Creative Writing Has Done for Me' at the recent NAWE conference, I was forced to reflect on the 'me' from before my time at Bath Spa University and the 'me' that emerged four years on with a BA in Creative Writing and an MA in Writing for Young People. While figuring out what to say I spent a long time looking at the two words, 'making it' and I wondered – long – about what they really meant and whether I had indeed 'made it'. With my delete key red hot from over-use, I concluded that those two words covered a massive range of possibilities. Yes, I came away from my MA with a finished manuscript (pre-re-writes) and yes, I was furnished with all sorts of crucial information about the publishing industry, but there was more to my particular 'making it' than that. I had changed. My stint at Bath Spa University surprised me and challenged me again and again and again and in doing so it had opened up a completely new landscape for me.

Here's how this happened – here's my story.

Given that I was a lone parent, aged 50+, with daughters approaching teenager-hood, an ailing parent to care for and a business to run, opting to return to full-time study verged on lunacy – especially as I'd gone through all that university malarkey before. But it's what I chose to do.

You see I wanted to write a novel – not such an unusual goal. However I felt overwhelmed by this simple ambition. Apart from having a complicated plotline, a sense of setting and a few lively characters kicking around in my head making the plot even more complex, I really didn't have a clue about how to organize my thoughts. My writing skills were limited; everything I wrote seemed stifled and formal. As if to load the scales completely against me, my domestic life was chaotic beyond belief. In my mind anything to do with reading or writing was indulgent and I would only allow myself to do either of those things once household, family and business demands had been sorted. As a consequence of that work ethic I wasn't getting much writing time in.

A good friend recognized my frustration and suggested I apply to Bath Spa University – to do their MA in Creative Writing and get that book churned out.

I thought about it. I thought about it a lot but my confidence was at ground level. So… I thought about it for a while longer. Then I braced myself and, as the last few minutes before the deadline for applications slid away, I clicked on the submit button on the form on my screen. It was a compromise. I'd applied for the BA. My friend gave me a hard time, said I was wimping out. But it was the right decision for me. I had been out of the education loop for a few decades and I needed a slow start. I knew that the demands of life were not going to disappear just because I wanted returning to student-hood.

I embarked on the BA at Bath Spa very unsure of what I was letting myself in for and not convinced it would lead me anywhere. The course proved to be an essential stepping-stone toward the MA. First and foremost it eased me into allowing myself to write. I had deadlines. Tutors demanded words of me. Discipline was imposed from outside and writing time (and reading time) soon rose up the league table of essential activities. I'm not sure this would ever have happened if I had not put myself into the middle of the very supportive and oftentimes demanding writing community at Bath Spa University. It is a community that is enthusiastic too. I derived great energy from being a part of it.

The course itself forced me to look long and hard at my own writing; I had a plethora of appalling habits and, in truth, I was pretty dreadful. I was also encouraged to experiment. It was fun. The learning and experimenting and improving continue but I will be eternally grateful to a fantastic bunch of tutors who managed to enlighten me without destroying me.

All of the above was what I'd hoped for. It was the add-ons that surprised me. I never expected to re-discover poetry. I never expected to find writing for young people such a challenge and such a delight. I never expected to discover the fun of short story writing (and reading). I never expected to be drawn back into the world of education. I never expected to run poetry workshops for children. I never expected to organize a poetry festival.

So many 'unexpecteds' – each one deeply satisfying.

Apart from the pleasure and instant gratification mined from each of those, I had an uncanny sense that

something was shifting within me; I felt that I was coming alive. I was daring to do things I would never have thought of a few years earlier. A simple example: on spotting a flier for the Port Eliot festival, I packed up a tent and headed down there, on my own, to listen to a few literary greats, take in some sublime music and *read my poetry*. When some of my old friends raised eyebrows at my newfound abandon I did worry that I might be turning into an eccentric old biddy – but it didn't *feel* like that was what was happening to me. I was engaging with a world I felt comfortable and happy in. My undergrad experience had changed me. And it had given me a hunger for more life-enriching experiences.

It was time to apply to study for an MA. I was torn. Should I opt for a course in writing for young people or for one in poetry? How in heavens name had that happened? Where had the plan to write an adult novel gone? Perhaps I'll get back to that someday but I'd ended up with a difficult decision to make. Eventually I concluded that choosing to formally study one over the other wouldn't prevent me from writing both. I opted for the MA in Writing for Young People and became a closet poet for a while.

The course was fabulous. My fellow MA-ers and the tutors oozed enthusiasm and the support from all quarters was massive. The combined effect of well-led workshops and thoughtful one-to-one tutoring saw the word-count rise. Softly, softly my novel found shape and by the end of the course I had a hefty 85,000-word manuscript and a sense of where I wanted to take it.

The MA was not all plain sailing. At the start of the course one of my older daughters came to live with me – with two young grandchildren in tow. Concerned that this could ring the death knell on my MA I virtually took up residence at the university. I commandeered a table in the common room and spent large portions of every day ensconced there, writing away like a mad thing. I ended up meeting students from the other writing courses, a few of the ceramicists and some musicians simply because I was always there, at my table with my writing. I was astounded by the creativity and commitment of my fellow students. Discovering the distances travelled by some of them and the sacrifices made by others so that they could pursue their dreams was humbling. I became more determined to make my MA experience as expansive and effective as possible.

So I applied to go on the student exchange programme that Bath Spa University runs with Columbia College, Chicago. I was accepted and found myself immersed in the company of a group of talented and articulate and wonderful people for four very intense weeks. I could write an entire book about that experience but suffice to say that it gave me some new perspectives on my writing and a wider view of all the possibilities ahead of me.

I jumped at the chance to work as a volunteer at the Bath Literature festival too. Wow. If someone had predicted that I'd be chatting with Posy Simmonds or Hilary Mantel over a cuppa at Bath Lit Fest I'd have laughed in their faces; thought it was a leg-pull. But I really did do just that when I agreed to take on some 'meet and greet' duties. Looking back at those experiences I realize that I was a tad awe-struck. But it was wonderful. It made everything and anything seem possible.

Studying creative writing at Bath Spa University has been a blitz of surprises, a treasury of unexpected discoveries. I've emerged from the course feeling suitably equipped to make real my dream to write and get it published. But, in addition to that, I have regained lost confidence, discovered endless possibilities and I feel sure that I have found the wherewithal to live my life in a way that is fulfilling and happy. Surely all that qualifies as, 'making it'.

Bernie Howley *has a large family, is a qualified teacher and has worked in engineering and research. More recently she has studied for an MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University.*

'Texts of Poetics' and Historical Fiction

Authors' critical reflections on their work

Heather Richardson

For the Creative Writing student, critical reflection is a necessary adjunct to their creative work. This can range in style and scope from the analysis of personal process required at undergraduate level to the more traditionally 'academic' critical thesis component of the doctoral submission. However, it is not only students who feel compelled to produce a reflective companion piece to their creative work. Many established novelists have written extensively on the motivation, process and method by which their novels were produced. These texts make fascinating and necessary reading for all students and teachers of Creative Writing.

In this article I will consider two novels, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and highlight what can be learnt from the non-fiction companion pieces - what Eco calls the 'texts of poetics' - that accompany them.

The Name of the Rose is the more self-consciously theoretical of the two novels. This is hardly surprising when we consider that Eco is a renowned expert in semiotics. The novel is a dense intertextual blend of medieval murder mystery, theological argument and postmodern playfulness. The book's narrator, the elderly monk Adso, recalls events that unfolded in 1327, when he was an eighteen-year-old novice assisting with an investigation into suspected heresy at a remote Benedictine monastery.

Writing a work of fiction poses a particular challenge for someone like Eco, who is a theoretician first and a creative writer second. In *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, he admits:

I was embarrassed at telling a story. I felt like a drama critic who suddenly exposes himself behind the footlights and finds himself watched by those who, until then, have been his accomplices in the seats out front.

Such self-consciousness is not unique to eminent academics. When Creative Writing is taught as an academic subject students are required to consider the theoretical context of their work from the very outset, and this can be profoundly inhibiting to the free-flowing, random and *sub*conscious nature of the creative process. However, in *Postscript* Eco gives some useful examples of how he uses the theoretical approach as a tool to solve particular problems. Theory becomes an enabler, rather than an inhibitor. One example of this is in his consideration of plot in a novel. As he points out:

Unquestionably, the modern novel has sought to diminish amusement resulting from the plot in order to enhance other kinds of amusement. As a great admirer of Aristotle's Poetics, *I have always thought that, no matter what, a novel must also – especially – amuse through its plot.*

So, how does a postmodern writer like Eco provide his readers with a satisfying plot, without venturing into what is – to him – the unacceptable realm of escapism? He concludes that plot can

be found also in the form of quotation of other plots, and the quotation could be less escapist than the plot quoted.

Eco's thinking offers an argument in favour of plot. This is useful for the student who may find him or herself tangled up in anxiety about the perceived 'artificiality' of plot. Eco's solution is admirably simple: use plot, by all means, but use it knowingly. Use someone else's plot, and call it intertextuality.

Another example of how theory can be deployed to solve technical conundrums is Eco's use of the rhetorical device of preterition or paralepsis. Many novelists – particularly, but not exclusively, historical novelists – face the challenge of incorporating large amounts of background information into their work. If they don't do this then the general reader may be at a loss to understand the context or rationale of the novel. If they overdo it, through 'info dumps', or overuse of expositional dialogue, then the reader will be pulled out of the world of the novel, and probably bored too.

Eco solves this problem through preterition or paralepsis – literally a 'passing over' of the information that needs to be integrated into the novel. As Eco puts it:

The speaker, in other words, claims he will not speak of something that everyone knows perfectly well, and as he is saying this, he speaks of the thing.

Eco's first use of preterition comes in the Prologue of the novel, when the narrator Adso says,

In the pages to follow I shall not indulge in descriptions of persons [...] what would be the point of saying today that the abbot Abo had a stern eye and pale cheeks, when by now he and those around him are dust and their bodies have the mortal greyness of dust...

While this example isn't about slipping historical information into the narrative, it does illustrate how the technique can be used in a playful manner that feels like a natural part of the narrator's character.

Eco does his best to maintain a rational, dispassionate tone in *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*. We get the distinct impression that he doesn't hold with mystifying the creative process. However, every so often we get a glimpse of what really drove him to write the novel: his passion for all things Medieval. He describes himself as a 'medievalist in hibernation,' and goes on to explain:

I know the present only through the television screen, whereas I have a direct knowledge of the Middle Ages.

And later:

the Middle Ages have remained if not my profession, my hobby – and a constant temptation: I see the period everywhere, transparently overlaying my daily concerns, which do not look medieval, though they are.

These comments go to the heart of the inciting impulse of Eco's novel. The theoretical tools he uses to build the book may be cerebral, but the original motivation for writing it had an emotional basis in his desire to immerse himself in his favourite historical era. This suggests to me two useful points for the Creative Writing student to bear in mind. Firstly, that the theoretical framework should support and enable the work, not curtail or dictate it. And secondly, that every novel needs to be generated and fuelled by some sort of passion or obsession.

Australian author Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* and its non-fiction companion *Searching for the Secret River* are of particular interest to Creative Writing students, as versions of these texts formed Grenville's doctoral submission to the University of Technology Sydney. *The Secret River* is the story of William Thornhill, a Thames waterman whose death sentence for theft is commuted to transportation to Australia in 1806. The focus of the novel is Thornhill's actions and thoughts as he establishes his own 'hundred acres' of property, on land already inhabited by a group of nomadic Aboriginal families. Grenville is clear-eyed about the immorality and injustice of the colonizers' treatment of the indigenous people of the country. However, Thornhill's character and experiences are portrayed with skill and empathy, so that the reader can understand his actions.

The novel is dedicated 'to the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future'. In the acknowledgements Grenville mentions that 'One of my ancestors gave me the basis for certain details of the early life of William Thornhill...' We, the readers, can join the dots, and identify key themes of post-colonial guilt and expiation.

The Secret River was first published in Australia in 2005, and *Searching for the Secret River* followed the next year. This second book is very different to Eco's *Postscript*. It demonstrates little or no interest in theory, and is much closer to the reflective commentary that most of us are familiar with from Creative Writing undergraduate courses. What the book does share with Eco's *Postscript* is the identification of Grenville's inciting impulse, but in *Searching for the Secret River* this is foregrounded. Right at the start she recalls the family stories about her great-great-great grandfather, Solomon Wiseman – a transported convict who transformed himself into a wealthy landowner in New South Wales, and was rumoured to have murdered his wife by pushing her down the stairs. This slice of family history segues into Grenville's experience of taking part in a 'Reconciliation

Walk' across Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000. The walk was a gesture of figurative bridge building between black and white Australians. Grenville met the gaze of an Aboriginal woman, but the moment of connection gave way to the realization of what Grenville's ancestor might have done to the Aboriginal woman's ancestors. As she puts it:

When you were a white Australian, investigating your own history could lead you into some murky territory.

She realizes that the 'Reconciliation Walk' is in many ways an empty gesture, a well-meaning attempt to address the past:

The imagery of our walk, across a bridge, suddenly seemed all too easy. We were strolling towards reconciliation – what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history.

Grenville sets out to write a non-fiction book about Solomon Wiseman. She diligently researches the archives in Australia, and takes advantage of a trip to London to seek out parish registers and court records, and to make location visits to piece together the fragments of Solomon Wiseman's life and times. However, she quickly discovers that:

Human beings were slipperier than the ones I was familiar with on the page: the creatures of fiction. This was the muddle of real life.

As she writes up the facts, she struggles with the challenge of turning archival material into something more vivid and arresting. She gives way to the impulse to fill in the gaps in the story with imagined episodes and motivations. The urge to shape a narrative is almost irresistible, but she struggles with the sense that by 'interposing a layer of invention' she will defeat her objective of telling 'the unvarnished truth'.

At this point she is at that stage of the writing process where she has caught the scent of a story, but hasn't yet found a shape for it. She appropriates an approach she remembers from her time working on *cinema verité* documentaries, and writes individual episodes without any clear idea of what the overarching story will be. Some of these episodes are factual accounts, and others are invention or dramatization. When she comes to 'find the story' from these assembled fragments she encounters a problem:

I was determined to write a book of non-fiction, but the only parts of this 'assembly' that were interesting were the 'flights of fancy' where I'd created the flesh to put on the bones of research. Where, in a word, I'd written fiction.

Grenville realizes that the facts of the story are standing in the way of the narrative she wants to create. Worse than that, they are distracting her from another, more important story:

...the larger one of what happened when white met black on the edge of settlement across the country.

Grenville decides that she has been blocking the story by her attachment to the facts, and – conversely – by her tendency to embroider the family tales of Solomon Wiseman. The 'small' story – the personal one – is impeding the 'big' one – the political story of colonialism in Australia.

Faced with a problem of plot or characterization Eco turns to theory, while Grenville walks, reads and does exploratory, generative writing. I was interested in my own response to these two approaches.

Her strategy is to allow her fictionalizing impulse to take over. She lets Wiseman step out of the story, and in his place comes the invented character, William Thornhill. He inherits many elements of Wiseman's life – the London upbringing, the trade as a Thames waterman, the crime and transportation, the slow rise to prosperity. Grenville finds the freedom to explore the big, political theme of the novel through this new, imaginary character.

In conclusion, it is illuminating to contrast the different approaches Eco and Grenville take to their 'texts of poetics'. Eco favours a logical, 'problem solving' approach that is determinedly rational, whereas Grenville advocates a more organic, intuitive method. Faced with a problem of plot or characterization Eco turns to theory, while Grenville walks, reads and does exploratory, generative writing. I was interested in my own response to these two approaches. While my methods are much closer to Grenville's than Eco's, I found his attitude bracing and liberating. It was useful to regard writing problems as just that – technical hitches that have a technical solution – rather than a

source of creative angst. At the same time, it was reassuring to read Grenville's account of how she had to both search for her story and 'wait' for it. Those of us who are reflecting on our own writing process can learn a great deal from both these approaches.

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***Heather Richardson** is studying for a PhD in Creative Writing at the Open University. Her PhD project is an historical novel,* Freethinkers*, set in Edinburgh during the late Seventeenth Century. She is a former winner of the Brian Moore Short Story Award, and her short fiction has been published in magazines and anthologies in the UK and Ireland. Her first novel,* Magdeburg*, was published by Lagan Press in 2010, and a short story mini-collection,* Chilled*, appeared as a Kindle ebook in 2011.*

Mute Disabled Characters in Young Adult Fiction

Nigel Smith

How easy is it to step into the shoes of a teenager with profound multiple learning needs? I became interested in this question because the main character in my work-in-progress, *Speak to Me*, is a teenager with cerebral palsy who needs help to speak.

How can a mute narrator tell their story? I shall look at four realist novels which try to do this. Disabled central characters are particularly at risk of becoming stereotypes.

Disabled Stereotypes

John Quicke asks whether children's books promote integration and develop social awareness in readers. He reports a trend away from sentimental tales towards more detailed, realistic portraits of disabled people. Lois Keith explores cure and 'mind over matter' in girls' fiction and quotes a drama critic: 'one must never underestimate the power of a cliché'. In Helen Aveling's anthology, disabled writers and academics critique girls' books. The authors explore archetypes such as the miracle cure, being a sidekick, dying young, having special powers and escaping into fantasy. Wheelchairs and walking aids feature as impersonal symbols to be destroyed or discarded.

It's impossible to ignore the stereotyping of disabled people in the media which includes such caricatures as ugly, ashamed victims, objects of pity, a burden to society, being on benefits, having no sex life, needing a medical cure, having to be monitored rather than having privacy, being dissatisfied with their lot rather than justifiably angry or being 'tragic but brave.' These represent deeply ingrained one-sided images: traps which lie in wait for the unwary author to fall into.

The Sound and the Fury

William Faulkner's Nobel Prize winning novel *The Sound and the Fury* is initially narrated by Benjy whose confused stream of consciousness account mixes times and places. Benjy is mute and needs feeding and dressing. He idolizes his sister, Caddy, and vainly seeks her among the schoolgirls who pass the front gate of his house. We learn of Benjy's subsequent fate through the retelling of the story by other members of the family.

Although it's set in the Deep South of the United States in the 1920s, the casual neglect which Benjy experiences may be typical of other times and places.

Skallagrigg

In William Horwood's *Skallagrig* teenage Esther has cerebral palsy and speaks occasional syllables. She uses an adapted typewriter to record a series of stories about Arthur who was mistreated in institutions during the 1920s. The stories are known to all people with cerebral palsy and have been passed on through non-verbal communication. They are transformed into Skallagrigg, a complex role playing computer game which becomes hugely popular. Horwood uses multiple narrators to portray the links between Esther and the network of people who assist her in her quest.

In the fifty five years that separate Arthur and Esther it is clear that communication and compassionate care have advanced enormously.

Stuck in Neutral

Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral* is narrated by teenager, Shawn McDaniel, who has a dark sense of humour as well as severe cerebral palsy and no speech. It's a bleak, no-holds-barred account that includes epileptic fits, incontinence, drooling and coughing on food. Shawn's Dad leaves the family home when his son is four. He writes about a man who killed his son who had learning

needs and Shawn watches a TV interview of his father talking about euthanasia. Dad asks Shawn: "What's the point of your life?"

The ending of the novella is ambiguous. The book scores high on realism but its pessimistic tone leaves a prolonged aftertaste. It's difficult to say whether readers would be more empathic towards people in Shawn's position after reading the book.

Grace Williams Says It Loud

Emma Henderson's *Grace Williams Says It Loud* follows Grace's life over forty years. Grace's physical and learning needs, complicated by polio, closely resemble those of Emma's real life sister, Clare. Grace's home, a mental hospital, its grounds and its alternately cruel and caring staff are sharply evoked in a love story between Grace and Daniel over thirty years.

It's a searing indictment of institutional care in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. Grace is sustained by her relationships with the other residents, especially Daniel and Robert.

Conclusion

To convey the life of someone without words through words is almost impossible. However poetry and novels have been attempting the impossible since time began. In the four novels I've looked at, it's not hard to step into the shoes of the mute characters.

If bullying and harassment of young people with learning needs persist, being able to identify with people who cannot speak seems all the more important. People with learning needs deserve to be included in books for young adults.

Adult non-disabled characters are often drawn into the plot. In my view this shifts the focus towards a 'parental' perspective which is particularly evident in the novels by Horwood and Trueman. Disabled people are increasingly speaking up for themselves. This can apply equally to mute characters in novels and for me that means using a first person narrator.

Mute characters offer a challenging and largely unexplored field that is open to new interpretations by ambitious writers.

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We print here an extract from Nigel Smith's own fiction, Speak to Me, *in which Lauren is starting school for the first time aged fourteen:*

"Good morning, I'm Mr Preston, your form teacher for the year. I think I've met most of you before." He gave a long meaningful stare towards the boys at the back. I distantly remembered meeting him on my first visit to the school. "We have a new student in class today and she's here with her learning support assistant."

Becky stood up and twizzled my chair round to face the class. Blank, bored and frankly hostile faces stared at me or pointedly looked out of the window so they didn't have to notice me.

"Thank you, Mr Preston, I'm Becky, Lauren's LSA. Lauren wants to say hello and how much she's looking forward to meeting you all."

Bollocks. I hated everyone in the room. I just wanted to be somewhere else.

"She's had a home tutor until now."

I often feel patronized by my carers. My adrenaline level peaked.

Mr Preston spoke up:

"I know you'll all look after Lauren and make her feel welcome."

About as welcome as a fish being introduced to the crocodiles.

"We've got five minutes for you to ask her any questions and you'll see how she communicates."

I scanned the twenty seven faces of different races all staring at me. Jennifer smiled but I couldn't help noticing the troubled, disgusted and angry looks of the rest. Would I be able to make myself understood?

My hair swung about as my head wobbled from side to side. I drooled down my chin. Becky held up the clipboard.

"This way of speaking is called Facilitated Communication, or 'FC'."

"Any questions?" said Mr Preston.
There was a chorus of 'Sir, sir.'
Mr Preston pointed to a boy near the back.
"Yes, Dan."
Dan tilted his head and smirked.
"How old is she?"
"You need to ask Lauren," said Becky.
"How old are you?"
Becky brought a chair over, sat down and held my finger over the printed-out keyboard.
15 i-n J-a-n-u-a-r-y.
There were a few giggles and whispered remarks that I didn't catch while I was tapping on the board.
"I'm fifteen in January," said Becky.
Dan raised his eyebrows and looked away.
"Sir, sir."
"Anthony," said Mr Preston.
So it was Anthony who'd made the comment about daleks.
"How do you manage without words, Lauren?"
I can't remember a time before words.
He leaned over and sniggered something to the boy next to him. What's your problem, Anthony? Then it was his friend's turn.
"Yes Matt, go ahead."
"Do loud noises affect you?"
Good question.
Yes. My ears are very sensitive. Loud noises make my muscles go tight.
Matt narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.
The girl sitting on my table was called Emily.
"Where do you live?" she asked.
Landsley Park.
That raised a few eyebrows. We were in a large Victorian house on a private road.
CRASH!
An ear-shattering bomb blast filled the room and echoed around the walls.
I screamed. My fists rose to shoulder level and both my legs kicked out. It was excruciating in front of the whole class.
"Sorry, sir," said Anthony, "it was an accident."
Bastard. Anthony picked up a book from the floor that had somehow slid off his table. Why had I ever thought I wanted to speak to him?

Nigel Smith *studied in Newcastle upon Tyne, worked as a consultant physician in the NHS and co-wrote a medical handbook in 1991. He decided to become a children's writer after meeting Jan Mark and Celia Rees on an Arvon Foundation course. He completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham and an MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa in September 2010. He has lectured on disabled characters in children's fiction at meetings in Bath and Nottingham. Nigel is seeking a publisher for his first novel:* Speak to Me*.*

Poetry, Practice and Pedagogy

Learning from the 'Well Versed' Pilot Project in the North East

Caroline Murphy

Well Versed was a year-long pilot project that aimed to transform and champion young people's experience of learning poetry in schools. The pilot was funded by Arts Council England, and managed by CCE in partnership with three literature agencies: Writers' Centre Norwich, New Writing North and Writing West Midlands. The North East pilot forms the case study in Caroline Murphy's PhD research into creative writing pedagogy. Here, Caroline shares some early findings. This article reflects on how the pilot initiated by New Writing North influenced teachers, and considers whether a new role for writers is emerging in a changing educational landscape.

New Writing North has considerable experience of working with writers in schools. The organization has, over the years, been involved in many residencies with poets and other writers – everything from one-off workshops to a residency that lasted for 18 months in one school. As partnerships between writers and schools have grown and developed, a growing body of work suggests that the 'writer-in-school' residency model has the potential to make a lasting impact on individual children, raising self confidence, enjoyment and attainment (Horner, 2011, Motion, 2010, Redmond, 2009). Increasingly, residencies have created outputs that make such work visible to the wider school community – plays, performances, and publications that celebrate young people's creative writing and share it with peers, parents and teachers. However, at a time when the resources available for partnerships between schools and writers are perhaps more scarce than ever, New Writing North wanted to use Well Versed as an opportunity to explore new, sustainable forms of partnership. Not something to replace the residency model, but to build on it.

The aim, then was to develop a model that focused on teachers' own creative writing practice, and to explore how their experience as writers might influence their pedagogy. The presence of writer-teachers in universities, where the subject has experienced considerable growth for more than a decade, has been instrumental in shaping theoretical perspectives on the pedagogy of creative writing. However, creative writing practice has not had the same influence on developing pedagogy in schools, where, despite a relentless focus on improving standards in young people's writing, little attention has been paid to teachers' own experience of creative writing. This perspective informed New Writing North's approach to the project, which responded to a central question: if we want young people to have better experiences of poetry in schools, what experiences do teachers need to have, and what can the role of poets be?

The model which was developed is relatively simple. Working in partnership with Northumbria University, a Post Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing in the Classroom was designed and delivered to 14 teachers from primary, middle and secondary schools. Teachers attended a series of seminars, developing a poetry portfolio, reflective commentary and academic essay for final submission. In total 11 poets worked on Well Versed, as tutors on the course and as poet mentors working with the teacher participants back in their schools. A training programme for the poets was implemented too. Some of the poets had a great deal of experience of working in schools, some had much less: they had been selected for their poetry credentials. But training was necessary even for even those who had experience of working in schools: they were being asked to work differently. For Well Versed, poets were being

asked to mentor teachers, both in the development of their own writing and in considering how their writing practice might influence their classroom practice. Poets were positioned as collaborators with expertise, rather than as expert visitors. So the training focused on exploring how poets could work with teachers to support their own creative practice; to develop new ways of working in the classroom; and to engage with staff from across the school to develop further creative writing opportunities for teachers.

The learning from the North East pilot has been considerable, and covers too much ground to explore in this article. The focus here, then, will be limited to an exploration of how the positioning of the poet as a collaborator, facilitator and mentor impacts on teachers' identity as writers; on their pedagogic approaches to creative writing; and on the development of teachers' knowledge about creative writing gained through their own practice.

During the seminars teachers started to explore the process of writing poetry. For some of them, this was an entirely new experience. Others had written before, but mostly in private. For most of them, the experience of involving themselves in writing, and sharing that experience with their peers in the classroom was, and to quote one secondary English teacher 'quite petrifying'. It was also, of course, illuminating, and the experience of actually carrying out the writing built confidence as the course progressed.

As well as exploring their own writing, the seminars exposed teachers to new pedagogical methods – the poet tutors facilitated creative writing in ways that were far removed from the teaching of writing that has been promoted through the National Strategies. The seminars didn't start by stating learning objectives and defining outcomes, and the writing process often required teachers to immerse themselves in the writing itself from the word go. This new way of working was not without its challenges. One of the teachers described this process of 'not knowing', saying:

Before embarking on the course, I believed that I taught creative writing creatively, as it were, but my experience turned upside down many of my practices. At first, in seminars, I found many of the activities puzzling or challenging because I was constantly trying to guess where they were going. Gradually I realized, as my Year 7 only took one hour to do, that the joy was in the not knowing.

This reveals an important aspect of the learning that came through Well Versed for the teachers: that the sense of 'not knowing' is important to the process of creative writing. Teachers developed their knowledge about creative writing through the process of creative writing: it was not handed on to them by an expert but revealed to them through the process itself – carefully guided by the poet tutors and poet mentors with whom they worked. All of the teachers who talked about this described the ways in which they had developed this sense of discovery in the classroom. For many, particularly at primary phase, this has meant reviewing the 'modelling' of writing that had been promoted through the strategies, where teachers role-play a writing process using text that has been determined at an earlier stage. Instead teachers began to take part in authentic creative writing experiences alongside their pupils. This pedagogic method had been demonstrated in the seminars by the poet tutors, and is of course common workshop methodology. It is however, rarely employed in schools. This from a primary teacher:

One thing that I did not do at all prior to the course was to complete an entire piece of creative writing alongside the children. While I have, in the past, sat with the children and completed a painting alongside them (something both they and I enjoyed), I had not written alongside them. This just hadn't really occurred to me – I probably would have felt that I was not 'teaching' by doing so. The idea of sitting down to write yourself while the pupils were writing would have seemed somehow self-indulgent at the expense of 'helping' the children.

Authentic writing alongside pupils sends a message that it is important, valid, enjoyable, difficult, frustrating work. However, it positions the teacher in a potentially more vulnerable position, since any authentic creative writing experience may involve difficulties and problems. As they developed their own writing, teachers began to identify such hurdles as essential elements of creative writing, and to recognize the value of exploring this in their own pedagogy.

As teachers, we should not avoid writing ourselves because it makes us vulnerable. Confidence in our own writing develops with practice. It is also important that pupils realize that it is normal to have insecurities and obstacles to overcome in the writing process. By demonstrating how we overcome difficulties when writing, we can provide the children with suggested strategies and build a supportive classroom environment where all participants can come together to overcome challenges. Perhaps most importantly, we can illustrate that sometimes you might like to write and see where you can take your writing just for fun. In this way we might even help to produce future teachers who write for pleasure as

well as read for pleasure.

For some teachers this change in practice went on to change the way that they thought about critical reflection in creative writing, and the relationship between text, writer and teacher.

As it happens, the experience of 'joining in' with the children provided so much more [than I had expected]. By actually doing what I'd asked the children to do I could see how ridiculously pedantic school policy and my pedagogic practice was at times! When I first started to take part in the automatic writing tasks, two of my pupils asked me if they could mark my work. 'Who will mark yours?' they enquired – a good point! Their comments came back with wry smiles, 'We love your ideas, but please don't scribble out. Put two small crosses either side of your mistake. Your handwriting could be neater.' It occurred to me that if I wanted the pupils to be engrossed in their writing (and to edit and improve along the way) I should be willing to forgo perfect presentation. If it wasn't viable for me to write in the stipulated fashion, what gave me the right to demand that my ten-year-old pupils did so?

During the mentoring phase of Well Versed North East, the poet was not there as a writer-in-school in the way that we might traditionally understand the term. That's to say, they did not go in to 'sprinkle magic dust' in workshops with pupils. They collaborated with the teacher. They spent about half of their time away from the classroom on reflection and planning – talking about poetry. They shared ideas about what they liked, and didn't. About what they found hard about writing poetry, and what they enjoyed. About what they hoped to achieve through poetry for themselves, and for children and young people. They spent time discussing the poetry that the teachers were in the process of writing for their poetry portfolio. Again, the challenges here – the process of sharing creative work – were considerable. One teacher commented:

Sharing my classroom and children with my poet mentor was easy; sharing my collection was not. I employed every childish tactic to avoid sharing my writing.

This prompted the teacher to consider how the anxiety and vulnerability she had experienced as a writer might influence the development of a critical dialogue between pupil and teacher:

Can the critical voice emerge from the writer teacher to the student writers when they are so acutely aware of the fragility of their position? It must. Risks need to be taken by teacher and writer; if any teaching, learning and writing is to be worthwhile, it must be honest.

It is interesting to note that this teacher – like most of those involved in Well Versed in the North East – calls herself a 'writer-teacher'. Others opted for just writer. The process of writing led them to see themselves as writers, and to identify with their pupils in the writing experience. Teachers frequently express an aspiration that their pupils should see themselves as writers, but are sometimes reluctant to see themselves this way (Cremin and Myhill, 2011). Perhaps this has been reinforced by a pedagogy that has promoted a simulated modelling of writing over authentic practice, distancing teachers from their own creative experience.

In summary then, Well Versed North East asked teachers to commit to writing poetry, to take that practice seriously, and to take their learning back into the classroom. They faced up to their own anxieties and fears about creative writing, and found that through the process of writing poetry they developed knowledge that is, it seems, otherwise unattainable.

This is knowledge gained at first hand, rather than handed down from an external body. But it is, importantly, knowledge that is facilitated by the poet. The Well Versed North East model positions the poet as an expert facilitator, mentor and collaborator, someone who can reveal to the teacher the power of their own creative voice, and their ability to use this new knowledge in the classroom. Teachers who have experienced this way of working have found that poetry, which as we know has come to occupy limited and narrow ground within the curriculum, has immense potential for all kinds of writing.

When I was asked to go on [the] course I was really pleased but as the course was based on poetry I wasn't sure it would impact on my everyday teaching of writing as much as it has done. I've been surprised by how much I've been able to get from the appreciation of poetry in its own right but also how much it can impact on my enjoyment of writing and teaching other genres too. I now see how much can be learnt through writing poetry and also by using poetry as a stimulus for other types of writing. I think that I had categorized 'poetry' into a couple of two week units of work. I would have taught a structured form of poetry – perhaps haiku or rhyming couplets as this presented an easier way to teach poetry to children. By practising my own poetry, I now rely on formal structures less and feel I would be in a better position to help the children to discover their writer's 'voice'. I no longer see poetry as a light, stand alone unit of teaching but as 'the most challenging

form of writing children encounter in school … using line breaks and chunking meaning into stanzas; invention and handling of imagery; playfulness and ambition in vocabulary' (Wilson, 2007, p.441).

Teachers are, on the whole, the biggest single influence on children and young peoples' writing. The experiences that teachers provide for children to write will shape the kind of writers, perhaps the kind of people, they will become. As school curricula are again reviewed, and in the wake of the National Strategies, the potential exists for writers to collaborate with teachers, supporting the development of their writing identity, and helping to develop a vibrant pedagogy shaped by authentic creative writing practice.

For further information about the Post Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing in the Classroom at Northumbria University, contact victoria.bazin@northumbria.ac.uk

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***Caroline Murphy** is currently undertaking doctoral research as part of a collaborative PhD with Northumbria University and New Writing North. The research explores the impact of creative writing practice on pedagogy, and Well Versed forms the case study at the heart of this research. Prior to embarking on her PhD, Caroline worked as an arts consultant for 15 years, specializing in participatory arts practice and working across the North East region and on national arts projects.*

The Future Is Words

Wes Brown, Daniel Sluman and David Tait

At the NAWE Conference 2011, young writers and contributors to the NAWE Young Writers' Hub joined the Hub Co-ordinator to share the variety of new developments and related activity, including: mentoring, publishing, podcasting, blogging, and a range of partnerships with literary festivals. The following is a summary of the session for young writers.

Wes Brown was born in Leeds in 1985. He is a novelist, short story writer, critic and blogger. Wes is the Coordinator of the NAWE Young Writers' Hub and Director of Dead Ink Publications.

At the International Anthony Burgess Foundation, Dead Ink launched Richard Evan's novel, *Kosmonaut Zero.* The set-up was familiar enough: the easy-going audience, the authorial swagger, the unnecessary microphone. Yet there was no signing. No book. And the audience bought their copies on smart phones.

Unimaginable a few years ago, the literature landscape is fast changing and needs an array of publishers and signposts to keep up.

Publishing has always been about printing. To physically inscribe. First scrolls, then pages. It was always a physical process. Now that reading platforms and distribution have destabilized, Dead Ink is an attempt to bring all the things we love about reading to new platforms, to develop audiences and authors in new ways.

My work with Dead Ink goes hand in hand with the NAWE Young Writers' Hub. At the Hub we're trying to create a news-driven resource that can help a new generation of writers support themselves – enabling them to develop an online presence, find their way around the new landscape, and gain experience of the writing world through our grants, events, workshops and feedback.

Daniel Sluman was born in Oxford, in 1986. He started writing poetry when he embarked on a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2008. Since then he has been published widely, and has performed regularly in the Gloucestershire area. He is currently finishing off his first pamphlet-sized collection 'Alphabet' and is Poetry Editor of Dead Ink.

From a poet's perspective, I've always been drawn to submitting to e-zines, rather than traditional print journals. The idea of sending off poems via snail-mail to London-based magazines put me off, as I knew that it could potentially be 3-5 months until I got a response. I was first drawn to e-zines like *Pomegranate* and *The Cadaverine*, partly because the material they published was instantly available. I could see work similar to mine on their websites, and this encouraged me to continue writing within my own style, and also gave me confidence to submit and eventually get published in them. Although, at that time, these e-zines didn't carry the same amount of reputation as well-established print journals, at least my successful submissions were available for anyone to see on the internet, requiring no purchase or subscription.

I think that in the future, two elements will determine the success of digital publishing; reputation, and access. The access of the internet will draw large amount of people to submit to e-zines, as well as starting their own. The negative side of this is the implication that quality control will go down in these internet-based magazines,

as the gate-keepers are no longer as precious as they would be if they ran a journal with print and distribution costs. If e-zine editors can start applying the same standards and principles they would to print journals then the future will be full of highly successful digital publishers, and print journals will have to adapt to survive.

David Tait was born in Lancaster in 1985. He is studying for a Masters in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University and is a winner of the Poetry Business Book and pamphlet award. He founded the Leeds Independent Poetry Press Festival (Lippfest) and is the poetry editor for The Cadaverine.

It was a privilege to attend the 2011 NAWE conference and speak candidly about a wide range of issues that affect us as young writers, web developers and editors trying to find a foothold within the current UK literary scene. High on the list of priorities for discussion was the issue of continuous low-level support for emerging writers and trying to find ways in which we could continually encourage emerging writers as they develop.

So many of the UK support systems offer a big one-off payment and then leave a writer to his/her own devices. Take for instance Grants for the Arts, the Eric Gregory Awards, writing residencies, one-off projects that you can apply for on the Arts Council website and so on. All these things are great, and really help to develop young writers, but is this enough?

Responding to these overall questions I decided to talk about a magazine called *The Cadaverine*, which I am fortunate to be able to edit.

When I took over *The Cadaverine* I highlighted a few things I very much wanted to do. The first was to increase the age limit for people who could submit to 30. The Arts Council define a young person as being 16-25 but I disagreed with this principle. I also didn't feel that, during my time of editorship, that *The Cadaverine* would need to apply for any Arts Council Funding. My aim is to consolidate *The Cadaverine*'s online presence before handing over to someone with more time, vision and patience with funding bids.

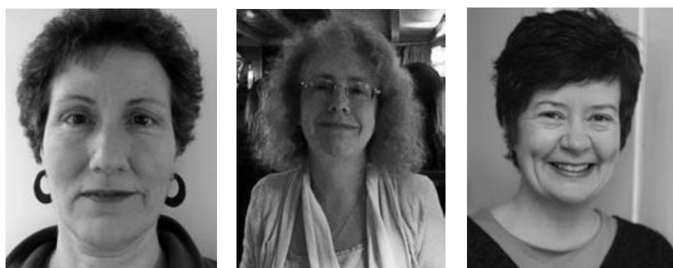
The second thing I wanted to do was widen *The Cadaverine*'s editorial base to include new writers who very much want to move into the literary sector. It's been a pleasure welcoming people like Andrew McMillan, Ian Chung, Kim Moore, Chloe Stopa-Hunt and Nici West to the team and to continue to see them get better and better.

Finally, the third thing I wanted to do was to create a culture within the magazine which very much saw publication as a stepping stone towards greater things. It is nice to be able to open up magazines like *The Rialto* and *Magma* and to see us proudly credited by writers like Laura Attridge and Ameerah Arjanee who appreciate what the magazine has done for them.

Then of course there are readings. We've had an incredibly talented lineup of readers at festivals and events around the UK for some time and it's a pleasure to be able to continue this as we move forward into 2012.

Facts and Feelings

Susan Greenberg, Hilary Jenkins, Julie Wheelwright



The idea for this NAWE Conference panel initially arose from a comment by a student about a personal nonfiction narrative – "It's what I feel, so you can't mark me." Among other things, she was reflecting a common view that emotions are outside the realm of critical engagement, by both the tutor and the writer her/himself.

What strategies do we use in the classroom to deal with these issues, and with other situations when emotion – in ourselves or in the student – becomes important? How do we juggle the roles of coach and judge, and where do we set the limits between providing a safe space for discovery, and therapy? How much do we reveal about ourselves (especially in social media) and how do we deal with disturbing work?

The panel outlined a few ideas, and the discussion yielded many more, as did our harvest of participants' ideas-on-a-Post-it. Here, as promised, is a round-up of those ideas:

1 Managing student feelings

• Allow time for students to read other people's work before a workshop and absorb their feelings

• When opening and closing the seminar, set expectations; for online work, set up ground rules in the same way you would with a face-to-face group

• Allow students to talk to each other first in small groups about a text, before dealing with the whole class

• Give students a choice, eg to stop writing during the exercise; to opt out of receiving feedback; to remain silent when asked to read out work

• When an emotional moment occurs, acknowledge it and hold the safe space in a neutral way, eg thanking the student for the contribution, and then move on

• In general, use instinct and sensitivity to know when to encourage or leave dormant

2 Managing our own feelings

• Wear an imaginary coat of armour

• Be clear about your boundaries and the limits of your own skills.

• Redirect students to counselling services if issues arise With welfare officers, develop a 'protocol' and code for dealing with problematic students, or those in danger of harming themselves, eg "Bring the Blue file"

• Admit feelings and park them in a journal after the workshop

• Explore usefulness of psychotherapeutic terms / concepts (eg narcissism, projection)

• Use anonymous marking

• Talk to programme director

3 Helping students communicate feelings in their writing

• For younger students: provide means to invest

feelings in things at one remove; eg puppets and other physical objects; drawing a heart for a character and labelling it

• When workshopping, remind students to focus on the text, not the author

• Encourage awareness of the reader, eg the effect of craft decisions on him/her

• Encourage students to “dump” material first in a raw state; teach students how to self edit, eg showing early and late drafts of a writer’s text

• Set an editing test on someone else’s work

• Encourage immersive research, for verification and as a way of imagining other people’s POV

• Conduct a close reading of texts that convey strong emotions eg anger to provide examples of how they can be used creatively to dramatize and amplify meaning

• Set an exercise in which students include conflict in the first sentence ie ‘I want to hit her’.

• Use defamiliarization techniques, eg:

– When writing about a disturbing incident, narrate it backwards
– Ask students writing about themselves to fictionalize or change POV/gender
– Get students to write someone else’s story
– Provide a rigid constraint (eg different verse forms, tweet) to make an experience approachable
– Use myths and archetypes
– Use a storyboard
– Write to music

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Being in Uncertainties, Mysteries and Doubts

Negative Capability and the Role of the Imagination in the Academy Today

Derek Neale

We publish here the third contribution to NAWE's panel session on this subject at AWP Washington, 2011.[i]

When undertaking Creative Writing study in UK universities writers are often burdened with an extra task, one that they are asked to do just because they are situated within an institution of higher education, or so it would seem. This task is the writing of a commentary about their work. Writers are required not to be certain about what they are doing, but to report confidently about their uncertainties.

These commentaries are required of writing students at undergraduate, MA, MFA and PhD levels. The postgraduate commentaries are more often referred to as 'critical' rather than 'reflective', and it is interesting to pause on those two terms. In so doing, I was reminded of something Malcolm Bradbury wrote in 1993:

For the moment what [academic] criticism plainly lacks is a substantive theory of creativity itself – a concept of the ways in which the instincts, the structures, the modal forms of imaginative expression can take on their purpose and pattern not as textual slippage but as original humane discovery.[ii]

Bradbury goes on to describe the study of creative writing in the UK as having a suspect reputation amongst academics; writers are commonly thought to engage in an activity rather like 'playing in the sand in primary school'. Bradbury asserted this nearly twenty years ago, but can we really say that the situation and perceptions have changed? Writers are children: perhaps we will all admit to that; we gain something from being children, it is necessary for us to play. Bradbury's era of teaching was one in which there was, some would say, a purer focus on the writing itself, an era less bothered by the need to explain method and approach. The UEA MA during his reign had no commentary component and he tended not to supervise on the then new Creative and Critical Writing PhD programme. The publication of the volume in which Bradbury's essay appears, *The Agony and the Ego*, was perhaps a sign that things were about to change and that there was a nascent demand for writers' accounts of what they do. That imperative inevitably revealed testimonies of incompatibility between writer and university. Much of the academy's mission in each of its disciplines is based on research and on pinning down human experience, recalling history in empirical fashion in order to further understand the present and possibly even the future. Yet in that same volume of essays Bradbury's then UEA teaching colleague, Rose Tremain, asserts that for the writer 'the factual or experiential has to find its own mysteriousness', as if this is antithetical to the academy's interest in data and evidence. She goes on:

By this I mean that all the research done for a novel – all the studying and reading, all the social fieldwork, all the location visiting … must be reimagined before it can find a place in the text. It must rise into the orbit of the anarchic, gift-conjuring, unknowing part of the novelist's mind before it can acquire its own truth … Reimagining implies some measure of forgetting.' [iii]

How is this anarchic, unknowing self revealed in commentaries? The labels we have come to attach to exegeses of the writing process – critical and reflective – now seem to implore us to get out of the sand pit and

grow up, or to wake up: to fully realize the price to be paid for renting a home in the academy. Both terms hold pejorative connotations. The misbehaving child is punished by being told to reflect on their actions. The critical is at once an analytical and a dismembering gaze, rather than one which liberates or is firstly appreciative, engaged and entertained by child-like play.

With both terms there is a tendency to think of the commentary as somehow elevated, the imaginative venture as demoted, diminished, or even criminalized. By playing – by writing stories, plays, poems – we are being naughty, miscreant children. The academic sphere gives a pre-eminence to more rational, theoretical, researched and evidence-based endeavour, over ephemeral and immeasurable acts of imagination and creativity. The academy finds it hard to fathom or assess 'play'.

In this way writing an exegesis about the creative work can be seen as a doffed cap towards our landlords, an attempted act of deference or even conciliation. Commentaries appear to follow the rules of academic study: using research and reading in order to form an essay-shaped text. They offer at least phenomenological testimony, which is evidence of sorts. Yet commentaries, reflective or critical or both, struggle to explain the spontaneity and necessary abandon – the 'negative capability' – involved in the imaginative adventure of creating, for instance, incidents and characters in a story. How do we write a commentary about these sorts of phenomena other than to state in a literal, banal and uninteresting fashion: 'I imagined it', 'I thought it up', 'it came to me'. Keats puts it less abstractly and less dully: 'I took part in the existence of the sparrow'[iv]. This seems instantly more satisfying, perhaps because it gives us an image to start playing with, but is it any more illuminating?

Commentaries present a quandary. How can you possibly write about writing and why would you want to? And, given a pervasive unease within the profession about such self-scrutiny, why would you ask your students to do so? Surely this could stop the writer from writing; does it not risk unravelling the work? If a writer has to explain her rhyming couplets or lines of dialogue, why write them in the first place? The sheer scale of exegetic work on Creative Writing courses is alarming. For instance, my colleague and I oversee two Open University undergraduate courses with a current student population of 3,500. Each student produces six or seven assignments, which roughly amounts to 22,000 commentaries written in one year at one university alone. 22,000 descriptions of the sand pit. What have we done? Just imagine the number of grains of sand that are being scrutinized, analyzed, reflected upon, at this very moment.

It also should be noted that not all commentaries are undertaken after the event. Some reflections have to anticipate, contradictory though that may sound. Writers can be asked to act grown up before jumping in the sand pit, being required to report not only on current projects but also on what is planned. This sort of reflective summary, often written as part of funding applications, progress reports and for dissertation or PhD proposals, might involve repeated pre-conscious synopsizing, a summing up of what is yet to be written. In a positive sense such commentary can be seen as planning and preparation: flushing ideas out into the open, so facilitating their initial development. Yet it can also be corrosive. The ideas might be incubating nicely; the brash, premature light of day may fracture their fragile potential.

22,000 descriptions of the sand pit. What have we done? Just imagine the number of grains of sand that are being scrutinized, analyzed, reflected upon, at this very moment.

Despite all of this apparent negativity – and, you might think, despite my better judgement – I would like to defend the commentary. This defense comes not from any duplicitous allegiance with our landlords, or from any sense of the academic residency being necessarily more suitable than any other home that writers might find. Patronage always comes at a price, yet this particular toll seems to me to tap into something that writers are already doing in any case. When pushed on the matter most admit to an ongoing reflective process, an editorial dialogue with themselves about what they are writing and the various ways in which they might negotiate the piece of work in hand. This amounts to a running self-commentary, informing the way characters develop, the way in which scenes are created, words and phrases are included or cut. Each writer will be different; often there is great overlap and interaction between self-commentary mode and writing mode, though they can require two very different states of mind. This calls to mind John Fowles' adage about all writers needing to be two people – a wild man and an

academic. Often the division seems more mundane. When reading through a story or scene I frequently note areas that need 'further development', but often cannot undertake that drafting work immediately, knowing that I am not in the right frame of mind. I may be thinking too editorially, I may be too involved in a previous scene or want to get to the next scene; I may be procrastinating or I may just be too tired. I come back to the missing part when I am more able to engage in appropriate fashion: when I can become the sparrow. At the heart of Keats' assertion of negative capability is the necessary subsuming of the writer's will and intention. The writer has to stop consciously doing in order to do. Yet, as we all know, there is an awful lot of will and intent involved in any sort of writing. In reviewing the writing process – in commentaries or interviews – writers often stumble on remnants of their discarded or fragmented aims. This area of how we write – the question of whether stories are made or found – suggests an intriguing paradox which very much relates to the idea of Keatsian 'mystery'; it is one of the reasons writers' interviews and commentaries make such fascinating reading.

Let me give you some examples. First of all fictional: the narrator in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, Bendrix, is a novelist. He offers contradictory testimony – stories can be found:

So much of a novelist's writing takes place in the unconscious: in those depths the last word is written before the first word appears on paper. We remember the details of our story, we do not invent them.[v]

And stories are wilfully made – with much graft, according to Bendrix:

Always I find when I begin to write there is one character who obstinately will not come alive. There is nothing psychologically false about him, but he sticks, he has to be pushed around, words have to be found for him.[vi]

The End of the Affair is a confessional novel about the writing process. It offers a familiar model of fiction passing itself off as life writing, presenting proto-empirical author-testimony as its story.

Similarly, in interview the novelist Andrew Cowan revealed intentional and unintentional ways in which his first novel, *Pig*, was written. The novel is a story which, as you may surmise, involves a pig, and also a grandfather. He says that the act of writing is akin to 'following a glimmer':

Every book is a kind of journey of exploration where you are looking for the words which will give form to the glimmer.[vii]

This notion of following a sense of the story which is part known and part mystery recurs with different formulations in many other writers' testimonies. Cowan declares that he knew nothing about pigs; he undertook trips to the library in his research and intentionally manipulated recall from his own life experience to create an emotional realism in the novel:

I drew on my memories of having dogs when I was a child so the pig in Pig *is really a description of my collie dogs when I was a boy.*

He also declares a more 'found' version of writing, such as with the voice of the grandfather in the novel:

That is my [own] grandfather's voice. And it came to me as if he was speaking directly to me which is a wonderful thing.

This flux between finding and grinding out a story echoes the testimony in *The End of the Affair* when Bendrix returns from mysterious imaginative ventures to an all too familiar, coffee-stained version of writing practice, often detailing a neurosis about his daily quota of words that may be known to many.

The novelist and memoirist Jenny Diski writes of the necessity of playfulness in *Skating to Antarctica* when talking about fictional child-characters based on herself:

The child who often appears in my novels sometimes has experiences I remember, but frequently doesn't. I am not fettered by history, by an absolute sense of telling-the-truth or making-things-up. I'm free to play around with who Jennifer was, might have been, never could have been. Sometimes it seems that I can get closer to her, or an essence of her precisely because of the distance between us.[viii]

In the tussle between making and finding, the lack of restriction is all important – having the freedom to dream, to play. This is an activity which, as stated earlier, does not sit easily in the academy. In this context, and pondering that 'adult world', it is impossible to ignore what now seems an almost quaint if necessary episode of late twentieth-century critical theory: that involving 'The Death of the Author' and 'What is an Author?'. Theorists such as Barthes and Foucault portrayed writers not as playful but as products of culture along with their writings. Authors were a hindrance to interpretation and at best should be put to one side. Such perceptions of the writer have tended to

reign within Literature departments. For instance, Bradbury, who was an academic critic who taught Literature as well as a novelist and screenwriter, wrote about that time:

It seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in classroom, then going straight back home to be one.[ix]

What happened to writers of fiction and poetry and drama while Barthes and Foucault were having their day, and since? Did we feel our pulses? Did we reflect not in words but by looking in the mirror to check if we were still there? On the contrary. The critical sidelining of the author has been countered over the years by the burgeoning profile of Creative Writing within English Studies. Authors, writers, have been far from dead; we have been active in the sand pit as per usual, and we have also been actively reflecting. It is increasingly apparent that practical writing studies augments and benefits the academy, not only with popular courses and high student populations, but also by adding an important strand to literary discussion. With the rising profile of writing modules in English departments the commensurate increase in reflective writing about practice has not just come from students. A new focus has developed – not on the author as signifier of the text but on the phenomenology of the writing process. The trend had its antecedents, for instance, in Henry James' essays and prefaces, one of them famously giving rise to the showing and telling debate. Notable other early contributions came with EM Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, Walter Allen's *Writers on Writing* and Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners.* A parallel tradition emerged with *The Paris Review Interviews*, and subsequent volumes of conversations with writers such as John Haffenden's *Novelists in Interview*.

Access to writers' versions of the creative process – their vacillations, hesitations and certainties, their craft and theories of form, their versions of technique and art, and their own individual and often eloquent vocabulary – has been amplified by modern, multi-platformed media and the ways in which writers are required to publicize their work. The latter half of the twentieth century and the start of this century has seen an explosion of reflective volumes from writers – Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*; Joyce Carol Oates' *The Faith of a Writer*; Ursula Le Guin's *Steering the Craft*; Graham Swift's *Making an Elephant*; David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction* and *The Practice of Writing*; Orhan Pamuk's *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*; Umberto Eco's *Confessions of a Young Novelist*.

This is merely the start of the list which also includes volumes such as *The Agony and the Ego*, mentioned earlier, as well as books by lesser known writers, many of whom teach creative writing in universities, along with several multi-authored, multi-genred handbooks and coursebooks, catering to the needs of the Creative Writing student population. This surge in practice-based discussion perhaps acts as a riposte to Barthes and Foucault, signalling that the realm of poetics is being re-occupied at least in part by those who write stories, poems, plays.

These various volumes feature both technical theory and writing exercises, though in research assessments within HE they tend to be denigrated as 'just teaching materials', highlighting the ongoing impasse between landlord and tenant. At the same time there has been renewed interest in writers' diaries, journals, drafts and drafting methods which has seen a parallel increase in archival research and wide-ranging revelations about working relationships between writers and editors: not only Raymond Carver, there are others – William Golding and Jane Austen are two disparate examples.

Over recent years I have recorded interviews with a number of writers about their writing process, conversations which have echoed this sense that practice testimonies offer valuable contributions to literary study and to the academic discussions about what Bradbury called 'a substantive theory of creativity'. I have also written – as have many others – an extensive commentary as part of a Creative Writing PhD thesis. My commentary was on the relationship between memory and writing. Various colleagues have reflected in their PhDs on the relationship between rock and roll and fiction, the novel tradition in Scotland, politics and the Indian novel. I could go on, but you can see from these titles and themes that writing a reflection frequently involves looking at context, examining other works; it involves reading widely and contextualizing that reading in relation to your own writing. It does not involve just retelling what you did.

In resting the discussion of poetics back from supposedly objective literary and cultural theory, writers are also contributing to a new diction and genre, one in which self-reflection is not destructive or indulgent, and where becoming the sparrow or playing in the sand pit have a proper and rightful significance. In finding the language to write these reflections we are not indulging in what writers fear most – having to explain, praise, exonerate our own work. A commentary should never be a defense, an explanation or an

interpretation. Commentaries on writing process, as seen in the examples given in this discussion, are not confined to university programmes. But universities inherently should be interested in their subject matter – the phenomenology of craft, of art and of the creative process; equally interested in these things as they are in the history, linguistics and aesthetics of text and form.

Similarly, writers should not be afraid of embracing the academy. It is ours to mould if we wish. This is my other reason for commending the commentary: it is a discourse, I believe, which can act as an important challenge to those who supposedly own the territory, our landlords; a challenge that offers up the suggestion that we may not be tenants after all but co-proprietors. Having finally arrived at this suggestion of affiliation (no, not deference or mere conciliation), I would never go so far as to suggest that we should proceed without doubt, without uncertainty. It would seem that 'not knowing' is central to what we do, but we can and should further scrutinize and discuss our uncertainties and how half-glimpsed truths are sought. Keats himself was seen to be ambivalent about negative capability in his own methods, as Douglas Bush wrote:

As artist Keats fluctuates – and is aware of his fluctuations – between belief in the poetic efficacy of a wise passiveness, and belief in the active pursuit of rational knowledge and philosophy.[x]

This seems to me to be an accurate account of the dilemma faced by many writers in the academy.

Notes

i Borrowing its title from a NAWE panel at the 2011 AWP conference in Washington DC, this article is based on my presentation on that panel. Fellow panelists were Diana Barsham and Maggie Butt; the panel was chaired by Paul Munden. 'Negative capability' has been a much debated term and originates in Keats' letters – specifically those addressed to Benjamin Bailey and Keats' brothers George and Tom, in November and December 1817, Rollins, Hyder Edward (ed.) *The Letters of John Keats* CUP (1958) pp183-194.
ii Bradbury, Malcolm 'Graceful Combinations' in Boylan, Clare (ed.) *The Agony and the Ego* Penguin (1993) p62
iii Rose Tremain 'The First Mystery' in Boylan, Clare (ed.) *The Agony and the Ego* Penguin (1993) p5
iv Letter to Benjamin Bailey November 22 1817 Rollins, Hyder Edward (ed.) *The Letters of John Keats* CUP (1958) p186.
v Greene G, *The End of the Affair* Penguin 1975 (1st pub 1951) p35
vi Ibid pp185-6
vii Andrew Cowan in interview, in Neale, Derek and Anderson, Linda *Writing Fiction* Routledge (2009) p178.
viii Diski, Jenny *Skating to Antarctica* Granta (1997) p86.
ix Bradbury, Malcolm, Introduction *Class Work* Hodder and Stoughton (1995)
x 'Keats and his Ideas' in Abrams, MH (ed.) *English Romantic Poets* OUP (1960)

Derek Neale *edited* A Creative Writing Handbook: developing dramatic technique, individual style and voice, *co-authored* Writing Fiction *and* Life Writing, *taught at UEA for a number of years and is now Lecturer in Creative Writing at the Open University. His novel* The Book of Guardians *will be published in 2012.*

Whither the Workshop?

Andrew Cowan, Sam Kelly and Richard Beard

Andrew Cowan, Sam Kelly and Richard Beard discuss the strengths and shortcomings of the Creative Writing workshop.

Andrew Cowan is the director of the long-established MA programme at UEA, which is structured around the Creative Writing workshop, the 'signature pedagogy' of our discipline. Sam Kelly is the director of the recently established MA programme at Napier University, which dispenses entirely with the workshop. Richard Beard is the director of the non-academic National Academy of Writing, which retains some element of workshopping while dispensing with many of the requirements of a university course. In this round-table discussion they debate the strengths and shortcomings of the workshop, and of Creative Writing in an academic context.

ANDREW: Sam, we first met at the Writing Worlds symposium at UEA a couple of summers ago, when you were just about to launch the Napier MA. The theme of that symposium was the teaching of Creative Writing – what works, what doesn't, what's probably had its day, what the future might look like – and I remember you being perhaps the only person there who spoke out against the Creative Writing workshop. The Napier MA was going to dispense with what's been called the 'signature pedagogy' of the discipline. I'm wondering, what lay behind that decision?

SAM: Why did I ditch the workshop? Firstly, I suppose, because I could. I'd been given a blank slate to write a new programme on, and enough development time to do it.

I had the luxury of starting with questions. The programme I had in mind was committed to the development of full-length prose work, and to developing the artistic potential in genre writing. I wanted the programme to be in constant, energetic dialogue beyond the institution: in my previous life as a literary agent I'd been alarmed to the point of prejudice by the solipsism and sense of entitlement I encountered when visiting groups of writing students. Everyone I know who makes a living from writing writes a lot of different things: while a novel is in progress they also write to order, to briefs and deadlines, in collaboration with others, or for a new medium. I wanted my graduates to have tangible, versatile skills that would enable them to respond to whatever opportunities they find out there, to stand a chance of earning money in the unknowable future of our culture.

From this perspective, all the ideological baggage the workshop carries seemed hampering – but I also had questions about it as a practice. What does it actually teach people to do? So I went around the country interviewing tutors and students, and found a lot of interesting non-answers to that question. I also suffered wearyingly many instances of the cynical response that it teaches people how to facilitate workshops. When the people I met did define the workshop as creative writing pedagogy, the thing taught was generally described as 'self-editing' and 'criticism'.

ANDREW: Yes, those would probably have been my answers. I usually describe the workshop as a collective editorial enterprise. There's a line from a Henry James essay that I tend to roll out – I use it to introduce the idea of workshopping to my students – 'Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and comparison of standpoints.'

I want to encourage that in the workshop – that variety of attempt and exchange of views. I want to get my

students thinking aloud about each other's work, in the hope they'll also be pressed into thinking about general principles and can start to get a sense of the range of what's possible, and what the challenges are.

Obviously the person who's being workshopped gets the benefit of all that feedback, and that's maybe one of the attractions for the students. The workshop provides an audience, and it's good at revealing what enables a piece of fiction to communicate, and for suggesting how it might be 'fixed' when it doesn't. The reception of the work is played out before its author, who can then re-write it in response to the reception. That's important, I think, and over time I hope it teaches a key skill, which is to be able to anticipate how your work might carry to an eventual reader.

But the discussion among the group is equally important, I think. My hope is that everyone will acquire a kind of critical toolkit – a vocabularly and a set of concepts or understandings that they can apply to their own work as well as to the work of their classmates. Not just while they're with us but afterwards, too. The 'afterwards' is always important – what they take away, what'll sustain them as writers in the future.

SAM: Yes, the 'afterwards' was central to my thinking, too. Having worked as both an editor and a critic I could already think of other ways to teach self-editing and criticism: as you've suggested, these are complex conceptual and methodological processes, not simply practical activities. And generally speaking, neither tends to occur in a room full of people who are all having a bash. So, one of my questions was about whether teaching should try to replicate, a little more closely, the kinds of professional situations students hope to encounter after they graduate.

After a while, my colleague David Bishop and I stopped worrying about the workshop and sat down with exactly the same questions that anyone would ask in designing a programme of teaching, whatever the subject. What's this course intending to achieve in the world? What exactly do we want people to learn how to do? What is the most effective way to enable them to learn it? How can we test whether or not they can do what we think we've taught them to do? Which leads to the rather exhilaratingly straightforward process of identifying specific learning outcomes for each module, scanning all possible teaching methods for a dynamic fit in each case, and aligning these with the most pleasurable forms of assessment we could invent.

ANDREW: I'm interested in the answers you came up with, and I'd like to come back to those – but Richard, I think the exhilaration for you might have been in *not* having to specify any learning outcomes or devise any forms of assessment, because the National Academy of Writing appears to be structured like an MA programme while being resolutely *not* an academic course. One way in which it is MA-like, I think, is in having retained the practice of workshopping. But you've relegated it. The workshop isn't central.

RICHARD: I'm all in favour of learning outcomes – if that means knowing what you want to achieve. We want the National Academy of Writing to make better writers. In my experience, the problem with university module approval templates is that these are about what 'MA' means, or what 'Diploma' means, and not about writing.

At the National Academy we've decided to take a more single-minded approach: there may be transferable skills that attach to being an effective creative writer, but I'm not very interested in what they are. I want our writers to get better at writing the stories they want to write. One way to achieve this is to examine how working writers get their writing done. They rarely sit in rooms full of strangers (or friends) and take notes on the chat that comes back.

The reason we've kept the workshop, although in a relegated role, is because I agree that it's a useful way to measure reader reaction. The group feedback acts as a barometer, exactly as you say – and although it's not an exact measurement a consensus response does tend to emerge.

The other reason we've kept it is that most of our writers like it. It helps builds a collegiate identity from disparate voices and is an efficient way for writers, normally isolated in what they do, quickly to feel united in a common cause.

The workshop also raises an economic question, which is worth mentioning. Best workshop practice (and I agree with this) dictates that hierarchy is unhelpful in the workshop process: the chair should not lead, pre-empt or dominate the opinions of others. In which case the writers end up paying to hear their own opinions. The Creative Writing teacher becomes a kind of literary party-planner, and not a cheap one either. Course leaders should be aiming to contribute more than this.

For the National Academy, this translates as established

writers investing time and expertise in close editorial feedback. The main focus for this, and the weekly event around which the course is structured, is the public 'edit' we've developed as the NAW Masterclass (based on the Conservatoire model of public music lessons). Essentially our emphasis is not on writing at all, but on re-writing. This is the core skill for writers, whatever outlet they find for their work. It is also the main part of what writers actually do.

ANDREW: It's interesting what you say about it acting as a kind of barometer. There's a passage in Primo Levi's novel *The Wrench* where he tries to identify what it is that makes writing such a strain on the nerves compared to some other professions, and he points to the lack of control instruments. You never know if a piece of writing is 'right on the bubble'. The whole thing might topple over at any moment. Which makes the workshop a kind of makeshift measuring device – you have twelve other pairs of eyes squinting at what you've made.

So yes, the emphasis is on making adjustments, even on making wholesale changes – and the workshop for me too is primarily about re-writing. *Writing* is always about re-writing. But where do you begin? How do you acquire the ability to identify what it is that needs to be done? I think that may be the main pedagogical argument for the workshop, that it requires the participants to attend closely to the work, to 'listen' very closely to words on the page, and then to formulate suggestions for how it might be rewritten in order to become a better version of itself. In the process they should develop as critics *and* as writers, because whatever skills they develop as critics of their classmates' works-in-progress, they can then apply to their own work.

But arguably these skills can, as Sam suggests, be engendered in other ways – tutorials, lectures, the masterclass. Sam, I wonder if you could describe how the Napier MA is structured, and what you decided to put in place of the workshop? I think you also include something like a masterclass.

SAM: Our MA is structured as a journey of creative decision-making, from an initial concept to a fully-conceived work. We put a lot of emphasis on the purposeful development of ideas and active, pre-emptive interrogation of technique, rather than simply addressing outcomes on the page.

Towards the end, we teach a range of additional skills, such as professional fiction editing, abridgement, adaptation and collaborative working. There are five compulsory modules: two are inspired by linguistics and philosophy and dedicated to prose experimentation; two are focused on technical and craft skills, and one is purely writing practice. Then for the sixth module there's a choice of specialist writing practice options: narrative non-fiction, writing for graphic fiction, screenwriting, genre fiction. And to finish there's the standard major project with extended critical self-reflection – with the added requirement of a personal development plan for the two years after graduation.

We teach in class for nine hours a week: three hours per module. What goes on is a mixture of group challenges, in-class exercises, critical self-reflection, short lectures, analytical reading, theoretical debates, demonstrations of technique, skills-building activities, working through ideas, testing out narrative approaches, guest talks: as much as we can possibly fit in.

We've replaced the workshop with three separate forms of feedback – and there's nothing radical here, aside perhaps from the quantity and cumulative effect. A regular feature of homework is a short piece with a brief and a strict five-day deadline. The results are given masterclass-style feedback in the following week's class: usually David and I do this together, so we're discussing the work between us and with the student in front of everyone else.

We set two formal assessments on every taught module – one in the middle and one at the end, so twelve in total before the final project – and we give written feedback within two weeks, with further discussion in individual tutorials. In addition to all that, every student has dedicated one-to-one editorial mentoring for the development of their own personal work. This is an hour of intensive discussion at four-weekly intervals; it takes place completely outside coursework and assessments, and I think it's by far the most important thing we do. Which maybe raises another set of issues about the logic of academic programme design....

ANDREW: One thought that occurs to me is that some of this range of activity is dedicated to generating new work, and some to feedback and reflection. You have a balance. And that corresponds in many ways to the structure of our BA programme. But one complicating thing about so many of the critiques of the workshop that I've read – most of them American – is that they don't make a distinction between generative, exercise-based learning and the discussion of works-in-progress. The term 'workshop' is used for both.

I'm not against class exercises, or taught modules, but for me the *workshop* is specifically a forum for feedback and reflection. Yet as both you and Richard describe it, probably the most effective method for giving feedback comes in the form of editorial mentoring – the kind of feedback that can only come from an experienced professional or practitioner. The masterclass is one context for that. The tutorial is another. Written feedback is another.

On our MA we put a lot of emphasis on the latter two, and they're certainly important, and effective. But one question: is there a danger that editorial mentoring can make the student too passive a recipient of another's expertise? What do you think of the argument that the advantage of the workshop is that it requires the students to think independently as critics of other people's work, which is a more active form of learning that will better equip them for life after the course?

SAM: I think there's a danger of fostering dependency and passivity in students, whatever we do. Those courses which provide little but workshopping risk turning out aspiring writers who can't get past a first draft without a roomful of opinions: a particularly hampering state of affairs in the case of full length novels.

Richard's point about how writers actually get their writing done suggests that what students should be learning, above all, is skilled self-reliance. So, I'm wondering how this links to your questions, which have to do with independent critical thinking and life after the course. It seems to me that the answers depend on where we set the bar: how we envisage the future for our students; what kind of cultural landscape we imagine they will inhabit; what it is we think they will do with this life after the course. What are the uses of critical acumen, for example?

The difference between the workshop and what we might term professional critical practice is partly an operational one – but I think it's also a question of the kinds of aspirations the workshop encourages. In the world, writers play a crucial role in shaping public dialogue – not just through their creative work, but as essayists, polemicists, critics, manifesto-makers, occasional satirists. All the novelists I most admire are engaged in some aspect of this. But there's a huge difference between the 'reader response' you get in the average workshop and the kind of imaginative critical work which is capable of significant cultural intervention. And there's the same gap between workshop feedback and the focused, committed one-to-one dialogue which prompts deep transformation in a story: the best kind of editing.

The editorial dialogue is by most accounts going down the pan. Only the next generation of writers can save it: by demanding more than proofreading of their publishers, by becoming editors themselves, by becoming skilled participants in the dialogue, from either side of the table. Otherwise, the future may look very bleak for our graduates: they will all self-publish their drafts as bargain e-books and join online discussions with their five readers to find out if what they did is any good.

Editing, self-editing, cultural intervention: looking at the likely future for our students, I don't see these things as optional extras. They all involve a particularly rigorous, elegant and creative method of questioning: technical and conceptual working which requires some framework or intellectual architecture. This we can invent from our own practices, and then refine in teaching which our students can use to their own ends. For me, the teaching takes the form of various collaborative and individual tasks and experiments, with a great deal of feedback and re-working of both questions and answers.

Of course, there's no reason why it can't be done in a workshop, though I have doubts. Over the summer, I led a series of traditional MFA workshops for an American university, and spent a long time shifting the dialogue from basic reader responses ('this is a distinctive voice', 'I can't relate to this character') to a collaborative process of identifying serious questions which the writer will benefit from answering. Student feedback suggested this was revolutionary, though I have doubts about that, too. I'm absolutely sure that a talented workshop leader would have managed it with more speed, finesse and understatement, but it still seems a very laborious way around.

RICHARD: There are several different issues here. Does the workshop improve a writer's critical skills? And not just as a reader, but in a way that transfers to their own writing? I think it does – re-reading critically is the essential prelude to effective re-writing. The workshop formalizes the need to find a coherent response to a variety of texts. However, as Sam suggests, at worst that response can either be vague and unhelpful or formulaic and unhelpful – there is an index of workshop phrases, such as those Sam quotes, that ought to alert any workshop leader that no coherent critical thinking has

actually taken place.

However, the fact that some writers don't think critically in a workshop situation is not always the fault of the workshop form. A distinction has to be made between the different *kinds* of criticism. In a group situation the workshop discussion will usually work at a broader level than close editorial feedback. There simply isn't time for up to twelve participants to go through the line-edit precision of noun-usage or the consistency of imagery (with examples) in each text. I know. We've tried it. Like a barometer, then, the critical measurement provided by a workshop is not a precision instrument. Nor are the critical skills learned in a workshop likely to be those of a copy-editor. The skills helpful in a workshop situation are those that can analyze larger sense units like concept, structure, or the arc of a plot action. In fact, exactly the kind of critical skills useful during the early stages of any project.

Close reading skills, those that become essential later on, can't usefully be taught in the workshop. Andrew asks whether there's a danger that editorial mentoring can make the student too passive a recipient of another's expertise. Well, expertise is what experienced writers bring to the NAW Masterclass. By making the close editorial reading a public event, our Masterclass allows all our writers to appreciate and learn from the process. A model edit is provided that writers can use as a foundation for their own editorial panache. If they still remain passive, then they may have come to the wrong place.

ANDREW: Earlier you mentioned the role of the workshop in creating a collegiate atmosphere, which is one reason why the Academy has retained it. At UEA we place a lot of emphasis on it, though I know in the past there have been periods when the dynamic was more gladiatorial. Patricia Duncker and Michele Roberts were instrumental in introducing a more collaborative, supportive ethos, and we do now encourage the students to think of themselves as each other's best asset. For instance, it's often the case that the students will find their future first reader in their workshop group – the person who'll be their sounding board for years afterwards.

But there's something more to it than this. If the dynamic is right, if the students hang out together, and make the most of the experience of spending a year being serious about writing in the company of other serious writers, they'll come to trust each other to speak honestly to the work. It becomes possible for the critical scrutiny of the *work* to be really quite detailed – even to the level of line editing – without anyone feeling that the writer is also under scrutiny. One of the great pleasures of teaching the workshop is participating in that studio atmosphere – it can be intense, it can be hilarious – and the main thing, the real excitement, is that sometimes my teaching and their learning feel as if they're approaching the condition of writing. I mean when the writing is going well and new, unexpected, surprising thoughts are occurring.

This is to present quite a positive view of the workshop, I realize. It's certainly true to my experience, and the success of our graduates may be some kind of endorsement of its effectiveness. But there are no doubt other ways of fostering that sense of collegiality. It may even be argued that the gladiatorial style is more productive of originality, in putting the students on their mettle, pressing them to think differently under an unusual kind of duress. One frequent criticism of Creative Writing courses generally is that they produce samey, conventionalized writing - and the workshop is sometimes characterized as writing by committee.

Sam, earlier you mentioned the ideological baggage that the workshop carries. I wonder if this emphasis on 'the group' is part of that?

SAM: Recent histories of Creative Writing provide interesting co-ordinates. In *The Elephants Teach* DG Myers traces a direct line from the artists' colony at Carmel to the Iowa Workshop, transferring intact the ethos of early twentieth-century American bohemianism. This could be summarized as: confidence in the autonomy of artistic practice, and a shared belief in the seriousness of the task; a disdain for any critical values external to the group, and an acceptance that the production of art is primarily undertaken for the benefit of fellow initiates. I would add to the inheritance an overwhelming concern with creating an *environment* over other pedagogical considerations, the idea of the workshop leader as a member of the peer group, and a lingering bent towards obsessively-crafted literary realism as the benchmark of achievement.

In passing, Mark McGurl suggests in *The Program Era* a lineage drawn from therapeutic aims, which validate self-discovery and self-expression as ends. This gives us the belief that sustained, 'guided' group endeavour is of use in itself, leading to a certain expedient mystification of process and technique. These two versions of the history may explain other tendencies: the internally-validated norms; the whole parade of catchphrases

about “finding your voice” and “showing not telling”; the general drift of institutional replication and regress.

Then there are the shrill polemics which would have us believe the workshop is the last bastion of liberal humanism, that universally discredited mindset. In its promotion of the authentic, unified human subject and its blindness to any theoretical concept past late European narratology – so the argument goes – the workshop is no more than an engine of the current capitalist cause. Personally, I sympathize with these attempts at radical argument, though I wish they were better expressed and more attentive: replacing a caricature of Carver with a caricature of Derrida doesn’t get us very far. Adding this to the previous versions, however, gives us a rather disturbing suggestion: the primary business of workshops now seems to be some form of consolation.

This is all very reductive, of course. But there do seem to be things here which prevailing practices either embrace or can’t help but reproduce in the workshop form. To an extent, it’s the ideology that students (enthusiastically or unwittingly) buy when they had over their fees. Which isn’t any kind of problem, except in academia. Richard has the most pragmatic solution, in removing the discipline to a different marketplace where it can define itself wholly in response to demand. But what about the rest of us?

For me, the most problematic inheritance of the workshop is the lingering insistence that Creative Writing as a university subject can’t, in the usual sense of university subjects, be taught. It’s evident in the number of external classes (English Literature, Critical Theory) that students on workshop-driven programmes seem required to take as supplements. If you don’t believe the subject is unteachable on its own terms, then this advertised lack at the heart of creative writing’s founding ideology is a worry.

ANDREW: I think we may have a different sense of the founding ideology! My understanding – which also derives from *The Elephants Teach,* as it happens – is that the original conception at Iowa was for creative writers to do scholarship and scholars to do creative writing. It was about integrating literary knowledge and literary practice. And this is still the premise of a lot of undergraduate courses, including UEA’s. Our advertised aim is ‘to complement the critical study of English literature with insights gained from the practice of writing and to complement the practice of writing with insights gained from the critical study of English literature’.

But yes, at MA level, the workshop is usually the core, though the presence of supplementary classes needn’t be taken as an admission that writing is unteachable on its own terms. I think they reflect an understanding that the practice is culturally constituted. So any practical engagement with generic conventions, let’s say, will be enhanced by an awareness of literary history and theory. Similarly, the discussion of process and technique that goes on all the time in the workshop will be enhanced by the students’ conceptual and historical awareness.

I’m ambivalent though. There are aspects of the ‘academicizing’ of writing that make me uneasy. As a writer, I often feel I’d be happier working with my students without the need to grade them, for instance. Feedback, yes. But marks... A writer’s development is slower and more profound than can often be measured by a percentage grade – it happens on longwave, so to speak, while the shortwaves of assessment can introduce a lot of unhelpful fuzz and interference.

This is one reason to envy Richard. I often think of our MA as being at the ‘professional preparation’ end of the spectrum, as being more vocational or publication-oriented than many other programmes. Napier’s MA is perhaps further along that spectrum, and the National Academy further along again. Richard, I wonder if you could conclude by identifying what you think may be lost or gained by teaching writing in a non-academic Academy.

RICHARD: The more constrained the university course, the more there is to gain by avoiding those constraints. In that sense, the National Academy of Writing will improve more significantly on some courses than on others. One immediate difference is a change of terminology: we don’t have students we have writers; no assignments only writing. This isn’t an advantage in itself, but the concentration on writing alone benefits the committed writer. The NAW is free of academic directives and can therefore pursue an honesty of focus that I think many writers appreciate.

We don’t offer an award at the end of the course, which is good or bad depending on the point of view. The course is validated only by its quality and the feedback given by writers who attend, but one of the biggest advantages is that we don’t have to make facile assessments. How useful is it, really, to offer feedback in the form of ‘Commendation’ or ‘67’ or ‘2:2’? This is a scale of proficiency, as Sam mentions, that tends to

favour literary realist embellishments. We insist on looking at how texts work on their own terms, without attempting the apples to oranges comparisons demanded by a system that wants to give out Distinctions.

As a single-issue organization, we may be able to avoid other creeping disadvantages of the university environment. We don't have to prove that our course offers as much of a challenge (and as much work, for equally favourable outcomes) as, say, the course being run in the next corridor on French Literature. We can say that the discipline of writing creatively may in fact not be anomalous to other university disciplines. Whether this means Creative Writing has any place on a university programme is no concern of ours. We can concentrate our energies on the more intricate and interesting problems of adjectival selection.

Which, of course, is also a disadvantage. Our model offers nothing to show for completing the course except improvement as a writer. This will not appeal to everyone. It may be that many writers on university Creative Writing courses are not as serious about writing as they think. They do want a consolation prize, an MA or a PhD. Good luck to them, because the university is full of other students on the same quest in different subjects. This is not, however, what NAW can or wants to offer.

At the professional end of the spectrum, the risk for all professional writers is ending up with nothing. Or nothing material, no certificate of achievement exchangeable in the employment market for jobs that are not writing. With time, and clear weather, NAW may build up the same kind of reputational capital as UEA. However, while this is happening the National Academy is more vulnerable to a creeping cultural idea that writing for its own sake is over. That learning to write and being a good writer and even writing an excellent book is simply not worth the candle. If this attitude prevails, we will not be the only casualty.

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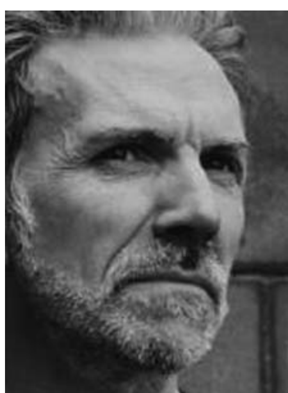
Sam Kelly *worked for many years as a literary agent in London, then as a critic, fiction editor, mentor to emerging writers and coach to established authors. She is now Programme Leader for the MA in Creative Writing at Edinburgh Napier University.*

Richard Beard *is the Director of the National Academy of Writing, and has published eight books. In 2008 he was shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award and in 2010 longlisted for the Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award. His latest novel is* Lazarus is Dead *(2011).*

Fluency, Observation and Voice

Issues in the teaching of creative writing to non-native speakers

Ian Pople



So, what *should* I do with this piece of writing?

Fife stretchs out on his bed. His arm crossed behind his back, he is dreaming, eyes opened about the house. The cuckoo-clock bawls eleven o'clock, falling out the silence of the house. Fife begins to close his eyes, maintaining his smile. A hollow noise rings. Fife wakes up immediately. He stays two minutes, listening to know where does the sound come from. His parents was sleeping since three hours, as every night. Fife wears a dressing-gown and, stealthily, goes in front of his brothers bedroom. His second brother open. He looks disagreeable, as every day.

- *Why aren't you in your bed?*
- *Well, I heard something, Douglas.*
- *It was nothing, get lost!*

On the one hand, there are inaccuracies in the English. And such inaccuracies are penalized with the marking criteria for the course. Partly, this is because I teach this course within the University Language Centre at the University of Manchester, and the Language Centre's courses are primarily for language learners, not for creative writers. On the other hand, there is an internal pressure in a writer as good as this to push their English as hard as they can. And where we ask *speakers* of other languages to be unafraid to make mistakes, we put pressure on *writers* of other languages to make their writing as correct as they can. And those corrections also fall within my remit.

My remit as the teacher is explained to my students at the start of the course, which lasts only one semester, twelve teaching weeks. I explain to the students that I understand that there is a real tension between the mistakes they make as a result of lack of language knowledge, and the mistakes they will make because they are pushing at the limits of their English. I try to assure them that I will use my long-term experience as a writer, and as a teacher, to weigh their inaccuracies against their creativities.

And Teddy's creativities in the piece above certainly outweigh his inaccuracies. Teddy, to my mind, is possibly the best 'writer' to ever have taken the course. Why? Although there is an element of over-writing in this piece, Teddy is feeling towards a voice in his writing. And a sense of a voice, emergent or partially achieved is very rare amongst these students. Teddy's voice emerges from the quality of observation there is in his writing. And that quality does not only apply to the environment and the things. Teddy's observation is applied to character too; to the four brothers and the mother and father that populate this narrative. Probably too many characters, but the following pages of his text certainly differentiate the characters one from another, and that snatch of dialogue hints at other weapons in Teddy's writerly armoury. There's also the careful creation of atmosphere through the relation of person to place.

Teddy also has a putative sense of narrative. The characters have strong interactions that point in useful directions, although there is a rather improvised feel, as if the trajectory of the whole piece was only being felt for. Teddy is allowed to do that, of course, because he's only with me for twelve weeks and that twelve weeks is all the trajectory he needs. And I'm allowed to accept that too, because Teddy is only with me for that short time. So if Teddy can avoid things, so can I.

That twelve weeks is all the trajectory I need! So I can put off dealing with the larger issues. Issues such as character, plot, tightening lines of development. And the

grammar and vocab!

This is Ju Hyun's writing:

Sand dust blurred the whole view.
There was no grass. Only hard ground covered sand existed.
Gray cemented wall divided the outside and the school.
Yellow, red, and green paint worn, so deep-black steel appeared see-saw, slides, and swings.
It smelled steel on hands after hanging on the chin-up bar.

I in the reality was ceaselessly running the playground, laughing, and sometimes chasing one another with friends. I jumped over the tires and was excited when I got a swing after long queuing. It was not all gloomy. I sang the song that was popular among children at those times and laughed a lot.

Ju Hyun has similar language problems to Teddy; grammar problems that she came to the university with, worked on while she was there, and will, I hope, carry on working through after her time here. At the same time, her problems don't interfere with either fluency or communication. The writing communicates. There is a vitality to the writing that is, like Teddy's, the result of nice observation; that fifth line, for example 'It smelled steel … the chin-up bar'. And the question arises here of whether the grammatical solecisms really matter with such vital writing. Part of that vitality actually arises out of the free-floating 'It' at the beginning of the sentence and the 'dangling participle' of 'hanging'. They add to a spirit of improvisation in the writing. And this improvisation is different to Teddy's narrative. This is improvisation in order to re-create an effect, to bring the physical tangibly alive. So the tutor's problem is how to 'correct' such writing without destroying the inherent vitality.

In the hands of a native speaker, such solecisms would be seen as examples of linguistic play of a different kind. Such play would be lauded, when written by someone such as Daljit Nagra or others, within a dialect, or idiolect created by someone 'fully in control' of the English language. Such praise would be predicated on a sense of that writer showing a range of particularized playfulness. However, the writer would have needed to show that in other texts that play had a focus and a meaning. And that kind of meaning is not available to Ju Hyun because her 'play' must be held within the 'mistake' category. Or must it?

That 'intentionality' is one of the central problems that I struggle with as the tutor on this course. As mentioned above, I play the 'experience' card with the students. I suggest to them that my long writing career and publication record (!), as well as my history as an EFL teacher, give me experience with which to judge and juggle between mistakes in the English and creativity in the writing. For Teddy, I perceive his intentions as his working towards an individual voice in his creativity. I see his writing as containing a whole bundle of felicities that add up to something very special. For Ju Hyun, I decide that her solecism is a solecism; that the whole bundle of her writing contains a great spirit and energy but that her intention is not to wrest the English language in ways its never been wrested before. So I probably underlined the 'It smelled steel … the chin-up bar' sentence and put some graffiti in the margin that indicated that it was unacceptable English and could she change it – and kill it!

With other writers, of course, the problems are different:

I used to live on the 6th floor of a high-rise building in the very centre of Berlin. Our flat had five rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a balcony. The view from that balcony was really the thing most worthy to remember. Not only because there was not exactly much that made the flat itself special, but because the view was just as diverse as you can imagine in terms of colours, shapes, temperatures, everything.

On the one hand, there was that huge street, Landsberger Allee, Berlin's longest street, which started right down there. There must have been millions of cars every day, several hundred trams and a few dozen ambulances, fire brigades, and police cars. It was as busy as Oxford Road, at the very least.

Roy's English, you'll have to agree, is basically very good; possibly some 'Germish' (German English!) as it tends to be called, i.e. an inter-language interference between German and English that leads him create 'the thing most worthy to remember'; and the use of 'fire brigades' instead of 'fire engines'. But his English is fluent, if a little stiff, although there's nice use of 'you' to mediate between the writer and the reader, in the first paragraph. No, the problem is not the English, it's the creativity. The observations here are of quantity, 'millions' and 'several hundred', not of quality. Roy doesn't particularize. Roy has looked but not seen, and finally throws the judgement back on the locally informed reader; if you don't know Oxford Road in Manchester, then you can't even begin to visualize what he's writing about. And even if you do know Oxford Road, then, when you visualize that, you are taken further away from the place that is not being described.

I tend to use visualizations a lot with these writers.

Since they are mostly ‘neophytes’, as I’ve described them elsewhere, I try to get them to write about what they know. Didn’t Oscar Wilde remark about the advice to writers to write about what they knew, that some of the worst writing he had ever seen was when people wrote about what they knew? But notwithstanding Oscar Wilde, I find that with such novice writers that they need to write about something, rather than relying on imaginations that they may or may not have. And I don’t think that I have much of an imagination either! But writing about what you know, when you are young and don’t have much life experience, can be limiting. And it was Thoreau who said, ‘How vain it is to sit down to write if you have not stood up to live.’

Don’t get me wrong here. As we’ve seen from Ju Hyun, those snippets of life experience can be vital and made more so with imaginative control of language. And I can assure you that each year, I have three or four students whose writing takes my breath away and who even in ‘their callow youth’ are much, much better writers than I am. And such good writers will take moments of autobiography and, through their imaginations, inhabit that autobiography so that it springs off the page. But the problem with Roy and others who take this course because ‘it’s there’, is that they aren’t people who would naturally pick up a pen and start to write. They come to the course for a variety of reasons, of which exercising their creativity might be only a small one. Some students, often the more diligent ones, hoover up all the English they can get in their one or two semesters at Manchester. And some writers write wonderful English in other contexts and other courses and simply don’t perform in Creative Writing. But many of these writers take this course because they want someone to look at their English, not their creativity.

At the same time, I do feel very strongly that the quality of observing is an important life skill as much as it is fundamental to the writer. Writers may sometimes not be very successful people (and much literary biography is a testament to that!), but surely people who are observant are likely to a little more empathetic, perhaps?

And then there are students whom, I feel, one needs to leave well alone. Junnan wanted to expand on her reading of *The Little Prince.* This extract isn’t quite the beginning of her text. But it’s very close to the beginning of her text addressed to Antoine de Saint-Exupery:

It was the first time I had travelled alone by rail in such a cold winter afternoon. With my heavy luggage alongside my feet, I sat down by the window, as I loved to enjoy the snowy views outside. I took out a book from my backpack and started reading. I always had a book with me when I was travelling. I don’t think that doing nothing during a journey is a waste of time, but I prefer to read something which could bring me to an imaginary world.

As there were not so many people travelling in such cold weather, it was hard not to notice the only person getting on the train when the train stopped at a small village. I immediately recognized who he was because of his golden hair and muffler. He was taller than before (according to the pictures in your book), but his face had changed little. He came straight towards me and asked: “What book are you reading?”
I had a thousand questions to ask him, …

Not only is the writing damn near perfect, but the imagination flows so clearly in the piece. The details are lovely: the depiction of the luggage, the reasoning why there were so few people on the train, the internalization of the recognition, and the little detail that the Little Prince is ‘taller than before’; the control of idiom in ‘his face had changed little’. So my fear, here, is how do I leave well alone – in such a way that offers encouragement and stimulation? One way is to offer Junnan the kind of commentary on her writing that I’ve written here, and I try to do that.

So, I try to offer feedback that picks out the details of the writing that work for me, and possibly for others and to suggest that they are good, strong, valid, etc. These are often, if not always, details of observation; I try to give feedback that accentuates the details that add up to voice.

Perhaps the fears I’m articulating in this piece are similar to the ones we all have, i.e. that Friday *crie de coeur*; ‘Another week done, and I still haven’t been found out yet!’ I’d like to think, of course, that I’m trying to articulate what it means to be a conscientious teacher with this particular group of students. I hope so.

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Taking Risks in Fiction

Linda Anderson

Fiction that isn't an author's personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn't worth writing for anything but money. – Jonathan Franzen

I remember the novel that most inspired me to become a writer. It was John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965), the story of an adolescent boy growing up in Ireland in the 1950s. He struggles with anguished sexual desires and with religious doubt. The young man's mutiny against adult authority and cant revealed to me that you can say anything in writing if you only dare. Transgressive things, disturbing facts, suppressed feelings, things that aren't supposed to be said. It is this thrilling and difficult freedom that I want to explore in this article.

So much of the literature we value deals with raw truths or with forms of emotional, moral and political discomfort. Writers are praised for audacity and some even make boldness into a kind of manifesto. For example, Andre Brink has insisted that all significant literature must 'confront, affront, offend – the reader and the world.' (Brink 1983:119) This is stirring in a way because it grants us a huge licence for expression and it banishes boundaries. But it is also daunting. Freedom of speech carries responsibilities. Audacity without artistry could be just crude and ugly. How do we distinguish between gritty writing and sensationalism? How do we encourage our students (and ourselves) to write in an unshielded way? It requires a mixture of bravery and technique. This article will explore some models that are useful to show to students and will also seek to challenge or complicate some standard workshop advice.

Know when to slow down

One of the commonest recommendations given to new writers is to 'cut to the chase'. Stop explaining too much, filling in every detail, and accounting for every moment. Anyone who has taught or attended workshop groups for any length of time will have read dozens of story drafts that could be improved by starting a few lines or a few paragraphs later than they do or where the writer has prolonged the ending past the best, most resonant conclusion. The remedy is to understand the importance of pace, how stories can be dramatized and enlivened by dropping extraneous details, or too much summary and interpretation. As Raymond Carver said of his own practice, 'Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on.' (Carver 1986 [1981]:22)

This advice is essential and true – except when it isn't. Economy, concision, and speed are not always appropriate. Writers need to also learn when to slow down, when to allow details to accrue. The problem is that lingering is usually right just when it's hard for the writer to bear it. For example, a student in one of my workshop groups recently turned in an autobiographically-based story. It was an eloquent and affecting account of a lonely girlhood overshadowed by the volatility of an abusive father. The only lightness came from a friendship with another girl who moved into the neighbourhood. The growth of this friendship was traced in memorable scenes that showed what the friend's loyalty had meant to the narrator, what the reprieves of fun and make-believe had given her. The two girls became estranged when the narrator went to a different school and received a more challenging education. She began to feel exasperated by her friend's timorous conventionality. And then the bombshell sentence: 'Six months later, I stood beside May's coffin.' It's an electrifying line, one that reflects the shocking blow of unexpected loss. It also follows standard advice about using jump cuts and avoiding predictability. It's direct and unadorned. But ultimately most of the workshop group found this part of the story

unsatisfactory. It wasn't the stark sentence itself but the way it was used to shut down further exploration. We got the shock of bereavement but bypassed the process of grieving or the significance of the loss. The apparent audacity disguised a failure of nerve: the writer could not bear to linger. Such fear and reluctance are understandable – we all experience these – but overcoming them can lead to great writing.

In Frank O'Connor's famous story, 'Guests of the Nation' (1931), the title is ironic because the 'guests' are British soldiers, Belcher and Hawkins, hostages of the IRA during the Irish War of Independence. They are confined to an elderly woman's cottage and guarded by two young, inexperienced Irish fighters, Bonaparte and Noble. The two soldiers and their captors develop a friendship through regular games of cards and debates about religion and politics, which are full of fiery banter but good-natured. Right at the start of the story, the narrator, Bonaparte, observes how he and Noble have picked up the Englishmen's habit of addressing them as 'chum' and how Donovan, the captors' leader, harangues Belcher for playing badly at cards 'as if he was one of our own'. (O'Connor 2005 [1931]:49)

The story darkens when Donovan informs Bonaparte that the enemy are holding Irish prisoners and threatening to shoot them. 'If they shoot our prisoners, we'll shoot theirs'. (Ibid: 52) As soon as this brutal logic is stated, the wrangling between Noble and Hawkins that same night about the 'next world', the location of heaven and whether the dead acquire wings, becomes unbearably sinister.

The next evening Donovan returns with news that the Irish prisoners have been shot and that now the Englishmen must be killed in retribution. What happens next – the execution of the two men – is recounted over six pages. It is slow and agonizing, taking us through both the hostages' anguish and the perpetrators'. We are taken right inside Bonaparte's mental torment:

He took Hawkins by the arm and dragged him on, but it was impossible to make him understand that we were in earnest. I had the Smith and Wesson in my pocket and I kept fingering it and wondering what I'd do if they put up a fight for it and ran, and wishing to God they'd do one or the other. (Ibid: 55)

The Englishmen are incredulous at first; then they plead and bargain, even offering to join the IRA side. Nothing works. There is an overpowering sense of everyone being trapped inside some inexorable engine of retaliation: 'If they shoot our prisoners; we'll shoot theirs'. After Donovan slaughters Hawkins, there is a harrowing scene where Belcher tries to tie a handkerchief over his own eyes. It's too small, so he asks Bonaparte for the loan of his to make a large enough blindfold.

The story ends with the sense that the perpetrators will never recover from this action. 'And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.' (Ibid: 60)

The slow, unsparing account of the murders creates a tension so fraught that the reader longs at every point for the action to stop, while knowing that it won't. We watch moment by appalling moment while two men die and their killers betray their own human decency and take on an everlasting burden of guilt.

Without one word of polemic, O'Connor has produced a story that creates revulsion for war and for how it demeans people. He does it through his unflinching control, his ability to slow down and stay with the action. The story is a useful antidote to some students' liking for a message-laden rhetoric. There is no point in telling readers that war is terrible (or racism or poverty or illness) or in making characters preach at others or berate themselves. What works best is to create characters the reader will care about, place them in adversity, and hold up a steady mirror to what happens. It demands self-discipline and practice for writers not to spill their own emotions and judgements on to the page. But ultimately, a restrained narrative is often more cathartic for the writer as well as the reader.

Dare to enter private life

To a chemist, nothing on earth is unclean. A writer must be as objective as a chemist. – Anton Chekhov

Fiction is an intimate experience, sometimes overwhelmingly so. We are used to reading about fictional characters' frailties and fantasies, their vanities and vulnerabilities. There is a great candour about sexual life in contemporary narratives but other intimacies are more rarely explored. For example, 'bathroom smells' are seldom mentioned outside of stand-up comedy routines or anxiety-fuelled aerosol advertisements. JM Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is narrated by Magda, the lonely daughter of a sheep farmer in colonial South Africa. Here is her description of the toilet habits of herself and her father.

Every sixth day, when our cycles coincide, his cycle of two days, my cycle of three, we are driven to the intimacy of relieving our bowels in the bucket-latrine behind the fig-trees in the malodour of the other's fresh faeces, either he in my stench or I in his. Sliding aside the wooden lid I straddle his hellish gust, bloody, feral, the kind that flies love best, flecked, I am sure, with undigested flesh barely mulled over before pushed through. Whereas my own (and here I think of him with his trousers about his knees, screwing his nose as high as he can while the blowflies buzz furiously in the black space below him) is dark, olive with bile, hard-packed, kept in too long, old, tired: We heave and strain, wipe ourselves in our different ways with squares of store-bought toilet paper, mark of gentility, recompose our clothing, and return to the great outdoors. Then it becomes Hendricks's charge to inspect the bucket and, if it prove not to be empty, to empty it in a hole dug far away from the house, and wash it out, and return it to its place. Where exactly the bucket is emptied I do not know; but somewhere on the farm there is a pit where, looped in each other's coils, the father's red snake and the daughter's black embrace and sleep and dissolve. (Coetzee 2004 [1977]: 34, 35)

This single paragraph conveys so much: Magda's unnerving outspokenness and her bitter wit. She is unafraid to rouse revulsion – and we sense that she is mesmerized by self-disgust. We also see her incestuous fascination with her father, a mingling of resentment and queasy obsession. The final image of the coiled serpent's deathly embrace is disturbing in its sexual connotations and amazingly lyrical, transforming the stinking dung into something resembling an uroborous, the snake that devours its own tail and represents a self-enclosed totality. This image is all the more telling when we consider Magda's rage and jealousy about her father taking a new 'bride'. The excerpt also indicates a lot about race and class. A servant has to inspect and empty and wash their bucket – another layer of claustrophobic intimacy. There is a sense of an imaginative woman going derailed and rancid in the stifling oppression of South Africa.

Why does this risk work? I think it is because the latrine and Magda's mortified but boastful interest in it have a revelatory purpose. It's about so much more than a smelly bucket.

Let's consider another repressed character, this time in 'Adventure' from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). The protagonist is Alice Hindman, who is twenty-seven years old, works in a dry goods store, and lives with her mother who has remarried a couple of years ago. We're told that Alice had a love affair at the age of sixteen with Ned Currie. He left the town to get a job with a newspaper and finally ended up in Chicago. On his last night in Winesburg, the couple made love in a moonlit field and he told her that now they would 'have to stick to each other'. (Anderson 2008 [1919]: 86) But gradually he forgot Alice. He was neither heartless nor malicious. His feeling for her was genuine but he entered a new city and a new life. Alice's life, by contrast, is completely stalled. She is like a young Miss Havisham, living in a chronic, unasked-for fidelity. 'To her the thought of giving to another what she felt could belong only to Ned seemed monstrous.' (Ibid: 87) She dreams of Ned, even prays to him. She begins to realize that her beauty and youth are passing and that the man is not going to return: 'It is not going to come to me. I will never find happiness. Why do I tell myself lies?' (Ibid: 89) Despite this self-confrontation, she cannot change. But her pent-up longing and loneliness clamour within her and one night, she undresses and runs out naked into the rainy street. 'She wanted to leap and run, to cry out, to find some other lonely human and embrace him.' She encounters a man stumbling homewards and speaks to him. 'Wait!' she cried. 'Don't go away. Whoever you are, you must wait.' He is old and deaf. He shouts 'What? What say?' and continues on his way. (Ibid: 91) Alice returns home, desolate and shaking, and resolves to resign herself to permanent aloneness.

The encounter has an element of hilarity: a naked woman presents herself to a man who doesn't even notice her. But we don't get the relief of laughter or ridicule here. The outcome is too surprising and consequential. Alice has stripped herself bare in every way and imperiously demanded a man's attention for the first time in her life. But he is elderly and deaf; it's dark and raining and maybe he's a bit drunk. It's as if he is hermetically sealed inside his own infirmities and concerns. Nothing could prove her doomed separateness more to Alice. The man doesn't really see her and she is erased. Her naked body is emptied of the usual heavily sexualized meanings: object of vision, target of desire. She doesn't even get reviled as someone importunate or crazy. Nothing happens – fatefully.

Anderson's method of punctured melodrama is one that can be effectively advocated to students with a tendency to overstate. Characters don't always have to be thwarted by major setbacks. Sometimes it can be plans that go awry, gestures that fail, needs that go unmet. It can be a moment of lethal ordinariness or another character's bland incomprehension that shape or deform a protagonist's chances in life.

The two literary examples cited here deal boldly with uncomfortable subject-matter, things that 'shouldn't' be done, things that 'shouldn't' be mentioned. They show characters at their most naked and unguarded, human beyond reprieve. Readers tolerate such edginess for the punch of truth and the solace of seeing their own vulnerabilities reflected. Both narratives demonstrate the power of tackling taboos in writing. There is nothing that we need to be silent about so long as we have the courage and seriousness to write in a way that is more than just shock tactics.

Avoid schematic characters

Writing courses and textbooks offer a range of standard procedures for inventing complex characters. The advice is always to steer away from stereotypes, which is right and important. But there is now a batch of anti-stereotype stereotypes that abound in stories: the athletic octogenarian; the lecherous clergyman, the music-loving thug. It isn't enough to avoid obvious stereotypes or turn them on their heads.

Students also receive advice about including contradictions and inner conflicts in their characters. Again, this is good advice but a superficial approach can result in a sense that some quirk or inconsistency has been tacked on for effect. If a meek librarian works as a lap dancer at weekends, the contradiction needs to emerge from a deep character structure or plausible life event to be convincing. Otherwise the character may seem like an animated diagram.

Another common method for creating characters is the checklist or questionnaire where students are urged to identify everything from their character's favourite snack to their worst trauma. These questionnaires can be useful but they are only a starting point. The idea of 'building' a character is misleading. A person is not a step-by-step Meccano set. The job of the writer is to grasp and show characters as a whole, honouring their uniqueness and even their ultimate unknowability.

In his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the story of Isabel Archer, Henry James describes in detail the genesis of the novel, which began with no sense of plot or set of relations or even a situation 'but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman'. (1991 [1881]:15) He wonders why his grasp of the character was so vivid despite this initial lack of context. He concludes that the acquisition of such an imaginary figure is not to be retraced. What matters is that he began to be curious about her destiny and her actions. This illustrates that character creation at best is a mixture of dreaming and deliberation, the unbidden images plus the methods we apply as we deepen our sense of who our characters are. The attitude that we need to cultivate towards them is a mix of curiosity, attention, a respect for their essential otherness, their difference to ourselves, their individual tangles of virtues and failings.

Students often balk at the idea of writing a reprehensible character. They may equate 'sympathetic' with 'likeable' and find it hard to show a character's faults without condemning or caricaturing them. This is not some quirk of amateurism. Professional writers also experience pressure to write likeable characters and it can be difficult to resist. Martin Amis has complained that it is a sign of cultural decay that critics nowadays tend to judge novels by whether they like what he calls 'the personnel', i.e. the characters. He argues that this will end with literature being reduced to a 'flabby stupor of mutual reassurance'. Zoe Heller, author of *Notes on a Scandal* (2003), echoes his concerns when she describes how often, even in supposedly sophisticated criticism, the charge arises: 'You've written somebody that I don't like.' Her riposte is: 'The question is not whether you like them but whether you understand them.' This is a robust reply, useful to pass on to students.

An interesting novelist to read in relation to this issue is Jude Morgan, who writes historical fiction and often subverts stunted views of actual, historical persons. For example, in *Passion* (2004), one of the characters is Lady Caroline Lamb, well known as one of Byron's paramours, often portrayed as a vain and silly stalker. At one point, Morgan writes about her visiting Brussels soon after the victorious Battle of Waterloo in which her brother Frederick was injured. She is just one of a flock of English visitors who gather there and set up 'a miniature social scene amid the blood and death.' (Morgan 2004: 396) But it is Caroline alone who attracts gossip and censure. She becomes an 'emblem of outrageous frivolity.' (Ibid: 396) Morgan restores the balance by providing context and showing that she was a scapegoat. The English visitors make up parties to go in carriages and view the battlefield. It becomes the latest fashion despite the horrors strewn there. The trampled fields are a 'mass of putrefaction' and there is a 'porkish smell' in the air. (Ibid: 397) The sightseers poke around, hunting for macabre souvenirs. Caroline goes there too and comes back dazed and thoughtful. Her reaction afterwards is to go to the dressmaker and order her most diaphanous, revealing dress ever. Is this as

shallow and unfeeling as it seems? Morgan casts doubt:

Caroline goes to a dressmaker. How would Madame like? Madame would like to live. Live, live. The fatty smoke, death on the wind, begins to disperse. Caroline's new gown is her nudest yet: pale lilac, thinnest muslin, shoulders and back bare. The soldiery parading in the place Royale stare as she skims by. She makes their day. Live, live. The talk is of moving on to Paris, where Wellington holds victorious court. William is morose. But says they may go, if she wants. Of course she wants. Not to want is to surrender. To want is to live.

'Caro Lamb,' people say disdainfully. 'Her usual flibbertigibbet self. Cares for nothing.' (Ibid: 398)

The narrator acknowledges the usual verdict but has undermined it in advance. He does not absolve her flaws but casts them in a more merciful light.

There are no shortcuts in this kind of approach. It takes real and prolonged compassion to imagine and render characters' inner lives in a convincing way. If we take the time and the risk, the reward will be that readers will find it hard not to understand and like our characters even if they commit hateful deeds.

Conclusion

I have mainly used this approach with experienced students who already have a grasp of basic narrative techniques. I would wait until I know the students and they know and trust each other. The workshop atmosphere needs to be safe and supportive. It is important to be able to judge when individual students are ready to move out of their comfort zones. For example, I remember a young novelist who was inventing an extreme racist, based on a family member. At first, he could only lampoon the character. He had to distance himself and show his condemnation. Gradually he realized that portraying the character in a less villainous, more complex way, was not only more true but more troubling to readers.

Patient time, peer support, an atmosphere of emotional honesty – these are all powerful elements in the nurturing of new writers. But the use of audacious texts as models adds an extra encouragement and acts as a kind of highly authoritative permission. I have sometimes witnessed an appropriate, no-holds-barred, literary text finally release a locked-down writer. One breakthrough was when a fiction writer whose work was a sequence of muted, euphemistic scenes, produced a love story full of erotic tension and candour after reading some prescribed Marguerite Duras. She did not produce a pastiche of Duras; she emulated her courage.

The approach I have outlined is not easy because it is a deeply personal enterprise for both tutor and students. But one of its excitements is that over time many participants do not only become better writers; they change, becoming more self-aware, merciful and sophisticated.

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Playground

Dave Attrill

David Attrill, who wrote this article about completing a novel and self-publishing, left school at 16. His achievement is partly due to his own reading and determined perseverance and also to the support he received from friends and more recently from the WEA courses he has attended. It is worth emphasizing how adult education writing groups are filling in gaps in ordinary people's writing lives and helping them towards becoming published writers. One review on Amazon says of Playground*: "The book has an exciting storyline and lots of twists and turns which kept me guessing right till the end. A good first novel and I'm really looking forward to the sequel being published."*

In this article I will be explaining how I came to write and publish my own novel. *Playground* is a detective thriller set in Sheffield. It follows Layton and Garstone, a female/ male cop duo who are investigating a strange murder in a local park playground – hence the title – while their corrupt senior officer makes their life extremely difficult for them, through his dislike of what he terms modern politically-correct policing.

The way it started is a bit of a long story. I had been working on projects for years since 2004. The first was 'Bike Busters', a story about a young cycle racing hero. Following this was 'Justice Is Scum', a London-set gangster thriller and another old idea I'd started originally as a script. Both struggled because of lack of inspiration, the latter hampered by shortage of background knowledge. I was in full-time work at the time I began 'Playground'. During mid summer 2008, we learned of possible redundancies in our company, and believing I was affected too, realized I needed to get a fresh book quickly written if only as a product to push my name around. Incidentally I kept my position, though it was reduced to a part-time post several months later.

I've trekked through a variety of novels in my time, having first got an Agatha Christie book at the age of 12 (laughs). Crime wasn't my first choice of genre but it grew on me quite suddenly from my mid twenties. Although I was already dealing with crooks and police corruption as the basic storyline in 'Justice Is Scum', the cops-versus-criminals concept was largely drawn from TV dramas such as *Frost, Silent Witness, Midsomer Murders* and *Ashes to Ashes*. Real-life experience occasionally came into it too. Having to help the police deal with a criminal when I was assaulted in 2006 supplied me with an extra bit of inside police procedural awareness.

I'd been strictly horror from my teens – as per street cred requirements of a heavy metal fan at the time – and had a sizeable list of pitches written up which at one time I even went round pretending to people I was actually doing. 'Half a Pound of Blood and Guts', a horror story I first produced as a comic strip when I was about 15-16 eventually became my first full-written 'hobby' novella. It was dreadful, though maybe good for my age.

People have commonly urged me to write about places I know, so setting something in Sheffield helped, with it having been my hometown for over 25 years (I'm originally from Kent). My local area, Dore and Totley, features as the setting of the crimes, so that definitely sped me into the writing. As for the storyline, it's a typical crime thriller in parts. The events in the book are on the whole fictional but two or three obscure moments have certain echoes of real life happenings I've been involved in. There is a running sub-story of a corrupt senior officer brutalizing both witnesses and colleagues alike, which may bat eyelids.

The early version was the first I'd written straight to computer. I normally take my books through a two-stage handwritten drafting. The first is the full rough draft, where all existing ideas are conglomerated. That means as many mistakes as I make are allowed, no matter how bad (I'm the only one who reads it.) The

second is the block draft. Again, pen and paper are involved but readable enough for proofers – or friends at my writing class – to see. Then, provided I have kept to my promise of making it readable enough for my own eyes, it makes the honourable transition to a Microsoft word file. Further improvements incorporated thereon in are made either on the PC or, if heavy, re-thought on paper like steps 1 & 2. This happened rather often with the 2011 re-write.

I mostly do my rough writing in coffee bars in and around town. I also make sure to take my pad with me on any train journey. Not only is it handy when away from the house but a deliberate change of atmosphere from the dining room or desk pays massive dividends, and I occasionally get to meet people too.

I decided to self-publish since more people recommended that way than to approach a publisher. As a new writer reading about publishing I learned how insurmountably hard it is even to impress an agent into taking your work. Hence it was very clear that I could be waiting a long time for a book that was intended as a 'quickie' to see the light of day. Out of the many who advised me to self-publish, several recommended I approach Lulu.com to see it done. They did a superb job, including a glossy cover, and left everything inside as I'd written it… more than a traditional publisher would have grudgingly allowed me. I had 100 copies printed and can always order more when necessary.

Nevertheless, any book placed before a public audience still has to be created with the same professional approach, even if self-published, and many who have already read mine believe that has been achieved. I hope I didn't let myself off any more lightly than any big name author making a career out there. Hours and weeks re-writing certain parts over and over again paid off, through the occasional typing error still escaped unnoticed.

I originally wrote it across three months in mid-late 2008 and then went straight on to my next project, *Fiona*, which features the same lead characters. I came back to *Playground*, however, in early 2010 and added parts I'd originally decided to omit plus further segments that would be integral to the background of the characters.

Playground is the first of a five-part series in which these detective characters will appear. The second, *Fiona*, which is partly based on a true story, will be poised to see light of day this autumn… crossing my fingers there. In the meantime, I am working on a small series of online shorts, which will be available through Lulu and Amazon by the summer as interim freebies.

Although I like to think of myself as a more than competent writer, I still like to go to my WEA writing group. You don't have to be new to the hobby to need these sorts of classes. They are extremely valuable for feedback, and it is thanks to both the tutor and fellow students that I have been able to tweak my book to the resulting standard. I don't always agree with the advice of the group and sometimes I used to argue, but that was normally a result of not wanting to take out particular parts, for reasons I was ashamed to admit.

If I was going to give advice to new writers, I'd say, start short. Haiku even, if that's the extent of your patience up to now, are good first practice. A book is not built in one day any more than Rome. Small sheet-long prose pieces are a great way into the hobby. As a writer of over 60 in my time, and as a participant in a WEA Creative Writing group, I can tell you that nothing has to be put straight into order and straight onto paper simultaneously. Scribble it and then sort the ideas later if that is what it takes. Remember, sometimes the first few words you put down become a magnet to the rest of them.

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On a Learning Curve

Ardella Jones

Ardella Jones [left] with Southerly Communications director, Shelley Hoppe at Southerly's Battersea offices

Just over a year ago, I was an Adult Education creative writing lecturer, working part-time in a London FE college to supplement my freelance career. I loved teaching: the eclectic mix of students, the creative interaction, the joy of eliciting brilliant work from people who thought they couldn't write. I hated the bureaucracy: the dreaded paperwork, which left me with no time or energy to write on my days off. My friend and colleague, ex-TV producer Jo Hepplewhite, a visiting tutor, was even more stressed; all her teaching prep, marking and form-filling was supposedly taken into account by the hourly rate.

Teaching seemed like some kind of luxury add-on, a perk almost, in which I was allowed to indulge – in my own time – after completing, enormous, repetitive Excel spreadsheets, myth-making Health and Safety forms (including a risk assessment on the canteen lady's kettle), and excessively detailed lesson plans which required me to enter the fact that I might need a register and board marker. I reached the point where I thought my brain would implode if I was asked to remember another photo-copy code, door code, or log-in (I taught in three sites), let alone complete another staff survey on job satisfaction.

Jo and I were nostalgic for the bygone days of Evening Classes (as part-time non-accredited self-development learning modules were once known) when students came first; there was no need for surly security men and ID passes; our boss was an enthusiastic, motherly woman, who wore ethnic smocks, and valued our creative talents. We missed the eclectic bunch of part-time colleagues – artists, sculptors, dress designers, yogis and flower-arrangers – who baked cakes for meetings, sent Get Well cards to ailing students and had serious talks about how we could all teach better. Sadly, over our two decades in Adult Ed, they had resigned, retired, or gone to the Great Staffroom in the Sky.

We now worked in a world, peopled by men in suits, in which academics occupied the bottom of a hierarchical heap, there to serve the whims of the car park men, porters, print room, admin team, finance clerks, IT nerds, Marketing, Quality, HR, Compliance Unit, Executive Management Team and, above all, the Principal. So, we decided enough was enough: we were going to start our own creative writing company and teach in an imaginative, student-centred way (and take holidays when flights are cheap!)

I resigned and, after a recuperative trip, set about organising some workshops in a comfy local pub with an arty clientele. We thought up a name – 'Chalk the Sun', from an Emily Dickinson poem, which describes the creative process – and put posters up in the local bookshop, the launderette and a few cafés. Pretty soon we had a group of lively, imaginative students with whom we could share ideas, exercises and a bottle of wine after class. A script-editor friend and a publisher acquaintance agreed to join us and, just like in the good old days, we got all fired up discussing new course materials.

However, we also had bills to pay and it was pretty

obvious that our small but beautifully formed student body was not going to bring in the equivalent of one, let alone two salaries. Teaching in a large institution may have had drawbacks but we hadn't had to do our own marketing. Then fate intervened and Shelley Hoppe, the dynamic young director of Southerly Communications, Google Online Business of 2011, decided she wanted to write a novel. Shelley lived near the pub, saw our leaflet and enrolled. It wasn't long before she said very diplomatically, 'I love what you guys do but marketing isn't really your forte, is it? Can I help?' Speechless with gratitude, we mouthed our thanks and Shelley began to work her magic.

First her team ran a workshop with us to get to grips with Chalk the Sun's brand, marketing strategy and website requirements. We brainstormed Chalk's image, the things we associated with it, and then the girls asked us to make a mood-board for homework. We really enjoyed this process, cutting pictures out of Sunday supplements and deciding if we were panthers or poodles, Riojas or Pouilly Fumes, Gothic mansions or Palladian villas. We used the results, plus the brainstorming ideas, to develop a strong new brand, as well as outlining our target audiences, new services and future marketing activities. For the first time, we analyzed what we offer and why students enrol.

Southerly transformed our flat page DIY website into a fabulous multi-layered site, using the colours and imagery defined in the workshop. The website is built on a WordPress platform, allowing even technophobes like me to update and maintain it; it also integrates social media to assist in marketing and incorporates an online payment system, making it easier for us to convert enquiries to paying customers. This has also reduced our administration requirements, leaving us better able to get on and teach!

Of course, it wasn't quite as easy as I'm making it sound. Our middle-aged brains reeled with phrases like 'core functionality' and 'dropping feeds into apps' as we struggled to envisage how it would all actually work. Even writing the content was surprisingly difficult, but gradually we got there and the website was launched on 1 January 2012. Now, thanks to the bright young things at Southerly, I am tweeting, blogging and Yammering like a hyperactive teenager raised in Silicon Valley.

The other aspects of setting up a business were no cakewalk either. We had to register with Companies House, become company directors and make strange theoretical decisions about our share allocations as

Jo Hepplewhite [right] with the Southerly Communications team at the branding workshop

though we were Mark Zuckerman about to go public with 18 billion dollars worth of Facebook. As we completed yet another form for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, we realized that Education is not the only realm where paperwork reigns supreme.

Then there's the laborious process of opening a business bank account which, according to the leaflet, takes 48 hours but took us almost two months.

'Sorry but you've been flagged up for additional security checks,' says a bored clerk, 'so we need both your passports after all.'

'But we brought our passports to the first meeting and you said you didn't need them.'

Clerk: 'Well I'm afraid you do now. You've been flagged up…'

'I know,' I scream,' I've had an account with you since 1978 but I may be an al-Qaeda sleeper! Anyone would think we were exporting agricultural chemicals to New York via Somalia backed by Saudi Arabian venture capital.'

The clerk looks bored and bemused, 'You've been flagged up for…'

Eventually we convince the bank we are not money launderers and get an account, a big cheque book and an online activation code – no, we haven't worked that out yet but I have every confidence that we will!

Our next step will be finding some admin support and developing systems that work because, inevitably, more

students generate more admin and we don't want to attract customers only to repel them with our inefficiencies. Then there's office space – we've already filled my box room with a new desktop, dozens of files and a big laser printer. And as we get more students we may have to recruit more writers to teach with us.

It's been an exciting, sometimes exhausting, journey and one that has really only just begun. We are learning a lot, not just about the world of small businesses but also about ourselves, our potential, our ability to rise to challenges. As writers and teachers, we are blooming in the new-found freedom of being our own bosses. In fact, I can hardly recognize myself as the tired teacher, weighed down with a big bag of quality files, who trudged up and down college corridors a year ago.

***Ardella Jones** grew up in West London then read English at Bristol University. On graduating, she worked for Lambeth Council whilst moonlighting as reggae correspondent for the NME, winning the Catherine Pakenham Award for journalism. She switched to writing fiction and scripts including the Radio 4 comedy panel game* The Labour Exchange, *starring Rory McGrath, and the cult 3D animation,* Bunny Maloney. *As part of double act, Ken & Ard, she won the New Names of 92 award at the Edinburgh Fringe, and, as a solo stand up, she toured the comedy circuit from Up the Creek to Jongleurs. She taught creative writing in Adult and Higher Education for twenty-years; for twelve years she also managed an evening institute for an FE college in South London. Now she performs as a poet, runs her own creative writing company, Chalk the Sun, and is part of Southerly Communications writing team.*

The Importance of Quiet Places for Writers

Siobhan Wall

I was inspired to write *Quiet London* whilst I was a full-time lecturer and was irritated by the constant traffic noise surrounding the building where I worked. The university was unfortunately located in the middle of a very busy roundabout in Aldgate and I taught mainly photography and video production so spent most of the day in darkrooms and editing suites. At lunchtime I would rush outdoors to try and find somewhere quiet to walk but working in a university with not a single blade of grass on the campus was very frustrating. I sometimes used to go to the Whitechapel Art Gallery over the road which was spacious and quiet. (Small, independent art galleries are also some of the best places to find contemplative, yet visually intriguing locations – unless sound-based work is being exhibited.) After reading Guy Debord's Situationist Manifesto, I decided that I too, would like to *dérive* or wander without purpose through the city. Because my academic time table during the week was so crowded, it seemed important to abandon all plans and just follow the unpredictable and serendipitous. Then I realized that this is the best way to find quiet places. Interestingly, I found if I spoke to other people in quiet locations they seemed less daunted talking to a stranger than in busy thoroughfares. Quiet places seemed to provide a safe haven not only from busyness but also from the cool indifference found in large cities.

I longed for green spaces and tall grasses, and soon discovered Bunhill Fields where William Blake's tomb can be found, under a fig tree. It wasn't until I started doing research for the book, however, that I took the tube to Gillespie Park nature reserve in North London – and this is where I found my perfect meadow. Closer to where I worked, I sat in London churches – cool in summer and beautifully candlelit in winter. I'm not sure why these are not used more by writers... I am not sure about other people, but I find it hard to concentrate if I have distractions. I agreed with Ian Sinclair who wrote, "...silence is a specific quality; it differences you, nourishes the imagination."[1] I suppose this is because quietness offers a space for reflection without too many distractions.

St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, City of London

Garden Museum in Lambeth, London

I decided to write the books as I thought other people might benefit from finding out about quiet places. To carry out research for *Quiet Amsterdam* I found the best way was to wander by bicycle, the perfect vehicle for desk-bound writers because it is very portable and very quiet -– even more so than many walking boots – and you can go almost anywhere, stop where you like, and can carry a lot more than in a handbag: camera, laptop, notebook, watercolour paints... I was an art critic in the mornings and a languid but alert cyclo-geographer in the afternoons – except when it was raining when I would read in one of the city's many libraries. I think I appreciate silence because it gives me time, time to abandon what is urgent and productive and ponder on the opposite of hurry, to linger with what opposes urgency, flight. Quietness is apparently good for us, too. It supposedly lowers blood pressure, reduces the chance of heart attack and stress related illness. So why do many people find being quiet difficult? I think it's partly a fear of finding an emptiness at the heart of things. This is why I go to a meditative yoga class once a week and I leave feeling a bit more peaceful rather than overwhelmed by all the projects I'm working on, but I also have another strategy to enable me to be 'quiet' but not bored. Even if I don't have my camera, I imagine I am drawing the scene in front of me. I look really carefully at anything – whether it is ugly or beautiful; I trace the outline of a tree, stare at leaves and ogle tall buildings. I think this is one antidote to the rush of visual and audible data that can be overwhelming, especially if you are pre-occupied with your own unfinished projects.

In the early twentieth century the critic Walter Benjamin observed the significant changes that occurred since the transformation of the 19th century city. He suggests that the experience of "too much sensory data" means "integration is impossible" and produces "the growing atrophy of experience" in modernity leading to the unsettling fragmentation of experience.

Elizabeth Goodstein recognizes such atrophy in her book *Experience Without Qualities*. She acknowledges that boredom is an 'urban phenomenon' which "emerged ...

in response to the superabundance of stimulation, the superfluity of possibilities for personal achievement, the sheer excess of transformation, offered by the modern city." [2] What I found when writing the *Quiet* books was that the slow, careful looking at things remedied the "subjective malaise proper to modernity" identified by Goodstein. This is why I included so many close-up photographs in *Quiet Amsterdam*. It seems paradoxical that by focusing on a small part of the scene – a fragment – this can counteract the "fragmentation" Benjamin talks about, but it does seem to have this effect. The writer of *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit, describes wandering as 'status refusal', and it is reassuring to me that the quiet meandering and careful looking that I try to practise (and implicitly advocate in my books), are very democratic activities that involve nothing more than a willingness to be receptive, saunter and stand still.

Nieuwe Ooster, Amsterdam

1 Sinclair, I (2003) *Lights out for the Territory*. Penguin
2 ibid

Siobhan Wall *is an artist and writer. She initially studied at Cambridge University, followed by a degree in Fine Art and Critical Studies at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, and an MA (Distinction) in Visual Culture at Middlesex University, London. She also has a PGCE in English from the Institute of Education.*

Siobhan has worked as a senior lecturer, teaching photography, cultural studies, video production and fine art for over ten years at universities in London and Oxford. In 2008-9 she also taught on the MA Course 'Museums and Contemporary Curating' at the University of the Creative Arts, Epsom. The author of numerous articles on contemporary art published by international journals (Eyemazing, Framework, Ceramics Art and Perception, etc.), she has also written two photobooks published by Frances Lincoln: Quiet London *and* Quiet Amsterdam *(due out Spring 2012) and is doing research for* Quiet Paris, *the third book in the series.*

In summer 2012 she showed her recent drawings in 'Precious', a joint exhibition with Dame Paula Rego at Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, to raise funds for the charity Womankind Worldwide.

REVIEWS

Criticism & Creativity

Ailsa Cox (ed), ***Teaching the Short Story.*** **Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. ISBN 0230573703, paperback.**
Jan Woolf ***Fugues on a Funny Bone*****, illustrated by Richard Niman. London: Muswell Press, 2010. ISBN 0956557503, £12.99, paperback.**
Nicole Moore ***Hair Power – Skin Revolution: A Collection of Poems and Personal Essays by Black and Mixed-race Women.*** **London: Matador, 2009. ISBN 184876393X, £7.99, paperback.**

Teaching the Short Story, edited by Ailsa Cox, is the latest in the series *Teaching the New English* supported by the English Subject Centre, which promises in its future publications a volume focused on the teaching of creative writing. Its contributors, who include Cox herself, share the concern of the series as a whole: to provide material relevant to 'the practicalities of classroom teaching', with a clear sense that that classroom is largely a university one.

The first two chapters, by Paola Trimarco and Michael Greaney, consider formal aspects of the genre; they also set the tone of the whole, at least from the point of view of the creative writing tutor or practitioner, of suggesting through detailed readings of well-chosen examples, critical ways of approaching the short story as literary text, distinct from more extensive prose, rather than as raw material for writing exercises. This trend is followed in considerations of Raymond Carver by Martin Scofield, women writers in the genre by Linden Peach, post-colonial short stories by Dean Baldwin, science fiction short stories by Andy Sawyer, and the ways in which the genre lends itself to film adaptation by Peter Wright. Cox's own contribution focuses upon the place of the short story in post-graduate research and in a world of shifting technological possibilities. Andy Sawyer notes quite rightly the importance of 'magazines … [and] the role of markets and audiences' in general to the form and to the history of science fiction in particular, but although no collection of this kind can be exhaustive, it is notable that none of the chapters here moves much beyond the academy, despite a realization that ways of understanding the short story itself might work best outside of the methodological approaches of mainstream literary and textual criticism.

In this sense, the most interesting essay here is by Charles E May, a pioneer of short story theory, who writes with a mixture of disappointment and anger that 'teaching the short story – a poetical form that has never been amenable to sociological or political criticism – [is] a difficult and thankless task.' This claim, of course, might be said to challenge the arguments made elsewhere in this collection, except that each in its own way both demonstrates and argues for the importance of the ultimately subjective – or perhaps collective in the classroom or workshop – practice of close reading and responding to issues of form and style as much to content, which is perhaps the most important thing that can be taught about the short story to both readers and practitioners.

Evidence of the vitality and relevance of the form can be seen in Jan Woolf's *Fugues on a Funny Bone*, which offers a series of interlinked fugues, or short stories, detailing the lives of adults and children (and as the stories continue it is deliberately hard to tell which is which) all connected to a referral unit for troubled children in London. Each of the stories works well as a standalone, and in the early ones the children are presented in a sympathetic but not sentimental way. The description of Jordon is representative:

He shuffles into the kitchen, locking his gaze onto the steadying trainers. The strip neutralises the shadow the morning sun should have made, yet Jordan feels all shadow.

This is the kind of writing that so many of the contributors to *Teaching the Short Story* might identify as typical of the evanescent form. But this is not to underplay the humour here – particularly the ability to both sympathize with and mock the well-meaning but neuroses-riddled and politically over-sensitive world of the social work and teaching profession. But what makes this collection so powerful is the way in which the stories, as fugues, are interlinked – with incidental details like victims of the Falklands (or should that be Malvinas?) war building in resonance – and expand, literally and thematically, from the specific to the general and global. It is only, perhaps, in the last story, set in post-communist Albania, both a long way from and yet very close to the starting point in Hackney, that the need for a point to be made outstrips the story being told.

A very different collection, demonstrating if not the power of the short story as such, then certainly of short prose, is *Hair Power – Skin Revolution* edited by Nicole Moore. This publication is the fruit of a longstanding project which can be traced back to Black History Month of 2008 and the work as editor on the Shangwe Creative Arts project (www.shangwe.com/index.htm). It collects

the work of nearly fifty women writers, some with considerable experience, others published for the first time – one being only 13. Through a focus on the politics of hair or skin, each writer reflects on her experience of coming to an understanding – sometimes triumphant, sometimes fragile – of who they are. The play on the idea of 'roots' is a repeated theme here but what is most impressive, in contrast to Woolf's collection, is the extent to which, unlike the remembered tortuous processes to tame non-European hair to perceived norms, this material is unworked, and has a kind of immediacy missing from more considered prose. This is exemplified in the contribution of Moore herself who notes in a politically resonant realization shared consciously or otherwise by all the contributors here:

I slowly realized that to be black meant precisely that one was never looked at but simply at the mercy of the reflexes [that] the colour of one's skin caused in other people.

It is inevitable that there is much repetition here, and that, in formal analysis terms, the stories are very similar in detail and story arc. And to this extent the poetry is, perhaps, the least successful element of this collection. Yet it is this immediacy that the personal essay can teach the (literary) short story and this collection in its own way is as powerful as Woolf's, precisely because of its directness, and the cumulative effect of common experience. There is just as much self-deprecating and, to this white male reviewer, self-challenging humour here.

As Charles May says, it may then be 'difficult' to teach the short story; it may be more difficult to read and to write in short prose forms. However, in their very different ways, these three books clearly show, despite May's understandable warning and the caveats noted here, that these are not in any sense 'thankless task[s]'.

Paul Wright

Lee Weatherly and Helen Corner, *Write a Blockbuster and Get it Published*, *Teach Yourself Series*. London: Hodder Education, 2010. ISBN 9781444103199, £10.99, paperback.

Lesley Bown, *The Secrets to Writing Great Comedy*, *Teach Yourself Series*. London: Hodder Education, 2011. ISBN 9781444128925, £12.99, paperback

Bekki Hill, *Coach Yourself to Writing Success*, *Teach Yourself Series*. London: Hodder Education, 2011. ISBN 9781444145717, £9.99, paperback.

Where do self-help books fit in the new writer's toolkit? Do they help in any way or are they obstacles to what the people who buy them want, misleading tips dressed up in book form to soak money from thousands of hapless wannabees?

As someone who came through the Creative Writing and PhD routes myself, my own feeling is that these sorts of books can be useful provided they're not the only things the new writer relies on. Some are better than others, as is the case in these three volumes from Hodder Education, and all should be read critically. None contains all the information you will ever need. And one valid question to be asked of them is their relevance. Better to discover what kind of a writer you are through a degree and lots of practice, surely, than buy a book that promises to teach you how to write a particular form before you know what you're good at.

All three of these books bring something new to the table in different ways. They come in Hodder's Teach Yourself distinctive and uncluttered white covers, and they've clearly been written by experts in their fields, or by people with long experience of teaching.

The Secrets to Writing Great Comedy is the first time I've seen a whole book devoted to the noble art of laughter, and it's a welcome addition. It starts off with a straightforward premise: writing comedy is a serious business. And seriously, point by point, it makes its case. The basics of comedy, the mindset of the comedy writer, getting started on writing comedy and an analysis of what's funny about different kinds of jokes are the opening chapters, and each contains what seems like interesting, informed advice. Quotes from comedians or joke-tellers in different genres punctuate the text, and each section has a list of 'Things to Remember', a brief summary of the main points, which helps refresh your memory later, at its end. One (mild) gripe I have is that the chapter on Writing Sitcoms doesn't contribute much.

A whole book on that writing form would be better than the thin coverage here, and no doubt one exists. Similarly, you could find some of the advice offered in any creative writing textbook, but it's probably impossible to write a book of this sort without including the usual stuff on editing, revising, polishing and language.

Write a Blockbuster and Get it Published is even more bang on the market, and the money, for me. This is one that delivers what it promises, and in fact explains things about the big, successful book that I haven't read as clearly and lucidly anywhere else. Again, you could find some of the general lore on the use of submission letters, getting an agent, and contracts in other books too, but by and large this volume really opens up the world of the hit book in a new and surprising way. It's good on genre too, although as with the sitcom chapter in the comedy book it barely touches on each one.

For me, the least helpful is *Coach Yourself*. Although it tackles its approach to the myriad worlds of creative writing as honestly and seriously as the others, it feels like it's written more about that approach than what the new writer is really interested in, which is how to write. As a piece of therapy for someone with writers' block it will probably work wonders, but with chapters like 'Who Are You?' and 'Who Do You Need to Be?' there's an insistence on the faux-spiritual, a working towards 'wellness' through endless self-analysis, rather than on the work. But there's no doubt this book will appeal to many. If all writers are different, which I think they are, then so are the routes they'll find towards what they want, and the books they buy to get them there. As with everything about writing, it depends entirely who you are.

David Manderson

Caroline Taggart, ed. *The Novel-Writer's Toolkit*. Devon: David & Charles, 2011. ISBN 978-1-4463-0050-3, £9.99, paperback.

This book may be well intentioned and could be a useful resource but it is horribly conceived: laid out like a school text book and squarely – even witheringly – aimed at the novel-writing hobbyist. It might not be intentionally patronizing but it is: on page ten and eleven we have topics such as 'What is a Novel?' and 'What is a Genre?' and it is fair to say that anyone who does not yet know the answer to these questions is so far from being ready to write a novel that they will not be needing the agent's view and legal advice that follows all too swiftly afterwards. To have encouragement and a starting point is a fine thing but the total beginner will need something which this is not: an in-depth guide on how to write and structure a novel with memorable characters and a strong narrative. They will need to know what they should be reading and whose example they could be following for wherever their particular talents and interests lie. There are a few good contributions from professional writers, agents and editors but whether they were fully aware they were going to end up in this ragbag of a book is another matter; it's hard to imagine agents being at all thrilled by submissions from writers at the stage at which this book is pitched.

This 'ultimate guide to writing and publishing a successful novel' is essentially a directory of writing courses, publishers, agents, resources, competitions and festivals with some very thin and preparatory material beforehand. Advice from helpful people appears in a difficult-to-read comic script font. Meanwhile, in bullet points, we are informed that characters are 'the people or other beings who inhabit the novel' and that dialogue and narrative is 'the way all the aspects of the story are expressed.' If we are going to go so far down this road to the Early Learning Centre, should we not stay there longer, until we are ready to emerge, all fully grown up?

While we're told writing a novel takes time, commitment, imagination, inspiration and motivation, there is no real advice about the rejection that this sketchy guide may ultimately engender. And just because there is no copyright on titles, there is no excuse to knowingly (or unknowingly for that matter) use someone else's. In his book of the same title, first published in 2003 and updated the same year as this sad little effort, New York Times writer Bob Mayer emphasizes craft and advises writers to read a lot as well as write a lot. He doesn't have predetermined notions about what stage the writer is at but he is straight to the point and shoots from the hip: witty, personable and personal in his approach. He spends thirty highly engaging pages on 'The Supremacy of Character' and provides a useful writing exercise at the end. Caroline Taggart's books devotes nine pages to it which isn't anything like enough for the main reason as to why people read novels in the first place. Mayer's book doesn't provide the market information and directory that occupies two thirds of Taggart's book but the beginner could learn a whole lot more and then consult *The Writer's Handbook* – when the time is right.

Paul Houghton

Arthur Krystal, *Except When I Write: Reflections of a Recovering Critic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-978240-6, £16.99, paperback.

Much praise has been heaped on Krystal's essays and the first five pages of this book are devoted to this: 'Krystal makes a vigorous case for the virtues of old-fashioned literary criticism, twitting the navel gazers of "creative non-fiction," which he dismisses as just a fancy word for memoir,' says *The New York Times Book Review*. These essays are then, perhaps, something of an acquired taste. Here Krystal covers subjects as diverse as aphorisms, duelling, the night, the 1960s and screenwriting. His writing is pleasant and placid and does seem to be from another age – before TV and the Net turned us all, irrevocably, into glazy-eyed drones. Rather like a thoughtful Reverend holding forth while staring into the embers of a dying fire, Krystal starts on one subject and effortlessly segues to another and just like a relative who goes on a bit, whether you will find him engaging will perhaps depend on the subject he is discussing.

'Prepare yourself: you cannot be a Coleridgean and a Hazlittean. I'm sorry but it needed to be said. This doesn't mean that you can't both like 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Indian Jugglers' but somewhere along the line you have to choose.' So he starts Chapter Three – his homage to 'William Hazlitt's Impetuous Prose.' His essays are conversational, graceful, factual and seemingly effortless. The problem I found with reading them was the light and sometimes heavier dusting of dullness. I expected to be drawn in by his essay on Poe but the very first line made me want to make a cup of tea: 'On the list of writers who have led thoroughly wretched lives Edgar Allan Poe must place near the top.' This essay rummages about the familiar territory of Poe as first detective writer (or not?), and details some of his personal circumstances while lightly examining a real-life murder of the time – of Marie Roget (that Poe wrote up in three instalments). Poe is celebrated for ushering in 'a new kind of hero and a new way of telling a story, beginning with a crime, then demonstrating the order and causality of events that led up to it.' Another essay on F. Scott's Fitzgerald's work in Hollywood is equally familiar.

In his essay, 'Carpe Noctem', Krystal asks how dark were the dark ages? Since no European cities deployed any kind of lighting before 1650, the world was no place to take a stroll after dusk. Here Krystal discusses A Roger Ekirch's book, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* which took twenty years to research. We learn that even the best candles did not emit much light, and before the French knew about wattage they knew that 'By candlelight a goat is ladylike.'

These essays were first published in *Harper's*, *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker*, famed for the rapier wit of their writers – Truman Capote, Pauline Kael and Dorothy Parker to name but a few. Admittedly, it is often a problem that pieces that sit and read well in magazines seem rather insubstantial in a hardback book. While there's no whiff of revolutionary cordite here, these essays may make pleasant enough reading on a Sunday afternoon.

Paul Houghton

Creative Writing in Schools

Susan Elkin, *Unlocking the Reader in Every Child*. Winchester: Ransom Publishing, 2010. ISBN 9781841679709, £19.99, paperback.

Susan Elkin, *Unlocking the Writer in Every Child*. Winchester: Ransom Publishing, 2011. ISBN 9781841679716, £19.99, paperback.

David Orme, *Unlocking the Poet in Every Child*. Winchester: Ransom Publishing, 2011. ISBN 9781841679693, £19.99, paperback.

These three books form part of a series which is aimed at teachers and other professionals and helpers involved in teaching reading, writing and poetry in school. The series also aims to provide guidance for parents and guardians in supporting their children at home. Susan Elkin's books provide a wealth of information about the acquisition of reading and writing skills from birth to the end of Key Stage 3 and David Orme's book addresses poetry from Key Stages 1 to 3.

Susan Elkin begins both of her books with information on how to develop the skills of reading and writing with the youngest children and gives examples of games, songs and activities to play with babies and young children. She is keen to impress that many of the skills required can apply to any age with the difference being made in the interest level of the child or young person. For example, word building with bricks or tiles with younger children 'could seem a babyish turn-off' for older pupils. As a 'grown up alternative' random letters on a computer or headline letters cut from a newspaper

could be used to develop the same skills.

The books follow a similar easy-to-read format. Each chapter begins with issues related to the title and is then followed with practical activities and ideas to develop the skills being addressed. Points are emphasized in the layout through boxes and separate lined areas in the text. This makes key points clear and accessible. Anecdotes add further emphasis to illustrate the points made and sometimes indicate what to do and what not to do. For example, David Jacques, author of the Redwall Series, as a precocious ten-year-old, despite his protests was not believed by his teacher to have written a particularly creative story. This anecdote provides a useful reminder of the importance of the teacher's role in supporting children's creative writing. Indeed, throughout both of her books, Elkin emphasizes the importance of building confidence and self-esteem and there are frequent references to encouraging children and the importance of meeting their individual needs.

Sections are provided to support struggling children at all key stages and again there are practical suggestions for activities and games to help children to overcome specific difficulties. This includes a section on digital technologies considering how mobile phones, smartphones and tablet computers can be used to engage and support pupils. Elkin discusses the use of social networking, Twitter, blogging and school networks such as 'Radiowaves'. In 2011, four pupils from a primary school in Liverpool used 'Radiowaves' to record a video diary of their visit to China. As a result, fellow pupils in Liverpool were able to follow their progress. This provides a clear illustration of how writing for a purpose can be used to engage children.

David Orme's book on *Unlocking the Poet* provides sixty-one activities for use from Reception to Year 6. The activities are followed by poems which are arranged by type not subject and are aimed at supporting the activities suggested by the author. They include counting poems, first person, personification and cinquains. Again, the format is clear and easily accessible and provides a very useful aid for busy teachers.

All three books provide a wealth of knowledge of reading and writing skills and pedagogy. The activities are practical and include many strategies and resources to support and promote the effective development of literacy. Issues are tackled, especially the changes in emphasis relating to teaching methodologies and Elkin rightly emphasizes the need to employ a variety of methods. She asserts 'No one size fits all' and this is effectively displayed by both authors in the wide range of activities they provide to meet the varied needs of individual children and young people. Overall, all three books provide a valuable tool for school staff, parents and guardians.

Maureen Bennett

Creativity & Health

Gwyneth Lewis, *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book about Depression.* London: Harper Perennial, 2006. ISBN 9780007232802 £8.99, paperback.

It's rare to find a really good, clear account of what it is like to suffer an episode of severe depression; still rarer to find one that is enlivening and eloquent, even energizing. One aspect of Lewis's achievement in *Sunbathing in the Rain* is her sheer good humour, the brisk cheeriness with which she shoves aside all manner of therapeutic sacred cows, from exhortations to exercise to positive thinking. Another, particularly relevant to writers, is its opposite, her high seriousness. This is typified by her willingness to engage with depression's extremes – its expressive excesses – and then, coolly and carefully, examine them:

The feelings you experience during a bout of depression appear melodramatic and out of touch with reality to those who are not ill ... I'd even go so far as to say that depressed and non-depressed are mutually exclusive orders of perception ... Both ways of seeing seem as if they are on the same emotional scale, ranging from normal despondency to desolation. This, however, is a trick of the light. Once you have passed from one state to the other, you might as well have crossed the river Lethe, whose waters make it impossible to remember the life you've left for the underworld (xvii-xviii).

This kind of psychic death demands explanation, and part of the book is devoted to what Lewis describes as 'a murder mystery', a murder mystery of a very particular kind, where 'you are both the corpse and the detective ... Your job is to find out which part of you has died and why it had to be killed' (xiii). The investigation undertaken here is a close look at the author's troubled relationship, from childhood on, with the writing of poetry, a task for the frail and ghostly survivor – the corpse and, as it turns out, killer, languishing in the shadowlands.

In her discussion of why writers (and poets in particular) seem to be especially susceptible to depression, Lewis deftly avoids pathologizing creative writing, concentrating instead on the demands of the writing life:

When you write creatively, you take a chance on failing utterly; you face your own incoherence in a brutal way; you live without knowing what to do, how things will work out ... Poems require a daily input of incomplete knowledge ... poets are prone to depression because they spend far more time in this terrain of ambiguity than the rest of the population who will do anything (get drunk, get laid, watch football, go on holiday) rather than face the existential blank wall that is the only gateway to worthwhile creative work (PS, p15).

Elsewhere, in an image I recognize immediately, Lewis describes the precariousness of the vital, early stages:

Getting ready to write is like carrying water round in a saucer over bumpy ground, trying not to spill a drop. This means holding something back from other people, even your loved ones. It means listening closely to your inner voices and trusting them, giving attention for long periods of time to ideas that might never work out, nurturing a privacy that sometimes takes precedence over being a couple (p. 49)

'Why do it, then?' is an obvious response, to which Lewis answers:

'What's at stake with poetry for me is awareness of my own life. Without writing, I'm unable to exercise a kind of inner eye, a moral vision which allows me to make sense of how I'm living. Everybody carries around in their heads a store of images, rules, scraps of experience which help them to make choices at important junctures in their lives. This is the raw material of poetry and everybody treasures it, even if they have no intention of turning it into art' (pp 47-8).

This raw material is 'a source ... an inner spring', Lewis writes, which needs careful guardianship; patience while it accumulates in a safe and private place and management of its in-flow and out-flow. 'Draw too much on it' Lewis warns, 'and you exhaust yourself. If you don't use it, the water becomes stagnant and you can't see anything through it' (p 48). The cloudy, stagnant water is the disordered environment typical of depression, obscuring the future with murky reminders of things past.

So maybe the depressed writer simply needs to put her apron on in readiness for a really good psychic (and actual?) house-clean, preparation for a heartfelt commitment to get back to writing – and on with her life. If only it were that easy ... Among the many mysterious and troubling aspects of moderate to severe depression is incapacitating demotivation, one of the hardest things for outsiders to grasp, especially when it attacks people who are 'normally' highly driven and self-motivated. Lewis's accounts of this kind of radical demotivation are some of the best I have seen: her 'collapsed' will-power was a 'phantom limb' (p 28); it was 'like a dog that had heard the bathwater running and had hidden itself, refusing to come out, whatever the bribe' (p 127). Typically, though, her description is accompanied by a practical warning not to keep trying to drive yourself on. The energy that fuels will-power is a finite resource; expend too much of it, too quickly, at your peril.

Better, she urges, to accept whatever energy levels are available, at any particular time. Acceptance of what is (rather than self-blame for what has gone wrong in the past, and self-will towards what might happen in the future) is one of the book's main messages. However, it's worth noting that this doesn't preclude making use of the help that is available: from good doctors, and, when necessary, from anti-depressants, which she describes as giving some relief from the full-on glare of depression's predatory light. What's needed, indeed, is acceptance of shadow, greyer (rainy!), weather, fog.

As suggested by the book's title, weather supplies some of the book's most insightful metaphors. Depression's melodramas certainly feel agonizingly real, urgently expressive of whatever living-dead stories to which we have given house-room ('ghosts are dead stories of which we refuse to let go,' Lewis observes (p 84), but maybe, she suggests, they are simply manifestations of atmospheric instability, their entrances and exits as meaningless as the actions that pull 'moisture-carrying winds from the sea' into the empty space at the heart of a low pressure system. 'The rain is an accident of the depression and not its cause', she points out (p 180). Why not lie back, then, and enjoy it?

Or, at the very least, appreciate it. While Lewis (like most practising writers) has little time for the idea that 'you have to be unhappy to write', she argues that there are nonetheless strong similarities between the state of mind of someone who is depressed and the state of mind that needs to be cultivated in order to write the best poetry we can. Her word for it is 'obscurity', characterized by 'the feeling of not knowing the meaning of anything, of not having energy at your own beck and call, of falling without control in the world'

(p195). If, as the psychologist Dorothy Rowe has suggested, depression can be described as a failure to take responsibility for one's own life, then maybe part of the writer's apprenticeship should be learning how and when to take responsibility for not taking responsibility. A tough call.

Anna Reckin

Poetry & Prose

Alyson Hallett and Chris Caseldine, *Six Days in Iceland*. Devon: Dropstone Press, 2011.
ISBN 9780956994004, £7, paperback.

Every trend generates a counter-trend. Now that e-books are mainstream and Kindles no longer raise eyebrows, there's an increased interest in books as artefacts. *Six Days in Iceland* is an attractive book, square, with no cover image, just the title in white, flanked by the names of the two authors in black on a bright red ground. Alyson Hallett is a poet, of landscape especially, and Chris Caseldine is Professor of Quaternary Environmental Change at the University of Exeter's Cornwall Campus. They, together with four photographers, document a geography field trip to Iceland in ways that provoke questions about language, intention, communication and writing. Funded by the Leverhulme Foundation, Alyson Hallett was the first poet-in-residence in a UK university Geography Department. Part of her work there was to investigate how poets and scientists respond to landscape.

In this book, Alyson Hallett's poems convey a sense of displacement in the strange and inhospitable environment of Iceland. She writes, 'Yes it was frightening there.' Her vision is often an animistic one, in which the landscape becomes 'creaturely', steaming water 'sees its breath' and 'dead grass reconsiders life'. Snow and the sun write on the hillsides. The book has an epigraph describing how the Icelandic language uses the verb 'to write poetry' for the act of cultivating the soil and the verb 'to read' for the act of picking flowers. Her poems run with this idea and extend it, as in the 'geysers publish their skyward bulletins'. She explores both inner and outer landscapes as she watches and observes, the idea of the ice 'deforming' being a leitmotif. The poems move from the strikingly imagistic to lyrical accounts of moving through the landscape, the outside counterpointed by two references to hotels, the first at Heathrow displaying a lump of rock from the volcanic explosion of the previous year, the second, the one she walks out from in Iceland, into the night with its absences and obsessive thoughts.

The language of poetry is heightened, multi-dimensional and full of resonance. The same can be said of the five short essays by Chris Caseldine on the geography of Iceland, in which he describes its geology, volcanoes, the properties of ice, glaciers and the significance of Iceland's location. From his opening sentence, stating that the 'nature of the Icelandic landscape is largely driven by horizontality', I was drawn into a world of poetic ideas and, without ever having been to Iceland, moved to think about poems. There are human stories in these essays, but there isn't a 'speaker of the poem' which gives space for more poems to be written, with perhaps different emphases from Alyson Hallett's. The inclusion of sixteen photographs of the wild, people-free landscapes in the centre of the book give us a wordless response to the country that invites yet more poems.

This succinct and elegant book is a useful one for thinking about cross-disciplinary writing projects. Personally, whilst I enjoyed each perspective, I would like to have seen more meshing of the poetic, visual and scientific responses to Iceland. The cross-overs and echoes were there, but I had a sense of the poet and scientist keeping their distance. My own first degree is in Biological Sciences and there are many creative writers with a science background. The Geological Society recently held a Poetry Day (Alyson Hallett and Helen Mort were among many excellent speakers), at which the chairman talked of how science needs poetry to convey the serious message of environmental catastrophe in a way that touches the emotions and so might change behaviour. *Six Days in Iceland* mentions 'three ways of recording'. A different metaphor might be 'three languages for talking about' and, in a version of a Café Polyglot, it would be exciting to hear multilingual conversations in which native speakers and second language users of Poems, Images and Science find ways to communicate.

Victoria Field

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Maureen Bennett is a retired Inspector for Primary Education. She was also an Ofsted Inspector. Since retiring, she has worked as a Consultant. Maureen has had a long career in education and was a primary head teacher. She also worked in Adult Education. She hopes her own enthusiasm for literature and writing has inspired the children and adults she has taught.

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Anna Reckin has taught Creative Writing in the US and then in the UK since 1996. She has an MFA in poetry from the University of Minnesota and a PhD in contemporary American poetry from SUNY Buffalo. She now lives and works in Norwich. Her first poetry collection, *Three Reds*, was published by Shearsman in 2011.

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