

Chapter 1

Introducing creative writing

If you wish to be brief, first prune away those devices that contribute to an elaborate style; let the entire theme be confined within narrow limits. Do not be concerned about verbs; rather, write down with the pen of the mind only the nouns . . . follow, as it were, the technique of the metalworker. Transfer the iron of the material, refined in the fire of the understanding, to the anvil of the study. Let the hammer of the intellect make it pliable; let repeated blows of the hammer fashion from the unformed mass the most suitable words. Let the bellows of the mind afterwards fuse those words, adding others to accompany them, fusing nouns with verbs, and verbs with nouns, to express the whole theme. The glory of a brief work consists in this: it says nothing either more or less than is fitting.

GEOFFREY DE VINSAUF, *Poetria Nova* or *The New Poetics*
 (c. 1210)

An open space

Think of an empty page as open space. It possesses no dimension; human time makes no claim. Everything is possible, at this point endlessly possible. Anything can grow in it. Anybody, real or imaginary, can travel there, stay put, or move on. There is no constraint, except the honesty of the writer and the scope of imagination – qualities with which we are born and characteristics that we can develop. Writers are born and made.

We could shape a whole world into that space, or even fit several worlds, their latitudes and longitudes, the parallel universes. Equally, we could place very few words there, but just enough of them to show a presence of the life of language. If we can think of the page as an open space, even as a space in which to play, we will understand that it is also Space itself.

By choosing to act, by writing on that page, we are creating another version of time; we are playing out a new version of existence, of life even. We are creating an entirely fresh piece of space-time, and another version of your *self*.

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The iceberg

Space-time is a four-dimensional space used to represent the Universe in the theory of relativity, with three dimensions corresponding to ordinary space and the fourth as time. I mean the same when thinking about creative writing. Writing a poem, a story or a piece of creative nonfiction, is to catalyse the creation of a four-dimensional fabric that is the result when space and time become one.

Every event in the universe can be located in the four-dimensional plane of space and time. Writing can create personal universes in which this system of events within space-time operates for the reader; the reader is its co-creator. Writing and reading are collaborative acts in the making and performance of space-time. Readers participate; they become, partly, writers. They will take part, consciously and unconsciously, in a literary creation, and live their life in that moment and at that speed – while they are reading. You make the words; they make the pictures. The reader lives their reading-time in a kind of psychological fifth dimension, where the book takes them, where the reader places themselves. A novel or poem is the visible part of an iceberg. As Ernest Hemingway put it, the knowledge a writer brings to the creation of that novel or poem is the unrevealed submerged section of that same iceberg. This book dives under that iceberg.

The writer weaves a certain degree of sparseness into their final text. If matters are left unexplained, untold, or the language of a poem is elliptically economical without becoming opaque, then inquiring readers will lean towards that world. Readers fill in the gaps for themselves, in essence, writing themselves into that small universe, creating that fifth dimension, and their experience of that dimension. The reader is active, as a hearer and a witness.

Moreover, if they are reading aloud to others, that piece of space-time will attract and alter several lives simultaneously. Some readers may be affected for the rest of their lives, loving that space so much they return to that work repeatedly, and even act out their own lives differently, in their own worlds, once they have put down the book. A well-drawn character in fiction or poetry, say, may find their actions and language imitated by readers simply because of the creative radiation of that fictional self, and the accuracy of the writing. Think about the force and precision behind the creation of fictional or dramatic characters we admire or cherish.

New worlds

Stories, like dreams, have a way of taking care of people, by preparing them, teaching them. I argue that, although there is an inherent simplicity to this, it

is not simple as a practice. With dreams come responsibilities, and the created worlds of a book require a vocation of trust between the writer and reader. It is that vocation, how we create ourselves as writers – never forgetting that we are also readers – that is the subject of the final part of this chapter. We will none of us become a good writer unless we become a great reader, of more matter than just books. We must also learn to become shapers of language and, in that way, shapers of the small, new worlds that take the form of poems or novels, each of them a piece of fresh space-time, remembering itself. Hemingway, writing of the practice of fiction, states:

You have the sheet of blank paper, the pencil, and the obligation to invent truer than things can be true . . . to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable and . . . have it seem normal . . . so that it can become a part of the experience of the person who reads it.
(Phillips, 1984: 16)

Writing can change people, for writing creates new worlds and possible universes, parallel to an actual. At best, creative writing offers examples of life, nothing less. To some, writing remains an artifice, a game even, and it is – as most things are, as all of us are – something made or played upon. However, when nurture builds carefully on nature, then life is not only made well, it can be shaped well and given form.

Why we write

Writing is so absorbing and involving that it can make you feel more alive – concentrated yet euphoric. The process focuses at the same time as it distracts; the routine of its absorptions is addictive. It can also recreate in you something you may have lost without noticing or glimpse when you are reading a rewarding book: your sense for wonder. Certainly, the process of writing is often more rewarding than the outcome, although, when you capture something luminous, that sense of discovery and wonder swims through the words and leaps in the page. There is a pleasure in precision; in solving and resolving the riddles of your syntax and voice; and in the choices of what to lose and what to allow.

However, while creative writing is no panacea, some writers find its practice therapeutic; and some teachers of writing believe that writing is a powerful aid to various types of therapy, from the treatment of depression to social rehabilitation. More accurately, writing may contribute towards self-development and self-awareness (see Hunt, 2000; Sampson, 2004). Writing wakes you up – it forces you beyond your intelligence and quotidian attention – and anything that makes you think and perceive more clearly and expansively may assist

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you with finding perspectives on yourself and others. Research has shown that we are never happier than when we are working towards some objective, and the spaces we work, and within which we work, are open enough to provoke surprise in ourselves.

What I must add is that writers invest a lot of time in getting the opposite results – storm-blind language, stillborn literature – in order to travel through darker space towards pleasure. Most days, this feels more like anti-therapy than art-therapy. Writers must journey into an abyss in themselves to make truth through fiction and form. Such journeys can be unforgiving rather than consoling. They can even lead to a sense of worthlessness and loss of direction. But, as the poet Richard Hugo advises writing students, ‘isn’t it better to use your inability to accept yourself to creative advantage? Feelings of worthlessness can give birth to the toughest and most welcome critic within’ (1979: 70). Good writers exercise a sharpened discrimination; very little of what they write will get past this acuity.

If – and this is the Mount Everest of ifs – you ever impress yourself as a writer, you are probably suffering a kind of artistic altitude sickness. Don’t get me wrong: you may be right, but the feeling will pass as you descend to other work. Toughness and dissatisfaction over your own work is itself rewarding, but only with practice. It can also seem ruthless, not therapeutic. If writing is not subject to these tests and taut self-tests, then you cheat your devil of his pay. You cheat your writing, in fact. It is possibly more therapeutic to allow writing to become both a form of pleasure and a form of work, rather than an outlet exclusively for emotions and epiphanies.

A balance

Having created a life, the first duty of the writer is to give it away. So long as what we have written is well made, this is a huge gift. Generosity is one of the pleasures of invention, and a principle of human love: honest of itself, it must be given, or given away freely. Now, look at that blank page again. Hold in the mind for a moment that this is both a private and a public space. The first to know this space is you, the writer, and the next person to know that space is yourself, the reader; a balance of perception and self-perception. To move from ‘this’ to ‘that’ requires a process which is both creative and which requires work, work that is sometimes euphoric and easy, and sometimes difficult, jagged.

Sometimes you will write for weeks as though your mind itself is running and even flying, independent of your ability and knowledge. It will seem like the mind has mountains, that it can contain the world. Sometimes you will write as though you are stumbling through a dark forest; your thought is sheer

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plòd. Sometimes you will be completely helpless, as though language's light had never existed in you or for you. There are feasts and famines. Any new writer who fears that flow and ebb, who takes no pleasure or pain in it, who is incapable of studying their own flaws or the flaws of their writing too nearly, must try to find their own balance. Marianne Moore wrote in her poem 'Picking and Choosing' (1968: 45):

Literature is a phase of life. If one is afraid of it,
the situation is irremediable; if one approaches it familiarly,
what one says is worthless.

But, for all that commitment or familiarity, creative writing is not a mystery. One of the purposes of the academic discipline of creative writing is to demystify itself without falsifying its intricacy. Creative writing can be opened and learned, like any craft, like any game of importance. 'You become a good writer just as you become a good carpenter: by planing down your sentences' – Anatole France.

As a writer, especially of fiction, you are obsessed by character. However, your own character has to be shaped and planed. *Writing is rewriting*, and the *character* of the writer is rewritten by the activity of writing and rewriting. If you are interested in the energies of language, rather than 'being a writer', then you stand a very good chance of becoming a writer. The character of the reader, your character – you as a writer – are central to that journey. Yet you do not need to write creatively if your ambition is to be a great reader. It is essential that you become a great reader if your purpose is to become a good writer. There is only dual citizenship on this continent. I hope you have already begun the journey. If so, then everything is possible, at this point endlessly possible. Think of that open space as an empty page.

Writing Game

THE WORD HOARD

Go to a shelf of books of fiction or poetry. Take one book at random. Close your eyes while opening that book and place your finger somewhere in it. Your finger will have landed on a word or words. Write the word down, as well as the three words preceding it and the three words following it in the text. You now have a seven-word phrase. Write this phrase in your notebook and, once you have written it, keep writing for five minutes. There are only two rules to this game: you must not stop writing; and you must not think. Try to write as fast as you can. You are not producing a work of art. After five minutes, you should have covered quite a lot of pages. Now read what you have written. Read it forwards,

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then read through it, word for word, backwards. Underline one phrase that strikes you as possessing any *one* of the following qualities: it has energy; it surprises you; it has never been written before in your language. The phrase must make a kind of sense; it must possess its own inner sense at the very least. That is, it must not be completely opaque in meaning. It might be a whole sentence, or it might be the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next. Now, write a short story or poem in which this phrase occurs without it seeming in any way out of place. You might wish to place the phrase into the mouth of a speaker in the poem or story, for example.

AIM: When we strive to be original, we tend to get tongue-tied, for we have been long taught that originality is no longer possible. As we shall see in Chapter Four, this 'free-writing' exercise is effective for warming up for writing, but it is also effective at creating unusual phrases, ones that possess a surprising amount of personal linguistic energy. You are trying to capture ideas and sentences that you would not ordinarily come up with consciously. You should try to do this exercise every day, not only to keep your writing mind limber, but also to create a hoard of original and unusual phrases from which you can draw when you are writing. 'Word hoard' is a 'kenning' (a Norse poetic device; see Chapter Eight), meaning 'a supply of words', such as a book, or vocabulary itself.

Learning to write*A continent*

Energy is eternal delight. There are as many energetic views on how to teach writing as there are university writing programmes, writing workshops, writing theorists, teachers of writing, books about writing – and writers. This variety is a cause for that delight, or it should be. Different exponents shade the discipline of creative writing according to their practice and aesthetics. Some use workshops, and some do not. Textbooks vary in the weight given to this or that topic, unlike, say, textbooks of biochemistry; and some writer-teachers never use textbooks relying on primary texts only.

The fact is that most writers develop haphazardly – we hit things fresh whatever level we reach, and work through problems in countless directions. There are no absolute solutions. What a writer is experimenting with is language. The fastest-evolving species of this world is language. Given that speed of evolution, there is no wrong or right about the pedagogy of writing – no frozen framework. It is more a case of what works for a time and what does not.

As language lives by evolving, so writers survive in its open space for their time, often influencing the successful mutations as well as bringing about (as well as preventing) extinctions. There are many literary theories of writing, but those theories are not within my remit. However, the quality of things

being so various can be confusing for a new writer searching for models, or one searching for some philosophy of practice they can lean against, or into, while they develop. Since creative writing is such an open space, whom do you believe?

You will do well to start with yourself – by refining your own ability in order to be able to trust your own judgement. Literature is a continent that contains many countries, languages, and countless contradictions; it is large, it contains multitudes. Its citizenship used to consist of its writers. Now there is a dual citizenship: writer-as-reader, reader-as-writer. Whenever you encounter contraries and inconsistencies between the citizens of that continent, bear in mind that the opposite of contention can be collusion, and even a closing down or culling of fresh thoughts. There are many belief systems, and that creates some leeway for the evolution of ideas for writers.

All these viewpoints about teaching writing are all right so long as they work within their time, and so long as they are not disingenuous (creating promises they cannot keep) or dogmatic (creating promises you, the new writer, cannot keep). This book attempts to concentrate some of that collective and contending energy, although it is by no means a synthesis of ancient and modern thought on the how and why of the art form. Although it touches some of these spheres, it can only glance off them and at them.

First, two questions to be asked as we cross into that continent. Can creative writing be taught? Can creative writing be learned? They are really the same question, but you will often hear it posed ‘as a challenge rather than a genuine enquiry; a challenge which threatens to damn the foundational premise of Creative Writing by daring the addressee to answer in the affirmative’ (Dawson, 2005: 6). The novelist David Lodge concluded, ‘Even the most sophisticated literary criticism only scratches the surface of the mysterious process of creativity; and so, by the same token, does even the best course in creative writing’ (1997: 178). Lodge quotes Henry James’s essay *The Art of Fiction*:

The painter is able to teach the rudiments of his practice and it is possible, from the study of good work (granted the aptitude), both to learn how to paint and how to write. Yet it remains true . . . that the literary artist would be obliged to say to his pupil much more than any other, ‘Ah well, you must do it as you can!’ If there are exact sciences, there are also exact arts, and the grammar of painting is much more definite that it makes a difference. (1997: 173)

So: you must do it as you can. Writing is not painting, neither is it a systematised knowledge. It is not empirical science; teaching and learning writing is not like teaching and learning medicine.

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Here are some cards; here is my table. I think creative writing can be taught most effectively when its students have some talent and vocation for it. If a teacher can shape the talent and steer that vocation, and the students enjoy the shaping and steering, then I think creative writing should be taught as a craft. The whole point of teaching creative writing, however, is that students must learn to make and guide themselves, for writing is mostly a solitary pursuit, even when written collaboratively using electronic media.

I also believe creative writing could be taught within other disciplines, as an option alongside science and social science, if students of those disciplines have some desire to try it, and can take the practice of creative writing for what it is: a possible second string, or a second chance at something from which they gain pleasure. It does not have to contribute to the pursuit of their profession, so long as the pleasure principle is foremost. It might contribute at some point through creative nonfiction. The role of popular science in raising the public's awareness of science and technology is a delightful benefit we consider in Chapter Ten.

Imagination's talent

The pleasure of creativity illuminates aspects of knowledge that we regard as non-literary, especially if we begin to accept the arguments of cognitive science: that 'the literary mind is the fundamental mind', not a separate kind of mind. Alongside many other neuroscientists, Mark Turner contends, '*Story* is a basic principle of mind', and 'the parable is the root of the human mind – of thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and plausibly of speaking' (1996: 1).

Writing is an extreme act of attention and memory; it pleads with your brain cells to make new connections. As neuroscientists put it, neurons that fire together wire together, and inspiration could be more natural *to* and more nurtured *in* a writer because they simply read the world (and the world of literature) a little closer when they were children.

Your brain interacts with itself: *hearing* words, *seeing* words, *speaking* words and generating *verbs*. These functions occur in widely spaced sections of the brain. Creative writing 'commands' these different departments of self to start cooperating, and they will, by stretching out synapses over relatively huge neural distances, wiring up. What else are they going to connect with along the way? What monsters or angels might be imagined into being? This is how writers are *made*, how the nanotechnology of your imagination is intricately (and provisionally) constructed.

We are capable of developing complementary senses – sight with sound, taste with touch, *time* with hearing – or all senses simultaneously transmitted

through the medium of one line of poetry, or one paragraph of description. This is how your imagination talks to itself, talks across itself even, and becomes ever more versatile. Writing rewires our brains – from our tongue to our eye to our hands. It encourages synaesthesia: one sense triggers an image or a sensation in another. When we stop paying attention to the world, we do ourselves great harm. It is like a slow suicide of thought with the senses. The imaginative gains of synaptic complication are always provisional.

We are neurologically *changed* by our experience of writing as much as we are by reading. For a writer, metaphor is an art of attention-seeking, of asking you to perceive some thing afresh. Creative writing is the art of defamiliarisation: an act of stripping familiarity from the world about us, allowing us to see what custom has blinded us to. It is no less than an act of revivification. Metaphor has power and permutation, almost like a magic force. Metaphor is ‘a transfer of meaning in which one thing is explained by being changed either into another thing or into an emotion or idea’ (Kinzie, 1999: 435). As Shelley wrote of poetry, it ‘lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as they were not familiar’. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson contend that ‘Metaphorical thought is normal and ubiquitous in our mental life, both conscious and unconscious. The same mechanisms of metaphorical thought used throughout poetry are present in our most common concepts: time, events, causation, emotion, ethics, and business, to name but a few’ (1980: 244).

Scientific, philosophical and artistic breakthroughs often go through four stages of cognitive and creative process – attention to detail (of a problem) → translation to metaphor → defamiliarisation → receiving something at a different angle – in effect, perceiving it anew, as a child does. We now know a little more about the physiological and neural states that certain types of creativity take, as well as those phases which acts of creativity and metaphor engender in readers. The making of creative language and story is natural, and part of everybody’s potential world. ‘Inspiration’ and fluency are aspects of our neural flexibility, and practice, endeavour and good perception make them so. As Flaubert claimed to Van Gogh, ‘Talent is long patience, and originality an effort of will and of intense observation’ (Oliver, 1994: 121).

A play of mind

So: is the literary mind the fundamental mind? Are we all born storytellers and metaphor-makers? In *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker argues that there are seven standard storylines in the world that all fiction uses and recycles (see Chapter Six). He believes, ‘The very fact that they follow such identifiable

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patterns and are shaped by such consistent rules indicates that the unconscious is thus using them for a purpose: to convey to the conscious level of our mind a particular picture of human nature and how it works' (2004: 553). This creates an interesting picture of the power and purpose of story, but is an impossible point either to prove or falsify.

It is important not to lie about creative writing. It is not in its nature. Yet, what is its nature – what is our nature – if not in the making of fictions and metaphors? What are our lives but stories we constantly rewrite? What are metaphors but fictions, doppelgängers, sculpted otherness? *Voice*, for example, sings within a writer's poems or stories. The poems and stories possess that voice, or are possessed by it. A writer's voice is a metaphor for spoken voice, but is not the voice of the poet or novelist.

We need to travel back in time. If we go back to the plausible origin of creative writing as a taught discipline, we open Aristotle's *Poetics*, and read that 'the standard of rightness is not the same in poetry as it is in social morality or indeed in any other art' (that is, poetry as an art of fiction and drama). We might conclude that same oscillating standard holds within creative writing. We could reason that it depends upon the position of the player; on a writer as player of language; on their play of mind on mind, and mind in mind. The craft of writing lies in the way the cards of language *are* played; the voice in how the cards become *your* choices.

Writing Game

DISCOVERING YOUR CONTINENT

Imagine a door. It could be a door in your own home, or room, or a door in a library or in a wilderness. Close your eyes and visualise this door. Write a few lines of prose or poetry describing it. What does the surface and the handle look like (use simile or metaphor)? In your mind's eye, open that door. What does the handle feel like? You step through. You have passed through a door in time and space. In front of you is a land you do not know. What are the first three things you notice, and what do they look like or even smell like? Now describe what is under your feet. You begin to hear two sounds in the distance. What do they sound like? You see some words; they could be on a sign, or a piece of paper. What do they say? What is the weather? Imagine this is part of a continent. Nobody knows about it except you – for now. You begin to explore the space around you. Write ten sentences or ten lines describing this exploration. Then you meet somebody. It could be somebody you know well, or somebody quite new. They say something to you. What do they say? You answer. What do you say? Use another ten sentences or ten lines to finish this writing. Then put it away for three weeks, after which revise it completely into a short story or poem.