

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76849-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing

Edited by David Morley and Philip Neilsen

Excerpt

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DAVID MORLEY AND PHILIP NEILSEN

Introduction

In recent years, the development of creative writing as a discipline in higher education has changed the shape of literature departments in universities across the globe. It has also changed the development of literary studies through creative reading ('reading as a writer') and through practice-led teaching. As Jonathan Bate explains, many of our best critics were creative writers. Creative writing is a rearrival at a balance in which the practice of writing is placed on an equal platform to its study. An act of criticism can also be an act of creativity, and vice versa. It is a falsification of how our minds work to suggest it could be otherwise.

Creative writing as a discipline has also begun to find its way beyond literature and humanities departments. Creative writing is not some add-on to literary studies, nor are its students schooled solely in the study of novels, plays and poems. Creative writing can be an education in the craft of writing in a larger sense. Writers, at their best, are *creative* writers whether they are writing journalism, plays, philosophy, novels, history, poetry or scientific nonfiction. These creative writers are found not only among the teachers of these subjects but also among their students; and not only in the academy but in the world at large. Whatever its setting, the act of writing is almost always an uncertain process. As one cultural commentator has argued, creative writing is best suited to people who have a high toleration of uncertainty. It should be no surprise that the teaching of creative writing embraces uncertainty, experiment and even purposelessness in order to arrive at recommendations and ideas that will only need to be reviewed again in a few years. In this way, creative writing as a discipline is not unlike science – or any open and evolving knowledge system for that matter. But it is a discipline.

It is essential to recognise that creative writing has always had and always will have a potent existence outside universities. Schools, libraries, reading and writing groups, internet writing communities, and residential writing centres such as the Arvon Foundation in the UK – all these aspects of the University of Life do not require the freemasonry of literary theory for a

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serious engagement with creative writing and reading. In our experience, and that of thousands of writers of our acquaintance, aspirant writers are as varied and rich in experience whether they are from a background in book-binding, biology or business; or were brought up in environments that fettered the desire to shape and make a writer's voice.

New writers are drawn to creative writing not only because they wish to make their truths, although that's part of the discovery, but because they understand intuitively that beyond education, origin or power, it is language that most shows a person. Language is who we are to the world and to ourselves. And beyond the necessary specialisation of knowledge, our ability to write – to write with panache, clarity and joy – *to tell our story* – can make the difference between being heard and being ignored or silenced. It is why one of the informing values of *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* is that all writing, at its best, is creative writing. This value also opens the door to the notion that creative writing as a discipline can create a synthesis between work in universities and non-academic professions for which good writing is essential. This book describes and explores the worlds of creative writing both inside and outside the academy without making the false assumption that one of those worlds is more or less real than the other.

We also value the often-underrated or understated fact that creative writing as an art form brings immense pleasure to the lives of many people. As humans we warm to things that are well made; that bring unexpected insight into our lives; that provide epiphanies above and beyond the need for us to make a living, important though that is. Creative writing makes us wake up to the world around us; helps us understand the natures of the people we meet or will never know by name; and alerts us to the intense interplay of language, ideas and feeling. Many other art forms depend on the writer to shape narratives through the apparent magic of what is a practical and teachable craft – a craft that is also a vocation. Above all, creative writing allows us to tell the story of our species.

The making and shaping of creative language and story is as natural as speech. It is part of our experience of being human. As the neuroscientist Mark Turner has argued, the literary mind is the fundamental mind while metaphor is an everyday ingenuity for how we read and express the world around us and in us. We are all born writers in the sense that we are all born storytellers, whether of ourselves or of what we come to know as our knowledge. How fluent we are at recreating language depends on our neural flexibility – and that takes training. The basic pedagogy for creative writing – reading, practice and playful experiment – remakes and reshapes the hard-wiring of our minds. Think about reading and then writing a story or poem: the complexity and simplicity of an imaginative creation. At even a very basic

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level, your mind will interact with itself, with memory and your senses for sound and music: hearing language, seeing language, speaking or even singing language and making verbs. In terms of neurology there are timezone-like distances between the places in our brains where these actions occur. Hearing language might as well reside in the brain's equivalent of a hamlet in Warwickshire; seeing language runs through the ravines of Tasmania; speaking language shouts (or even sings) between Micronesian islands; and our mind's verbal explosions trigger avalanches in the mountains of Spitzbergen.

Why does creative writing need a friend in a high place, a *Companion* from Cambridge University? An academy provides a haven and structure in which writers can play, develop and deepen in craft (for a short while at least; the world is always waiting). It is important therefore that universities review and incorporate the very best practice in the teaching and research programmes for creative writing, and do not settle for structures, ideas and values that fudge or fake the reality of a writer in the world. There has been much debate over the past decade about whether a creative writing course can teach the unteachable; whether the creative writing MFA fosters a homogenised literary style; and whether creative writing has become its own industry.

The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing opens an exchange of ideas between acclaimed creative writers, all of whom are also creative readers, all of whom publish their work in the world outside the academy, and all of whom are teachers or publishers who subscribe to the idea that the discipline of creative writing has come of age. Yet our writers are not signing up for some pledge: their critical intelligences inform their creative contributions. Independence invites a responsibility to reflect, review and then to act. We believe that creative writing has achieved a measure of independence as a discipline at many levels of education, including universities. The creative work of its teachers – their novels, poems and plays – is now accepted as a valid form of research, although our chief aims as writers should always be to bring pleasure and purpose to the lives of our readers rather than publish for tenure.

We'd argue that our discipline has, over the past fifteen years, grown global in its reach where before it was the preserve, by and large, of the United States. Our international faculty of contributors is testament to the spreading of those wings. We suggest that all the current debates about creative writing show that the subject is still evolving as a discipline, working across academic fields and knowledge systems while, at the same time, it continues to flourish in the world outside the academy. We think that what people call the 'creative writing industry' requires a steady assessment, one that looks critically at where the discipline might be going; and how we can further improve and

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enhance our practice as teachers, writers, students, publishers, editors and experimenters.

The titles and styles of many of the chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* are themselves acts of creative writing. Some are written as personal essays in the manner that Jonathan Bate describes as acceptable forms of critical practice and, in this book, they display adventurous variety, wisdom and play. They also demonstrate significant scholarship, vocation and practical experience. The book is divided into explorations of specific genres and discussions of more general topics.

Beginning with fiction, Ron Carlson takes us on a personally guided tour as step by step we develop a scenario into an effective short story by balancing our writer's mind with our editor's mind. He shows us the rich potential of short narrative, its key elements, and answers the vital question 'How much of writing is about control and how much is about letting go?' Maureen Freely proposes a new approach to teaching long fiction. Though accepting the value of more traditional workshops and one-on-one consultation, she argues for also developing a space that allows a 'community of writers' and explains the 'open house' and '*tertulia*' teaching methods. These assist students to overcome preconceived ideas, find new ways of working and imagining, find their voice, be bolder and more precise. Kim Wilkins draws on her experience of having published twenty-one genre novels to explain how writing well in popular genres requires a skilled ability to balance which generic elements are replayed, and which are set '*in play*', to make possibilities and pleasures. She uses speculative fiction as a focus, and offers fresh perspectives on the treatment and deployment of genre elements in the fantastic and unfamiliar, leading us through the key building blocks of the novel.

Many books about creative writing sidestep or ignore the process of writing drama. In our book Michelene Wandor 'reconstitutes' drama writing as a discrete literary process by separating it from its fusion with performance and its alliance with fiction and poetry, so as to focus upon it as a writerly practice with its 'own formal characteristics'. She deconstructs and challenges common assumptions about drama writing (collaboration, performance, the visual) and restores its autonomy as a conscious fictional genre, which through dialogue shapes the imagination to produce form on the page. Wandor carefully exemplifies this by explaining how she teaches drama writing in the classroom.

Bronwyn Lea gives us a clear and practical account of the forms and techniques that organise and enable the writing of poetry, demystifying this form of creative writing that many students, at least initially, find somewhat daunting. She impresses upon us that poetry is transcendent – capable of

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transporting us into an alternate awareness – but that it is also, as W. H. Auden argues, ‘a verbal artefact that must be as skilfully and solidly constructed as a table or a motorcycle’. She engagingly provides a reflective account of writing one of her own poems.

Kári Gíslason is both craft-based in his suggestions about *how* to go about writing up your travels, and analytical and literary-historical in his close reading of influential texts in the genre. In this way, the chapter reflects the broadening of creative writing as a discipline to include both practitioner-led and reader-oriented approaches. He presents structures and modes in different subgenres of travel writing, thereby allowing for the wide variety of aims among writers: the chapter does not seek to prescribe the single right way of approaching travel writing, but rather to give options; the task is to improve what a writer is already doing, not limit individual aims.

Hazel Smith’s chapter highlights the new possibilities for contemporary writing which are emerging through the dynamic interaction of humans and computers, and argues that they are changing both the activity of writing and our concept of authorship. New media writing, which is screen rather than page-based, extends opportunities for innovation and artistic complexity by means of verbal kineticism, increased reader interactivity, split screens, computerised text generation, textual variability, and the multimedia blending of text, sound and image.

Is literary translation also an act of creative writing? Fiona Sampson captures the creative essence of translation, and its many benefits: ‘Seeing what other ways of writing do is a way of seeing what your own practice leaves out. It helps focus creative choices, especially those to do with register and form.’ She explains how translation must work hard ‘to convey *both* the meaning and the innate character of a text’, but dismisses as limiting the claim that texts should only be read in their original tongue. Translation also proves that a work is never finished. Sampson leads us through the process of a translation she made herself – a valuable and instructive insight into this intricate form of creative writing.

By viewing life writing as storytelling that utilises fictional techniques – including a narrative arc, through-lines and characterisation – Philip Neilsen explores the way life writing tackles concepts of memory and identity while constructing a ‘self’ in order to make meaning of a life. He analyses in detail several successful examples of memoir and biography to show how life writing defines us – by means of psychological complexity, openness, and conscious selectivity and subjectivity – while also maintaining a ‘contract with the reader’ to attempt a representation of ‘truth’. He concludes with the case for life writing having therapeutic benefits for individuals, through building a coherent self-narrative.

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The book moves on to explore significant topics that shape the past, present and future of creative writing in the academy and the wider world. David Morley explores two questions. Can studying science make you a more inventive creative writer? Even more radically, can the study and practice of creative writing make you a better scientist? Morley explores these questions with reference first to literary and scientific history and case studies of the practice and thinking of Wordsworth, Humphrey Davy, Blake, Keats, Osip Mandelstam, Barry Lopez, Marianne Moore, Les Murray and Miroslav Holub; and second to the practice-led teaching of creative writing, contemporary environmental writing and ecology. The author, who is both a poet and trained ecologist, draws on twenty years of experience and research in this field and suggests fresh ways in which to teach writing inside and outside the academy, as well as in schools and the community.

Any book of this nature needs to be constructively provocative, exploring topics that cannot be quietly ignored. Richard Beard argues that a freelance approach to teaching creative writing courses does little to assuage a writer's anxiety. The same tensions apply as with freelance writing – the hunt, the gather, the begin again. Increasingly, the salaried comfort of a full or part-time university post seems ever more attractive. But is teaching creative writing in an institution compatible with simply writing? Beard explores the topic of divided loyalties. For the writer there are advantages and disadvantages to working within the academy, and decisions must often be made about when to be a writer and when a teacher. Is this schizophrenia sustainable? It depends on the course, and the university. His chapter argues that some university courses are increasingly hostile to the act of writing. At which point creative writing as a discipline stands in danger of becoming the territory of qualified academics and not practising writers. The chapter offers some suggestions for greater flexibility, while concluding that flexibility may also be found outside the academy. If writers are to stay involved in the teaching of creative writing, writers and not academics need to lead from the front.

Reaching into his considerable experience as a cutting-edge publisher, poet and editor, Christopher Hamilton-Emery explains the dynamics of the tasks and aims of all who work within a publishing house and also makes a convincing and timely prediction of the likely shape of the future of publishing – one that will be a time of pivotal change and of which contemporary writers and editors need to be aware now.

Jewell Parker Rhodes provides valuable suggestions directly from her position as an experienced novelist: how trans-global and trans-cultural narratives rely on the primacy of the imagination, no matter how rooted they are in social experience; how to avoid the solipsism of the seductive

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'I point of view; how to create characters in action; and how to go beyond the comfort zone of writing 'what you know'.

In her groundbreaking chapter on workshops, vital to the evolving teaching of creative writing, A. L. Kennedy persuades us that workshops should respond as much as possible to the participants in any group, be as flexible as possible and rooted in the practicalities of human nature, the nature of writing and the realities of being self-employed, rather than what is easiest for the tutor, an academic or institutional agenda, or a pattern of established habit. Everyone involved should be aiming to grow as a writer – workshops affect who we all are as people – and vice versa. She recommends that teachers and students should aim high and accept failure as part of the development process. In class we are always working with other writers – just how we do this tells us much about our own appreciation of our work and roles and writing.

Creative writing is often taught using practice-led teaching. Such procedures have become popular and successful – the 'serious play' of a workshop allows students to grow into skills through a combination of pleasure, practice and exaction. Other subject areas are borrowing the pedagogies of creative writing, including business and science. As in David Morley's *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*, there are practical writing exercises in this book. Contributors have recreated these from their own best practice. The writing exercises can be used by readers and students for their own writing. They can also be used by teachers of writing, by writers and by you.

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Genres and types

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