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978-0-521-88164-7 - The Psychology of Creative Writing

Edited by Scott Barry Kaufman and James C. Kaufman

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CREATIVE WRITING

The Psychology of Creative Writing takes a scholarly, psychological look at multiple aspects of creative writing, including the creative writer as a person, the text itself, the creative process, the writer's development, the link between creative writing and mental illness, the personality traits of comedy and screenwriters, and how to teach creative writing. This book will appeal to psychologists interested in creativity, writers who want to understand more about the magic behind their talents, and educated laypeople who enjoy reading, writing, or both. From scholars to bloggers to artists, *The Psychology of Creative Writing* has something for everyone.

Scott Barry Kaufman, Ph.D., completed his doctorate in cognitive psychology at Yale University in 2009. He also holds an M.Phil. in experimental psychology from the University of Cambridge, where he was a Gates Cambridge Scholar, and a B.S. from Carnegie Mellon University, where he studied psychology, human-computer interaction, and voice performance. In his research, he combines various perspectives, including cognitive science, philosophy, and evolutionary psychology, to further an understanding of intelligence and creativity. In addition to publishing more than 20 book chapters and articles in professional journals such as *Intelligence* and *Journal of Creative Behavior*, he is co-editor of *The Cambridge Handbook of Intelligence* (with Robert J. Sternberg, forthcoming). Kaufman's work has been covered in media outlets such as *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Men's Health*. Additionally, he writes a blog for *Psychology Today* called "Beautiful Minds." He is the recipient of the 2008 Frank X. Barron student award from Division 10 of the American Psychological Association for his research on the psychology of aesthetics, creativity, and the arts.

James C. Kaufman, PhD, is an associate professor of psychology at the California State University at San Bernardino, where he directs the Learning Research Institute. Dr. Kaufman's research focuses on the nurturance, structure, and assessment of creativity. Kaufman is the author or editor of books either published or in press, including *Creativity 101, Essentials of Creativity Assessment* (with Jonathan Plucker and John Baer), *International Handbook of Creativity* (with Robert J. Sternberg), and *Applied Intelligence* (with Robert J. Sternberg and Elena Grigorenko). His research has been featured on CNN, NPR, and the BBC and in the *New York Times* and *New Yorker*. Kaufman is a founding co-editor of the official journal for the American Psychological Association's Division 10, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. He is also the editor of *International Journal of Creativity and Problem Solving* and the associate editor of both *Psychological Assessment* and *Journal of Creative Behavior*. He is the series editor of the Psych 101 series. He received the 2003 Daniel E. Berlyne Award from APA's Division 10, the 2008 E. Paul Torrance Award from the National Association of Gifted Children, and the 2009 Western Psychological Association Early Career Award.

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The Psychology of Creative Writing

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*For my “Granny Smith,” Jeannette Robbins Gorodetzer, whose ditties, spirit,
and good cheer I shall cherish and remember forever and ever. Like I
promised, this one is for you.*

— SBK

*For my mother, Nadeen Laurie Kaufman,
who read every story, poem, or play I ever wrote,
complete with red markings in the margin
(“Show, don’t tell”).
I love you, Mom!*

— JCK

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FOREWORD

ROBERT J. STERNBERG

For many years, writing skills were treated as the ugly stepsister of reading skills. Tests of “verbal aptitude” and “verbal ability” comprised assessments of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and verbal reasoning. Writing was nowhere to be found. Even achievement tests of “English composition” created by the College Board often had no actual writing whatsoever. Although Louis Thurstone distinguished between verbal comprehension and verbal fluency in his early theory of primary mental abilities, the former has been widely measured, the latter only rarely. And when the latter was measured, it was typically by tests requiring writing at a basic level, such as writing down as many words beginning with a certain letter as an examinee could think of in a specific time period.

In 2008, as I am writing this foreword, the situation in practice has improved slightly. For example, the SAT Reasoning Test (as it is now called, after many name changes) includes a writing section, although it is so formulaic in its conceptualization and scoring that it is not clear how much it measures writing in a more creative sense. And educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of writing for success not only in school but also in later life. Writing has always been much harder to study and measure than reading, because it does not lend itself nicely to multiple-choice or other objective forms of scoring. But psychologists and others are rising to the challenge, as shown by the present book. And I am delighted and proud that the two psychologists who edited *The Psychology of Creative Writing* are both former graduate students of mine.

Creativity has been relatively little studied in psychology, creative writing even less so. It is hard to study. First, whereas participants can sit down at pretty much any time and answer reading comprehension questions or solve mathematics problems, they cannot do the same for creative writing: Sometimes the ideas just do not come! Second, it is hard to assess creativity. Third, the study of creative writing is interdisciplinary, involving cognitive, social, personality, and biological aspects of psychology – and phenomena that best

lend themselves to interdisciplinary approaches are often the last to be studied, if only because no one person or team typically has the expertise to study the phenomena as a whole. Yet understanding creative writing is essential not only to psychology but to all of the humanities and many of the social sciences, most notably, psychology.

In the psychology of verbal processing, there are various levels of analysis, two of which are particularly salient. One is the study of what one might call the micro-processing of verbal material. In the study of reading, this would include how one processes phonetic information and decodes words. In the study of writing, it would include how one strings together words to form grammatical and meaningful sentences. Of course, even this micro level can be subdivided, but the main focus is on how writing is even possible in the first place. The other level is the study of what one might call the macro-processing of verbal material. In the study of reading, this would include how one understands a story or an essay. In the study of writing, this level would include how one writes a story or essay. The focus of this book is on the macro level of understanding writing, and the book limits itself to the creative side of writing.

The book is catholic in its approach to creative writing. Some of the chapters deal with the psychological processes involved in writing. Others deal with social processes, such as writing as a collaborative enterprise or how rewards can affect the creative writing process. Still others deal with the personalities of creative writers or how writing can help one's psychological state. The kinds of writing reviewed vary widely: from Shakespeare to screenwriters to the everyday writing we may all do as we face the tasks confronting us in our day-to-day lives.

Many themes run throughout this book. In a brief foreword, I cannot possibly cover them all. But I would like to mention one – namely, that many people become creative writers not by virtue of their education, but in spite of it. Indeed, many career creative writers showed no particular promise to be great writers in their school careers. Even when schools or assessments place some emphasis on writing, it is often the kind of writing that is largely expository and in which one is evaluated in terms of how well one meets the mechanical requirements of writing, rather than its creative ones.

If there is a single message to this book, I believe it is that schools need to place more emphasis on the creative side of writing (and everything else), and that in doing so, they will produce not only more creative writers but also people who are more creative as they go about their lives. Creativity is largely an attitude toward life. Creative people are those who are more willing to redefine the ways in which they look at problems, to take risks, to seek to overcome daunting obstacles, and to tolerate ambiguity even when its existence becomes psychologically painful. Teaching students how to write creatively helps teach them how to approach life in a creative way.

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We live in a time of great challenges, in which the formulas of the past often fail when applied to the present. Indeed, as I write this foreword, Wall Street and much of the U.S. financial system are in a sort of meltdown the likes of which perhaps have not been seen since the Great Depression. If there ever has been a time for the encouragement of creativity in writing and thought, this is it. This book, I hope, will help lead us, as a society, toward that recognition. Arguably, with daunting threats to our survival as a species, our time for recognizing the importance of a creative approach to life is running out. We can only be grateful for books that celebrate the importance of creativity to our existence and survival.

PREFACE

We laymen have always been curious to know . . . from what source that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it.

– Freud (1908)

Who is this strange being that is the creative writer? How can we understand the person behind the creative writer or what process a person may take to write creatively? Can we use this knowledge to nurture aspiring creative writers and even enhance the writing of already established creative writers? In *The Psychology of Creative Writing*, we offer 20 chapters by top scholars musing on the key components of creativity writing: the writer, the text, the process, the development, and the education. These insights are bookended by our own analyses and thoughts.

We have both been fascinated by creative writing and creative writers for as long as we can remember. As a child, Scott would often peer into other worlds, either through writing stories about time travel or reading science fiction such as the Xanth series by Piers Anthony. Today, he works on stand-up comedy writing whenever he has the time, and he tries to sneak away from his work whenever he can to open up a psychological thriller or science fiction novel and escape into another time and place.

As for James, he always wanted to be a writer – he was writing stories by the fourth grade, always under the watchful eye of his first mentor, his mother. He continued to write, becoming a sports journalist at age 14 for local newspapers and slowly publishing his attempts at poetry, stories, humor, and essays in a wide variety of tiny magazines and journals. In college he studied under the famed novelist T. Coraghessan Boyle and realized he should find a day job. Continuing to write plays and musicals to this day (and with the very good fortune to see them often performed off-off-Broadway and around the world), James initially began studying creativity itself as a way to understand the creative writer.

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Preface

We are not the only ones to harbor such fascination. A search on creative writers in PsycINFO returns 755 results; searches on creative mathematicians and creative painters return 58 and 97, respectively. In a world in which celebrities come and go like exploding supernovas, the writer has remained a constant. Stephen King, John Grisham, and J. K. Rowling have been stars for decades, with no sign of abatement. Literary giants (Joyce Carol Oates, the late John Updike, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth) continue to be published and be discovered.

Perhaps because of this fascination with the creative writer as an individual, the first part of the book (“The Writer”) is also the longest. Jane Piirto tackles the personalities of creative writers. Samaneh Pourjalali, E. M. Skrzynecky, and James C. Kaufman discuss the complex relationship among the creative writer, locus of control, and the tendency to dysphorically ruminate. Adèle Kohanyi takes on the related question of how mood variability and regulation affect different writers. Steven R. Pritzker and David McGarva write about eminent screenwriters; indeed, in addition to his accomplishments in psychology, Pritzker is a well-known screenwriter himself and has worked on such television shows as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Silver Spoons*. Finally, Scott Barry Kaufman and Aaron Kozbelt offer insight into the psychological characteristics of comedy writers.

In the second part of the book, “The Text,” we begin with a chapter by Daniel Nettle on the evolution of creative writing. Martin S. Lindauer then argues for the importance of physiognomy, in which investigating the text itself can yield insights into a writer’s thought process. Finally, Dean Keith Simonton analyzes the work of perhaps the best-known writer of all time, William Shakespeare.

The third part focuses on “The Process.” Todd Lubart takes a delightful look at the creative process through the eyes of a certain young fictional girl named Alice. R. Keith Sawyer, known for his work on group creativity, applies that same lens to writing as a collaborative act. Mark A. Runco takes a broad look at many facets of writing and how these facets interact with many different ideas. Finally, Thomas B. Ward and E. Thomas Lawson offer a treat for science fiction/fantasy fans as they look at the role of creative cognition in this genre.

In the fourth part, our scholars focus on “The Development” of both the creative writer and creative writing. Susan K. Perry describes what it is like to write in flow, based on hundreds of interviews with eminent writers. Jerome L. Singer and Michael V. Barrios discuss perhaps the bane of a writer’s existence – writer’s block – and strategies for getting creativity kick-started again. Sandra W. Russ discusses how pretend play and emotional processes can play a role in developing narrative writing. Finally, Janel D. Sexton and James W. Pennebaker share their research on the curative powers of expressive writing (which serves as an alternate perspective to some of the chapters in the first section about creative writing and poor mental health).

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In the fifth and final part, “The Education,” we shift our focus to the classroom. John Baer and Sharon S. McKool describe two of the top creativity killers, rewards and evaluations, and propose ways to maintain a healthy enjoyment of creative writing. Grace R. Waitman and Jonathan A. Plucker share some of the myths of creativity, arguing that a successful approach to teaching writing could start by shattering some of these myths. Genevieve E. Chandler and Pat Schneider describe the Amherst Writers & Artists method of teaching creative writing, which has been applied to a number of nonartist populations. Finally, Ai-Girl Tan offers a cross-cultural spin on this topic by discussing ways of learning to write creatively in Chinese classrooms.

We are honored to have a foreword by Robert J. Sternberg, one of the true visionaries in creativity research and a mentor to both of us, to begin this collection. We have also written a final chapter that integrates and synthesizes the many suggestions and ideas proposed throughout the chapters.

We hope that, by bringing together the insights and research of these exemplary psychologists, this book will serve as a resource for many people. Certainly, psychologists who study creativity, writing, and creative writing may be the most obvious audience. But we hope that writers themselves – novelists, poets, playwrights, journalists, essayists, and bloggers – will find much to ponder (and, perhaps, disagree with) in the pages that follow. We also hope that people interested in writing can open the book to any chapter and find a discussion that introduces a new idea to ponder.

Scott Barry Kaufman

James C. Kaufman

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to first thank our editors at Cambridge who shepherded this project through fruition, Eric Schwartz and Simina Calin. We would also like to thank Jeanie Lee for her tireless and cheerful work on this project; project manager Brigitte Coulton and copyeditor Gail Naron Chalew for a fantastic job; Thomas Neises for his assistance; and a terrific team of indexers led by David Loomis and including Ryan Holt and Anthony Sierra.

We appreciate the insight and help of Lori Handelman, Allison Kaufman, Paul Locher, and Genet Tulgetske.

We have both been lucky enough to be mentored by Robert J. Sternberg, who graciously wrote the foreword to this book. His support and accomplishments continue to inspire us both.

Jerome L. Singer was on both of our doctoral committees, and his imagination, wit, and joy for life are a constant delight.

We are continually inspired by our colleagues in the field of creativity research; we are also both especially invigorated by the stellar research and writing of a new generation of creativity scholars such as Ron Beghetto, Zorana Ivcevic, Aaron Kozbelt, and Paul Silvia (among many others).

Scott would like to thank his very supportive and wonderful friends: Elliot Paul (his twin brother from another mother, a man with a great mind and a big heart), Dr. Benjamin Irvine of jolly ol' England (thanks for the many stimulating conversations and fun times!), Eugene Ford, Markus LaBooy, Nienke Venderbosch, Brent Kyle, Jennifer DiMase, Louisa Egan, Candida Moss, Elise Christopher, Alia Crum, Yoona Kang, Adam Green, Bret Logan, Dave Roberts, Hillary Ruhl Dueñas, Erin Coulter, Justin Khoo, Mark Gerban, Avi Kouzi, Jamie Brown, and Balazs Aczar. He also owes a huge debt of gratitude to his terrific collaborators: James Kaufman (a constant mentor and friend, as well as his other twin brother from another mother), Colin DeYoung, Glenn Geher, Jean Pretz, and Luis Jiménez. As for his lifelong mentors, warm appreciation goes to Anne Fay and Nicholas Mackintosh for their continual guidance. Thanks to the late Herbert Simon for mentoring and inspiring him as

an undergraduate and to Jeremy Gray for giving him a home at Yale. Cheers to his high school teachers Mary Acton, Regina Gordon, Tom Elliot, and Debra Hobbs for their fine teaching and warm encouragement and Mr. O for his stimulating and fun creative writing class.

And last, but certainly not least, acknowledgments go to his family. Thanks to his grandfather Harry Gorodetzer for showing him the importance of practice and sharing the cello with him (the most beautiful instrument in the world), his grandmother Jeanette Robbins Gorodetzer for the bear hugs, his Bubba for the warmth, and his Zeda for the toys. Scott's biggest acknowledgment and gratitude go to his parents, Barbara and Michael – thanks for encouraging all of his varied, sometimes zany creative pursuits and writings (remember *Roborky's Statue?*). Without their encouragement, love, and guidance, this book would hardly have been possible.

James would like to thank his many psychology mentors – those above and John Baer, Jeff and Lisa Smith, and Jonathan Plucker and his CSUSB colleagues (especially Mark Agars, Susan Daniels, Michelle Ebert Freire, and Allen Butt; chair Robert Cramer; and administrators Jean Peacock, Joanna Worthley, Jamal Nassar, Louis Fernandez, and Al Karnig). He would also like to thank his inner circle of friends – especially Nate, Amy, and Zachary Stone; Joshua Butler; and David, Aviva, and Jonah Hecht – and his family – the Bengels clan (especially Dennis and Barbara, Emily, and Jessica); Joseph, Jean, and Cindy Katz; Milissa, Matt, Josiah, and Mikaela Kaufman; Kate Singleton; Nicole Hendrix; Jennie, Mitch, Brianna, and Leo Singer; Alan and Nadeen Kaufman; and his wife, Allison, and son, Jacob.