

Writing Wrongs

Abstract

This article looks at a definition of creative writing and at the massive increase in its popularity in recent years. It also looks at the expanding phenomenon of writers-in-residence with a wide number of organisations. It tries to understand this explosion in popularity by considering some of the reasons why people are putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, in record numbers. Such reasons range from the rise of the celebrity novelist to the greater availability of travel opportunities.

Additionally, I wonder whether this increased activity has meant a decline in standards of writing people are producing.

I look at the ‘creative writing industry’ which has grown up alongside the increased number of writers, and attempt to assess the worth of this industry, while including some of my own experience at the hands of writing tutors, courses, coaches and holidays. I also reflect on how the success (or otherwise) of this unregulated ‘industry’ can best be assessed, if, indeed, it can be assessed at all.

This article examines the question of whether writing can and should be taught, and what aspects of the craft, if any, can be learned by student writers.

Finally, I also take a brief look at the study of creative writing in a university setting, its controversial status, and consider the relationship between such degree courses and the publishing industry.

Introduction: What is Creative Writing, and why are we all doing more of it?

Micheline Wandor, (2008:7), recalls how a young man once asked her for an exact definition of creative writing. She ‘waffled a bit; not inaccurately, but also not succinctly. At the end, the young man said so it’s a mode of thought, then? That’s exactly it, I said. It’s a mode of imaginative thought.’

I have yet to find a better description of an activity which, I am convinced, is more popular than ever. Indeed, my research revealed just a single voice of dissent, from a poet, Ashley Harrold, who maintained that numbers for the groups in which he is involved – a workshop and a Poets' Café – are steady, but not rising.

The Writers' Conference, at Winchester University, for example, has mushroomed tenfold since it began in 1980. Welsh writer Phil Carradice read nearly 700 entries while judging the last Rhys Davies Short Story Competition, and Barbara Large, Founder-Director of the Winchester event, reports that the 2007 conference's accompanying competition attracted more than 800 entries in the category for young poets alone. There were also 700 short stories, and more than 350 first pages of novel entries.

Writing is now widely taught, not only in universities and schools, but in prisons, as part of mental health care, and in adult education colleges, among other institutions.

The Arts Council reports that the benefits of having a writer in residence to promote the creative development of an organisation's staff and increase literacy and organisational health have been well documented. As the boundaries between work and leisure becoming increasingly blurred, it is tempting to conclude that employers are taking a more holistic view of the well-being of their staff.

This has led to a growing trend for organisations, from Marks and Spencer to the British Antarctic Survey, from the London Transport Museum to the Thames Gas Platform, to hire writers in residence. The Scottish Arts Council alone has funded more than a hundred residencies.

And, with more magazines, web sites, and TV channels hungry for fresh scripts meaning more outlets for publication, the craft of writing has rarely been more visible. These days, a voice has to be loud to be heard over the babble.

It is interesting to consider why more people should feel inspired to put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, *now*. Some of the possible explanations appear to be

contradictory. For example, *all* leisure pursuits seem to be on the rise now – from ballroom dancing classes to Sudoku, despite, the increased hours we spend at work.

Another contradiction lies in the consideration of a rise in literacy as a contributory factor. To claim increased literacy has seen an increased take-up of creative writing is not borne out, for example, by the Skills for Life survey which the Department for Education and Skills (2003), which reports that one in six respondents (16 per cent, or 5.2 million adults) had lower level literacy skills.

The increased access to and use of computers is probably a much more compelling argument, with some people happy to tap out on a screen what they wouldn't have written on paper. As John Moat points out in his eloquent memoir about the creation of the Arvon Foundation (2005:94), which runs residential creative writing courses, a student is 'as likely these days to have a laptop as a toothbrush.' Despite the depressing statistics from the DfES, we are more computer literate than ever, and the Internet has created a myriad of opportunities for writers to network and promote themselves and their work, and to receive feedback - from blogging to online competitions and forums. There has even been a writer in residence for cyberspace.

Along with increased computer use, books are cheaper and more accessible now. Book groups have taken off in pubs, libraries, homes, prisons, through newspapers, web sites and even on television thanks to *Richard and Judy*.

There are other considerations. We are, in theory at least, better educated, more affluent and aspirational. We live longer, and spend more years in retirement with leisure time to write. Writing is no longer considered to be exclusively for an educated elite. Arguably, being assailed by information on all sides, we are more able to absorb and take things in. Global communications mean we know more about the world around us, and take a greater interest in it. With more of us journeying more frequently and further afield than previous generations have done, it's not difficult to see why travel writing, as a particular example, has never been more popular or competitive.

High-profile millionaire authors such as JK Rowling have almost certainly caused some to hanker after glamour and fortune along with literary immortality. As Russell Celyn Jones reflects in the *Richmond Review* (1995/6): ‘Writers have become the product now.’

Even the supermodel Naomi Campbell has ‘become a writer’, with her novel, *Swan*, which she allegedly has not even read, let alone written.

Dr Johnson famously asserted: ‘No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.’ (1991:183). Yet barely a handful of those who turn up diligently for their weekly writing class, or follow correspondence courses will make a penny or see their efforts or names in print. So why are they writing, and who *for*?

I am sure that there are as many explanations as there are creative writers. Some no doubt do it because it gives them pleasure and stimulation. Others may see it as a form of therapy. For some students, a class is a way, perhaps the only way, that their voice will be heard. Others may do it purely to get out of the house and as a way of having some company. What I am not sure is how many of them, as Rilke (2001: 6) urged, ask themselves ‘in the most silent hour of their night’ whether they ‘must write’, and then ‘build their lives in accordance with this necessity.’

Does More Mean Less?

I wondered whether the standard of what is being produced has risen, along with the volume, or whether we are guilty of creating what William Jay Smith (2007: 251) describes in his chapter of *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* as:

‘Creative writing writing – competent, passionless stuff learned in workshops and seminars and published in Mickey Mouse magazines’?

Ashley Harrold emails: “There is a lot of good material being produced. Rubbish doesn’t usually make it into the public forum. There is a large amount of adequate stuff ...but the exceptional is rare.” I have no reason to doubt this statement.

The Creative Writing Industry

A ‘creative writing industry’ has shot up alongside this growing army of largely unpublished and unpaid would-be wordsmiths. A glance at a single issue of *Msllexia*, the magazine for women writers, carries seven adverts for graduate and undergraduate university courses, 11 advertisements for a variety of writing related services, from literary consultancies to mentoring, coaching and self-publishing. Five writing competitions, 10 non-university courses, two writers’ organisations and five books are also featured.

The December 2007 issue of *Writer’s Forum* has no fewer than 16 advertisements for a similar array of writing services, one for some software, five for non-university courses, two for university BA and MA creative writing degrees, and two for competitions. It also has a directory listing a vast array of classified adverts.

There are around a thousand groups and courses listed in a recent directory of writers’ circles.

Poet Polly Clark tells me via email: “If you’ve done your homework, you’ll know who to work with, and what is a good course. Payment doesn’t guarantee publishing success, and only a very naïve writer would believe it does, or get angry when it doesn’t.”

Phil Carradice comments that several of his students have reported “very bad experiences” with these kinds of organisations. While some may well provide useful services, tellingly, those I contacted who had a commercial interest – *Msllexia*, a writing coach, *Writer’s Forum* – declined to respond to my queries.

There is nothing wrong with making money per se. It’s what any business must do to survive. But I also think it possible that some of these organisations may, on occasion, be guilty of giving false hope, of making students believe they can write when maybe they can’t, at least not professionally.

As the ‘graduate’ of three writing retreats, two Arvon Foundation courses, 18 months of adult education classes, one writing coach, countless workshops and as a current MA student, I have considerable first-hand experience of the creative writing industry.

My weekly phone conversations with a writing coach tended to be vague and unhelpful, since she wasn't discussing my writing itself, and indeed had never seen a word of my work. Instead, she was talking in non-specific terms about 'motivational issues', time-management, prioritising writing and the like. Our conversations did not leave me feeling more inspired to put finger to keyboard.

Arvon Foundation courses, on the other hand, are unfailingly helpful and inspiring, not least because they offer time and space to write. Aspiring writers spend five days together, experiencing high-quality teaching from published authors. I know that many leave feeling energised and newly committed. This total immersion in the world of writing, and living with other writers, is, I would argue, what makes the difference.

The adult education course I attended was well-meaning but ultimately ineffectual. The teacher was always non-committal about what he had written himself, and his feedback on work often too generalised and not sufficiently critical. The class was also rather too large to be meaningful, and often poorly structured. There seemed little incentive to turn up with fresh work each week.

In contrast, the MA I am doing in Creative and Critical Writing at Winchester University has helped me develop a voice and given me much-needed discipline in my writing, while also, I am sure, making me a better and more analytical reader. It has also forced me to write outside my comfort zone, learning new genres like scriptwriting.

Although I had never considered myself a fiction writer, my dissertation is to be the first 20,000 words of a novel. Regular meetings with my peers during which we offer constructive critiques of each other's work, are invaluable.

Equally, by writing two pieces of memoir – for the creativity and non-fiction modules – I believe I have come to a better understanding of myself, and of how I fit into the world. Both have been published, and, without the MA, I believe both would have been written to a lower standard, if, indeed, they had been written at all.

Barbara Large points out that the creative writing industry, outside the university setting at least, is new and not officially evaluated. Anyone can set themselves up in business, in much the same way that anyone can proclaim themselves to be a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Admittedly, however, the issue of how you would regulate this industry is not one which is easily resolved. It is surely not meaningful, for example, to assess organisations in terms of the volume of work its students produce, or on whether or not such work is of 'publishable' quality.

As Patricia Duncker, Professor of Contemporary Literature at Manchester University, writes in the arts section of the British Council web site:

'So much badly written nonsense and best-selling vacuous cliché is published ... that being 'publishable' cannot be a failsafe guide to quality.'

In any case, as Russell Celyn Jones says in his *Richmond Review* piece (1995/6), only 20 per cent of graduates from even Britain's most prestigious creative writing MA programme, at the University of East Anglia, become published authors.

While some say true originality should be the deciding factor when it comes to assessing work, this is just as tricky to define, making regulation almost impossible.

Instead, it may be more meaningful to judge success on how students have improved, although even this could be hard to quantify.

Can Writing Be Taught?

The debate over whether writers can be made, whether the craft of writing can be taught, and indeed learnt, is hardly a new one.

As early as the eighteenth century, Mary Shelley (2005:237) wrote:

'I recommend the mind's being put into a proper train, and then left to itself. Fixed rules cannot be given ... The mind ... cannot be created by the teacher, though it may be cultivated, and its real mind is not, cannot powers found out.'

But what did more modern practitioners have to say?

For Barbara Large, although not everyone can turn out copy which will be published, everyone can improve and increase the enjoyment they derive from writing. In that sense, then, yes, writing can indeed be taught.

Poet John Hegley told me: “You can nurture talent and teach tricks of the trade, but you can’t teach someone the magic.”

For Ashley Harrold: “A voice can’t be taught, a voice must be discovered.”

Even some of those who make their living from teaching creative writing are sceptical.

Jack Epps (2006:103), of the University of Southern California writes in Graeme Harper’s book *Teaching Creative Writing*:

‘What cannot be crafted is the talent, the soul of a writer.’

Another thing that cannot really be taught, the factor which for Phil Carradice is the single most important factor in writing success, is discipline.

Roger Scruton (2001:6) would agree. In the *Sunday Times Review*, in a reactionary rant slating artist Tracey Emin for not having had the same formal training as Mozart, he avers:

‘Artistic ability is not like scientific knowledge: you cannot acquire it ... by diligent study. There comes a point where a leap of the imagination is required.’

Graeme Harper, of Bangor University, (2006:38-9) is very aware of the extent to which the teaching of the subject has been described as ‘an elaborate educational hoax’, and a ‘hopeful but doomed activity.’ This he blames on universities rather than the subject itself. He accuses them of ‘a lack of willingness to push the boundaries of human creativity and thought.’ Instead of teaching creative writing, he says, universities ‘merely manage the discipline’s existence.’

David Myers (2006:3) in *The Elephants Teach*, which traces the history of creative writing since the latter part of the nineteenth century, laments that:

‘The idea of hiring writers to teach writing has never won unquestioned acceptance, nor has creative writing – the classroom subject – progressed much beyond apologising for itself.’

Writing and teaching are surely distinct disciplines, with the best writers not necessarily making the best teachers. You can write without being able to teach, but I am not convinced the reverse is true. (Our teacher at the local adult education college was always evasive when asked what he wrote himself. It did not inspire confidence.)

Someone who would wholeheartedly agree is John Moat (2005:19-20), who discusses his apprenticeship with the poet John Howland Beaumont in these terms:

‘...the only person who can teach the technique of writing is an experienced writer ...teaching is proved by experience that is wholehearted and profoundly relevant. It is the authority that can relate the specifics of technique to the spirit of writing. Which means the authority ... of one who has ‘been in it with all his or her heart.’

This is encapsulated in Arvon’s motto, *The fire in the flint shows not till it be struck*.

What can you teach?

If you cannot teach talent, genius or creativity, what can you teach? Certainly, there are aspects of the craft which can be passed on – Hegley’s ‘tricks of the trade’.

As Lajos Egri (2004:284) puts it in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*:

‘If you know the principles, you will be a better craftsman and artist.’

Tuition can also give students the opportunity to develop and increase their own understanding of their craft.

Perhaps the greatest strength of all creative writing tuition is in its capacity for *forcing* people to write, for making them better editors of their own work, and for bringing them together with others who share their passion. For many, a creative writing class

may be the first time they have shared their work, or received any kind of meaningful feedback. It may be the first time they realise they have any sort of ability, and can give them the confidence to develop and nurture that ability.

Teaching Creative Writing in Universities

The place of creative writing in universities, specifically, has long been mired in controversy, particularly in Britain, with mutual mistrust between some academics and professional writers. Traditionally, the study of 'English' has been about the critical study of literary forms, rather than their creation. It is entirely possible that some academics see creative writing as a challenge to this tradition.

The first chair of English literature at Harvard was only appointed in 1876, and the English honours degree at Oxford was not established until less than 20 years later. Both factors have directly affected the construction of postgraduate creative writing programmes.

Such debate has not stopped the subject from becoming increasingly popular in the university setting, with dozens of undergraduate and postgraduate courses offering everything from novel writing to creative non-fiction. (At the last count there were more than 12 Masters programmes on offer in screenwriting alone.) Many traditional English Literature courses now also include creative writing modules. In the current higher education climate, students have become consumers who expect a tangible result beyond education for their money, and some may be disappointed.

Creative writing as a university subject is much less controversial in the United States. As Russell Celyn Jones (1995/6) states in the *Richmond Review*:

‘the creative writing business is like the psychotherapy business, something the Americans are more comfortable with than the British ... The problem sets in when the party never ends. Some students go from three years of undergraduate workshops onto MA courses ... capping it all ... teaching ... without publishing anything. That is taking a good thing too far.’

Phil Carradice's main concern is that degree courses are not churning out more creative writers, but more *teachers*: “Who will go on to produce more courses for

people to attend and churn out more. Sit down and write your book – that’s the best training.”

It is worth considering the extent to which creative writing degree courses should prepare their graduates for life beyond university. Especially for undergraduate courses, should there be a definite job at the end of it all, and should this be the ultimate goal? In that sense, creative writing is no guiltier than, say, Media Studies, or even English, come to that. In any event, it’s probably not the prime reason most students sign up for university courses in the first place.

If students are not being prepared for definite jobs, then perhaps at least they should be introduced to the publishing industry. Barbara Large, at Winchester, is keen on forging connections, and encouraging student work placements.

In that sense, should teachers be urging their students to write stuff that stands a chance of seeing the light of day, work that the publishing industry is looking for?

Celyn Jones (1995/6) is astonished that

‘We no longer train people in coal mining .. yet we encourage students to write at the literary end of the market, even as it is shrinking.’

In *Teaching Creative Writing*, radio drama teacher Steve May (2006:93-94) worries about the tension between teaching within the extremely narrow range of actually commissioned radio plays, and giving students freedom to write the stuff they want. He is always clear with his students about what the market really commissions.

This combination of free reign, mixed with a healthy dose of realism, is probably the best compromise.

Conclusion

The last word goes to Warwick University’s Professor David Morley (2007:22). He sums up perfectly the value and pitfalls of creative writing teaching:

‘Writing requires nerve, stamina and long listening – as well as talent, and editorial discrimination. ... Although learning creative writing can be fun, *becoming and being* a writer is a far more ruthless, wilder game.’

Earlier on, (2007:8) he asserts:

Creative writing can be taught most effectively when students have some talent and vocation ... If a teacher can shape the talent, and steer that vocation ... then ... creative writing should be taught as a craft. The whole point of teaching creative writing, however, is that students must learn to ... guid[e] themselves.’

But for some, he concludes (2007:251):

‘the creative writing industry is a cartoon world, a cloud cuckoo land of fantasy accomplishment and vacuum-sealed reputation.

It is evidently much more open-ended. At best, the teaching of creative writing provides a moving edge for literary evolutions and language’s revelations...An open book of possibility, the creative academy is an open space, but... just sometimes, we need rewriting.’

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