

Creative Writing: why go to university to do it?

You want to write. You want to write creatively. You want to have a go at it, to see if you can do it, and you want to have your work assessed by practicing writers. You are a reader, and what you read inspires you to want to write. You tell stories, you have a gift for it, and you want to develop this gift. You want to be in touch with other people your age who also love literature, writing, books. You want to make professional contacts that might show you how you could advance a career in writing or publishing. You can see how much energy, creativity, and experiment is happening out there in the virtual world of the web, and you want to be part of it. You think that if you do become a teacher, then you would want to teach creative writing because it looks like fun, it looks like the ultimate challenge. You have worked as a professional for many years now, and you have raised a family as well, but all along you wanted to try your hand at writing, so now you are seeking a supportive environment, a fast track to development of whatever talent you might have.

These are only a few of the reasons students might come to creative writing at one of Australia's universities. There are now nearly three dozen universities in Australia offering an undergraduate major, postgraduate coursework, or research qualifications up to PhD level in Creative Writing. Each program is different, there is no common template. There is a peak professional body, the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (<http://www.aawp.org.au/>), which offers networks and workshop support to students, an annual conference for academics, and a globally prestigious refereed research journal, TEXT (<http://www.textjournal.com.au/>) for the publication of research, the conduct of debates, and as an outlet for some forms of reflective creative writing. Publishers look to make contact with the best of the creative writing programs in Australia.

I teach in a creative writing program whose home is the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, where we have four hundred students enrolled in our first-year subject as part of the Bachelor of Arts, around 80 to 100 students completing a major in Creative Writing each year, and about 50 students doing PhDs in Creative Writing at any one time. Our PhD graduates have had novels, short story collections, literary non-fiction books, and scholarly books published, some of them winning prestigious prizes.

Of course it is possible, and common, for people to become writers without undertaking a creative writing course at a university. But once you find yourself at a university (and especially doing an Arts degree) with a passion and ambition centred on writing, then it makes good sense to avail yourself of the chance to meet others similarly motivated, put yourself in contact with writer-teachers, have your writing stimulated, provoked and workshopped; and, perhaps a most lasting experience, learn to begin to read as a writer, or at least as a reader who appreciated what it might take to write an imaginative book to a demanding standard.

Creative writing is, like 'History' and 'English' only the name of a discipline taught in the academy, it is not necessarily descriptive, nor is it indicative or exhaustive in pointing to what a creative writing program might offer. In our program we aim to cover poetry, short fiction, novel writing, nonfiction, autobiography, writing for children, young adult fiction, screenwriting, writing for theatre, graphic fiction,

experimental forms of writing and theoretical investigations—at beginner and advanced levels. Even so, with this spread of kinds of writing coming under the umbrella term of creative writing, we cannot pretend to be covering all the main forms of creative writing. We are acutely aware of the rise of online, virtual, digital and hypertext-based writing, especially forms that cross-fertilise with the arts of animation, film, audio, performance, game-writing, blogs, online journalism and the many forms of e-zines, e-journals, e-anthologies and e-books. We are determined to keep moving towards involvement in these new regions, forms, and modes for creative writing while holding to the belief that at the heart of creative writing are the grounding forms of poetry, fiction, nonfiction and script—and perhaps even more fundamentally, a reading habit.

In our program we recognise that the PhD has multiple purposes, and in some important senses must be a qualification that remains compromised (one way of looking at it), which is another way of saying that it remains representative and reflective of the many tensions, contradictions and traditions that inform the PhD. The PhD is an opportunity for a writer to complete what is sometimes their first major manuscript; it is a training ground for developing a research expertise and direction in the multidisciplinary field of creative writing; and it is now a basic qualification for anyone wanting to move into academia in Australia, where most academics must be both teachers and active researchers. As a consequence, the Creative Writing PhD at the University of Melbourne is split 50-50 between a creative text and a dissertation, which stands alone as an academic research exercise, but one that at the same time complements the creative work. Conceptually, we see the PhD as a research question that has its creative response in the creative writing, and has its academic, intellectual investigation in the dissertation. This is sometimes an uncomfortable fit, and sometimes requires a ‘linking’ statement to help examiners see the coherence of the project. There is no guarantee that our PhD will always be like this, but at present its form goes some way to meeting the varied and competing purposes of the qualification.

It is important to recognise that creative writing is not necessarily or even mainly a vocational-training discipline. Just as most students who study history, English or geography at university do not become historians, literary critics or geographers, most students who study creative writing will never publish their work, and might never write, say, poetry, again after completing their study. Does this mean that we (teachers, programs, universities) are selling a promise that is patently empty and unachievable for most students? I don’t think so. I believe students know what they are choosing when they choose to study creative writing, that they know that universities are places where they can expose themselves to experiences that hopefully will contribute to the self that will emerge some years later, ‘educated’ for want of a better term. More prosaically and in a more practical vein we point out to beginning and departing students that if nothing else, their studies in creative writing have equipped them for the subtle, constant and complex task of communication. They are highly literate, confident, critical, creative and subtle communicators. When employers of graduates are asked what quality they seek in new graduates, ‘communication skills’ are commonly near the top of the list. In other words, if we do not produce novelists and poets or the next big thing in games writing, we do reliably produce highly employable communicators.

On 8 October 2014, the British *Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/07/creative-writing-killing-western-literature-nobel-judge-horace-engdahl>) reported criticisms of creative writing courses made by Horace Engdahl, a member of the Nobel Prize committee for literature. Among other comments, he made the following criticism:

“I think it [the university] cuts writers off from society, and creates an unhealthy link with institutions,” he told *La Croix*. “Previously, writers would work as taxi drivers, clerks, secretaries and waiters to make a living. Samuel Beckett and many others lived like this. It was hard — but they fed themselves, from a literary perspective.”

This is not an unusual criticism. It is criticism that has been directed at creative writing in the academy for many years. I wonder if it was such a bad idea for Michelangelo Merisi from Caravaggio to seek out a protected place in the training studio of Guiseppe Cesari, the favourite painter of Pope Clement VIII in 1593 when he was wanting to professionalise his skills, set himself the highest benchmarks possible, understand the artistic movements of his day, find patrons, and make his name where it counted. Artists have always found ways to exploit, adopt, invade or live off those institutions that would welcome or suffer them. If the modern academy helps kickstart writers careers, and if it produces at the same time readers who appreciate the work and skill required to write a book, then the academy is doing no more than what many institutions have done for centuries: it is fostering creativity in a world where the survival of that quality is as fragile as it has always been. Besides, nearly every student I teach at university these days also works as a taxi driver, clerk, secretary or waiter in order to fund their study. And Samuel Beckett would have been safely ensconced in the best creative writing program he could find, if such opportunities had been there for him. Such criticisms have more than a whiff of anti-intellectual fervor, and are based upon inaccurate assumptions about universities, writers, literature, and the relation of creativity to work. It is interesting that this time it comes from such an eminent source.

A final point to note about creative writing is that it remains something of an interloper or an outsider in the academy, because it does have deep connections into the commercial worlds of bookselling, games writing, film making and television. It has its attention on the swirling world outside of the university curriculum, outside the sanctity of research, and outside the safety of respectful intellectual debate. And this is OK. The new university, starved of government patronage, wanting to take its place in the marketplace, wants to foster these kinds of connections, this kind of attitude. The Philosophers' Mail (<http://www.philosophersmail.com/index.php>) is a new website that takes up the news that the British tabloid *The Daily Mail* publishes, and offers reflections and analysis by philosophers. The site is modeled on the site of the *Mail Online* (<http://www.philosophersmail.com/index.php>) and is staffed by philosophers from London, New York and Melbourne. This is in part a response to the fact that in Britain an average book of philosophy sells about 300 copies, while *The Daily Mail* has about 4.5 million readers and 100 million visitors to its website per month. This is the kind of creative, lateral, challenging and digitally savvy writing project that can come from the academy when it begins to value communication beyond the campus out into the chaotic world. If you Google 'Literary Journal' you will have 34.5 million hits to choose from. With that kind of activity, that kind of energy going round out there, it is important that as many university graduates as possible have a sophisticated understanding of what might be found there, how they might contribute, how they might help shape this world.

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