Innovative Practices in Creative Writing Teaching

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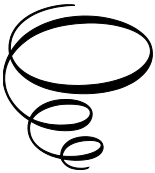
Edited by

Graeme Harper

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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INTRODUCTION

GRAEME HARPER

"If you want to master something, teach it.
Teaching is a powerful tool for learning."
—Richard Feynman

While becoming competent at something is the result of learning that thing's core characteristics, to be masterful at doing it involves transcending ordinariness. Mastery contains mystery. We transcend because, by being masterful, we appear to know more than is ordinarily known, or perhaps could ever be expected to be known. Most specifically, we have exceeded the knowledge both of a group (those who are known to do that particular thing) and of generally exchanged knowledge (that is, we have gone beyond the canon of exchangeable knowledge). We are in this way in the territory of the unexpected. In this territory, a person has either learnt core skills and learnt other skills that are applicable but were previously not known to be relevant or even to exist, or they have approached the thing, the task, the activity in a way that doesn't much (if at all) rely on or acknowledge what have been considered essential actions and established ways of thinking.

On occasion, mastery initiates a paradigm shift. The lone genius, separated by distance or brevity of action from connections with others, does not easily bring about such a shift. But mastery observed in one or more people, and then considered by others, the unexpected made visible in this way, can result in the thing itself (whatever it might be) being newly considered, newly approached. If enough others who do it then feel a need to reconsider what has been previously done, and how, and in what ways, why, and to what ends, a paradigm shift occurs. Mastery can, in this way, produce evolutionary creativity, a shared, synergistic newness, communal innovation. If we see mastery as an extension of general exploration, as evidence of enduring possibility, part of a natural desire for better (in some way or ways, and that is not only present in humans but in all living creatures), then it is more than the uncanny result of quirky individualism. Instead, mastery has a role in all the taxonomic ranks associated with Charles Darwin's depiction of natural selection, being *both* individual and

communal. It could not logically be otherwise, because evolution is dependent on the outlying being regularized, on what was previously considered unusual or odd becoming mainstream.

Not all mastery produces paradigm shifts, and not only because it might occur fleetingly or out of the sight of others. Sometimes mastery is dependent on circumstances – instances, external occurrences beyond our own input, confluences of people or events. You can of course have degrees of mastery, 'proportional mastery' as it might be called, meaning that you are good at portions of something, elements or aspects, but not necessarily the entirety of something. However, whether across a domain or limited to certain aspects of that domain mastery is extraordinary. It is seemingly an element of all living, related to betterment as much as it is to survival, secularly transcendent and sometimes shareable.

Innovation points toward mastery, because to innovate is always to go beyond basics. That 'beyond' might similarly be basics *plus* more or different, or it might be a beyond that had not previously been perceived, the largely or entirely new. Newness is also regarded as a core aspect of creativity. Originality, novelty and imaginativeness are too. As traits of creativity, these are therefore traits of creative writing, and the connected route between creativity, newness, innovation, and consideration of mastery to the practice of creative writing can also lead us to considering how the teaching of creative writing might also be innovative; and, in this way, we can say, how it can be undertaken more masterfully.

Teaching creative writing can be the practice of those of us who seek to know more about creative writing – that is, those of us who seek to master it. So, explicitly or tacitly some of us might go about teaching creative writing with the intention also of better understanding how we individually approach our own practice of writing creatively. Through this interest our teaching connects the personal and the public, our inner world and the external world, our individual imagination and what is more often a group experience (the classroom, the creative writing workshop, the collection of imaginations that make up a class). However, to seek to know more about something because *we* desire to know more is not in opposition to seeking to know more so that we can share that knowledge with others. A love of learning, a desire to build communal, societal or generational knowledge (much school and college teaching relates to ideals of generational exchange, to the evolution of knowledge, one generation building on the knowledge of another), a sense of having influence (which indeed could be both altruistic and egotistic), a joy in sharing a passion for something –

teaching creative writing can have many motivating factors. For that reason, and at different levels of education, some of those who teach creative writing are not necessarily regular creative writers.

As the field of Creative Writing Studies grew in the early part of the 21st Century some of those who helped it grow were not creative practitioners (or not currently); rather, they were primarily teachers and researchers who sought out more knowledge and new ways of understanding and teaching the subject of 'Creative Writing'. While practice-led creative writing research (clearly research undertaken by creative writers) certainly informed some of this growth, other elements – that is, in this case, modes and methods of teaching – meant that pedagogic innovation could (and still can) be seen as an area of potential mastery for practitioners of creative writing *and* for non-practitioners alike. Of course, we might ask: 'Is it necessary to write creatively in order to teach creative writing?' If so, how often and how much?

There is certainly evidence that the 'practitioner-teacher' model has the advantages of ongoing proximity to the practice, as well as through the relating of techniques or approaches based on sentience (not only perception and thought) founded and maintained in the doing of creative writing. Role playing in the composing of creative work might also be enhanced by undertaking those roles in real life, beyond, leading into the acts of teaching, and modelling actions and results based on our own practice might well enhance the depth of engagement of both the teacher and the student. And yet, being an active creative writer, could also mean a teacher does not have time to investigate connected modes of pedagogy, perhaps those associated with cognate disciplines, in general, in other forms writing, or in other modes of communication. It could focus the teacher's attention on a personal project, outside of their teaching, and the challenges of that could exceed a desire to teach more basic creative writing skills to students. These are not dissimilar considerations to those found in thinking about the relationship between the 'doing' and the 'teaching' in any field of human endeavor, and they are not meant to paint active creative writers as self-absorbed and incapable of empathy. Simply, there could be both advantages and disadvantages to a creative writing teacher being an active creative writer, and some of this could simply be in the availability of time and in the amount of attention sometimes needed to complete a personal writing project. So, I largely leave open the question of whether it is necessary to be an active creative writer to be able to teach creative writing well - except to say, in my own opinion, the advantages of proximity and sentience outweigh any time and attention pressures and provide a benefit that is difficult to emulate when someone is not a creative writer.

Personal opinion thus expressed, whatever someone is teaching it is not a matter of simply being good at a thing and then passing on that expertise, osmotically, to someone else. Teaching involves modes of connecting, employing techniques for conveying information, explaining or demonstrating or encouraging engagement with ideas. Teaching can also be organized and arranged, even systematized. When teaching, there is often an application of structure – however skeletal that structure might be – and coordination and creating and using some sense of order. We might or might not be teaching creative writing in large part to learn things about our own writing; but, either way, are we doing so through a practice that involves learning how best to convey what we already know and, perhaps, how best to set up situations in which we ourselves both teach and learn?

When teaching, if we are dealing with a creative practice, we are navigating between the open-ended and the fixed. Not only can teaching involve structure, and creativity ensue structuring, so too written language needs rules in order to be comprehensible yet imagination suggests the independent and the interminable. The dynamic conditions here are even more intriguing, because in fact the imagination is schematic and language can be enhanced by being dexterous and inventive. Similarly, teaching and learning clearly can benefit from degrees of logic and comprehensibility, yet uninspired teaching lacks impact. To innovate is to know both what is and why might be, and if we seek mastery of teaching creative writing – whether in part to learn more about the practice ourselves or not – then we seek mastery of the relationship between the open-ended and the relatively fixed, the observable present and the projected future.

The chapter authors here in *Innovative Practices in Creative Writing Teaching* agreed they would explore aspects of their teaching they personally defined as innovative. No general criterion for that definition was offered to them, each writer chose their own definition, their own focus and direction and tone and the stories they had to tell. We can therefore take what is published here to represent several perspectives on creative writing, on teaching, and on innovation. If there are similarities in the different explorations that could suggest some similarities in how both creative writing and its teaching are perceived. The authors have a variety of backgrounds, locations and creative and critical interests. The one thing that makes them a group is that they each and all teach creative writing. This, alone, might tell us something.

To teach creative writing is to embrace and encourage the creative (in this way indicating an interest in the new). Working with written language, we also embrace and encourage the structural and the systematic

– because written language cannot work without some established system of inscription, order and communication that is understandable to both writer and reader (or audience). Creative writing travels constantly between the open-endedness of the creative and the relatively stable nature of written language, and we teach in this zone, in frequent (if not constant) awareness of the navigation we are undertaking.

To innovate in this zone is to seek out better communication and better understanding between these dimensions of human endeavor and knowledge – which are not necessarily opposed but are different, and offer challenges to mastery of creative writing and its teaching. How best can we undertake the navigation, remain truthful to the nature of creative writing, convey skills and understanding, and support both individuals (say, in a class group, but with individual creative interests, personal history, intellectual histories perhaps) and the group itself (say, who have signed up for a particular class based around writing a creative genre, or addressing a collection of practice topic – such as story-telling or inter-arts communication or critical thinking applied to creative practice)?

Some guiding statements as to how and when and in what ways innovation in creative writing teaching might occur could be along these lines (as suggestions):

- the imagination is largely the personal, even though our individual imaginations are influenced and informed by our cultural, societal, interpersonal, historical, geographic and educational situations. When innovating in teaching creative writing we are therefore attempting to empower the personal, while recognizing the communal. Shared experiences can nevertheless result in individual learning responses – and how we respond to those constitutes a primary challenge in pedagogic innovation.

- reconsidering ‘the norm’ when we’re dealing with written language pushes at the boundaries of sense and comprehensibility or, perhaps, extends and heightens both – the counterbalances here require writerly decision-making bound indeed in the ability to perceive what is transferable to others. We have seen examples of this in written creative works as varied as those of Pierre Reverdy, Ezra Pound, F. T. Marinetti, Forrest Gander, Gertrude Stein, Marie Ndiaye, Jorie Graham, James Joyce – an entirely random and entirely too short list of adventurers and pathfinders in written language. There are many, throughout literary history. The norm in teaching also comes with traditions and expectations, some defined by educational histories (which vary between institutions as well as between nations and languages) and some by general perception. Innovation

in teaching asks for a similar sense of what may be transferable – the exchanges we're attempting as teachers (and perhaps, too, as fellow creative writing learners).

- if innovation is a sense of difference (difference imbued with possibility) how is difference defined? Questions of diversity, equity and inclusion arise in teaching creative writing – as in all things – and some of these questions concern representation and empowerment. It could be, then, that innovation in teaching creative writing is focused on issues of diversity. More broadly, though, it could be that the ability to think and act empathetically is core to equitable teaching and that innovation in teaching creative writing is the empowerment of individuals in cultures and societies (of all kinds) where the impact of mainstreaming, political, economic and social control and prejudice bear down on individual writers in a myriad of ways.

- does innovation insist on results in physical form to prove its existence? This question, if considered generally, seems nonsensical. Of course, innovation doesn't require material manifestation to be happening or have happened. However, in creative writing teaching often results are assessed according to the work produced – stories, poems, scripts. If we innovate in the practice of teaching in order with experiences not material results in mind, how is the success of this assessed? What experiences might these be, and to what ends?

- how much are innovations in creative writing teaching informed by or even impelled by new knowledge emerging about the nature of creative writing? This becomes significant when we examine research in creative writing – whether through the practice of it or entirely through critical exploration of it, as such research has increased around the world in recent years – and that research produces new ideas about how writing occurs, or the techniques employed or the influences on it or the relationship between the mind and the method, imagination and physical manifestation in the written word, and more. What innovations in teaching have (or might) arise from such research? Certainly, in other fields it is research that (sometimes quickly and sometimes not) informs changes in teaching.

The modes and methods of challenging perceived opinion on what works in the creative writing classroom (however we describe in a contemporary sense a 'classroom') – particularly as it appears in higher education, but also as it appears generally in all forms and facets and locations of educational practice – will vary according to individual teacher and circumstance. It might not even be an innovation itself that lies at the heart of the exploration here. Ideas *behind* innovating could well be enough to stimulate productive

thought on the reasons for teaching practices and the success or lack of success of those practices. Defining what we mean by 'teaching creative writing' could in this sense be a *re*defining. Innovation can be the result of a reevaluating. It can be the result of the same imaginative thinking that is at the core of much of our creative practice. It might be that innovation is a tool for personal discovery or borne on a discovery that seems individualized but warrants exploring with others – a class of learners perhaps. To master the teaching of creative writing – which many of us seek to do but don't often feel we have truly achieved – we face bringing the expected and unexpected into the same place and time, the familiar meeting the unfamiliar. In this we transcend what we know if only to speculate on the experiential and/or material results that could be brought about by alternative knowing. If there is a canon of exchangeable knowledge in creative writing teaching (and years of work on creative writing workshops and on teaching writing techniques and on evaluating the results of writing practice suggest there is such a thing), then it is enhanced by the notion of innovation and maybe more so by our genuine attempts at it.

CHAPTER 1

CIRCLING BACK: MAKING SPACE FOR THEORIES IN THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOM

KHEM ARYAL

By Way of Introduction

In my multi-genre introductory creative writing class, I frequently get students who use the terms "story" and "essay" interchangeably. I don't think this experience is unique to me, and it is fully understandable given the fact that the course attracts students from various disciplines, not only literature. Even in my upper level creative writing course, not all students come with a minimum level of understanding of the basic genres of literature that they are supposed to produce and workshop in class. But as the prevailing creative writing pedagogy demands that they produce works that we can workshop, even before they have had the opportunity to learn the genres, the writing process, and any theories about literature and literary production. It is true that some of the textbooks that are being used lately begin with the elements of the genres we tend to teach, but such discussions are too cursory and they hardly provide students with a good theoretical foundation on literature. We are a bit too quick to fall for lore-based craft advice on how to write and "workshop" their work rather than making space for theories of literature and theories pertaining to literary production, circulation, and consumption.

In 1994, Katherine Haake wrote, "We tell them 'write three stories,' without ever asking 'what's a story?' We judge their success or failure by how 'good' their work is, without adequately defining what's 'good'."[1] Although the field of creative writing is making hopeful strides towards embracing a more theoretical approach to teaching writing in the last two decades or so by, for example, embracing alternative workshop methods that allow a questioning of the workshop itself, and embracing

theories from rhetoric and composition, it is no secret that we still rely on "a patchwork pedagogy with little basis in theory or practical research."[2] The separation between literary studies and creative writing and the separation between creative writing and literary theories still persists, and this fact explains to an extent our students' lack of knowledge of the theoretical tools that would serve them better. The new and emerging developments in creative writing as a discipline tell us that it does not have to be this way. Theorizing what we are practicing and making space for appropriate theories of literature and literary production, circulation, and consumption, while remaining open to the specific needs of any other focuses within creative writing (screenwriting, for instance) is, in my view, a way forward for us as a discipline, and that is what I am attempting to do in my teaching to the extent my institutional and disciplinary contexts allow me.

I teach at a mid-sized public university in the American South. We do not have a separate creative writing program, but we offer a minor in creative writing, for which students are required to take 18 hours of creative writing and other writing related courses. Even though we do not offer an M.A. in creative writing, our literature students can write a creative thesis. This context is different from the places where there is a separate creative writing program at the bachelor's level and the places where they offer an MFA or MA in creative writing. The institutional set up for the courses we offer and the opportunity to write a creative thesis, while not offering a full set of courses to call the degree Master's in Creative Writing, may have constrained our ability to grow in certain ways, but it has allowed me an openness and flexibility to curate my courses in ways I can help my students to go beyond the rigid framework of the traditional creative writing program, by which I mean going beyond the mere craft-based learning practices.

Historical Context

Those who pioneered the establishment of the field of creative writing, Norman Foerster and Paul Engle and Wallace Stegner, whose work Foerster oversaw, were first and foremost literary critics. As a follower of New Humanist thinkers like Irving Babbitt, Foerster saw in creative writing the opportunity to accomplish what the "prevailing academic methods—philology, literary history, general history"—could not since they just "yielded half-truths in need of synthesis by a critic."[3] He thought, Eric Bennett writers, that "poets and novelists, like critics, could do the work of humanistic synthesis…. Creative writers were to be the stewards of the wholeness of the person."[4] Foerster believed that creative writing was a way

of studying literature from inside, by writing it. Stephen Wilbers concurs, "Foerster believed that 'accuracy of this higher sort' could be encouraged by practice not only in historical and critical writing (or interpretive writing), but also in creative writing, which could 'assist an inner comprehension of art'."[5] According to R. M. Berry, "Foerster's concept of literary study imagined two interdependent activities within a unified field of knowledge instead of two epistemologically distinct realms of antagonistic psychological faculties. A single individual not only could be a writer and a critic, but she could hardly avoid it."[6] Going further back to the roots of the field, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as D. G. Myers shows, the field of creative writing emerged "as a means of unifying the two main functions of English departments—the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature."[7] In such context, the methods, theories, and practices being employed in literature would be readily available to creative writing as well. New Criticism is one such tool that became a staple of creative writing for long, and even today it's being practiced albeit without being called so. However, as we know, things changed quickly and literary studies and creative writing soon took to separate corners, sometimes resulting in bitter enmity.

With the hiring of more poets and novelists to teach creative writing courses, the apprenticeship model, which was the most widespread form of "poet's education" until the 19th century,[8] became prevalent. Since creative writing at Iowa began as a graduate course offering, which would later evolve into an MFA program and become a model for almost all creative writing programs in the U.S and abroad, the pedagogy of apprenticeship made a lot of sense in terms of training young writers. However, once the emphasis turned to training students based solely on the authors' own experiences, the literary studies affiliation got left behind. Berry notes, "In order to enter American Universities, practicing fiction writers and poets identified themselves with a theory of literature that, once Creative Writing was established, they seem to have abandoned."[9] There were institutional, in additional to the practicing fiction writers' and poets' personal stakes in it, but in any case, the shift was swift and markedly noticeable. It can be argued that with the establishment of the Associated Writing Programs in the 1960, the departure of creative writing from literature and theories began its completion, thus shifting the focus on criticism and theories to the *writing* itself, with whatever remained as a residue of New Criticism.

Coming down to the 1990s—to a large extent, under the influence of, or maybe as a repercussion of, the work in rhetoric and composition—there was a revival of the discourse on theories in general, including literary

theories, in creative writing. Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom's edited collection, *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing, Theory and Pedagogy,* renewed the conversation on the need to make space for theories and "examined pedagogies," in Ostrom's words, in creative writing, albeit little differently than just retreating to literary theories. In the introduction to the anthology, Ostrom argues,

> It doesn't make sense for teachers of creative writing to compete with literary theorists solely on the literary theorists' terms; the reward of such competition have so little value in most epistemologies of creative writing teachers. But retreat from theory and from examined pedagogy cannot be seen as a legitimate alternative either, for such retreat is corrosive, cynical, and entropic. We need to seek alternatives to competing and retreating.[10]

In the same anthology, under the unit called "Theoretical Contexts for Creative Writing," R. M. Berry, Katherine Haake, Gayle Elliott, and Jay Parini make a case collectively for literary theories in creative writing. While Barry's and Parini's arguments are more nostalgic for a collaboration between literary studies and creative writing and Elliott focuses on one particular theory (feminism), Katherine Haake approaches the issue much more broadly. As a creative writing teacher who has taught theory courses to creative writing students, she argues,

> Theory helps us recognize the puppet strings. It helps us analyze not *what* texts mean, but *how* they mean, not who we are, but how we are what we believe we are at any given moment, and how, as well, that changes, as it does. This is useful knowledge for writers who, while they're occupied with their analysis, might want to clip a string or two, for play or emphasis, or out of curiosity or the tradition of rebellion.[11]

Literary theories, she agrees, help writers conceptualize ideas and talk about them. She shares her experience that they helped her devise "certain experimental narrative strategies."[12] She argues that theory "makes them [students] more aware writers, more self-conscious—more, in some sense, in control of their work."[13] Haake's argument is thus a serious apology for theory in creative writing at a time when creative writing was faring very well outside such discussions. (We can just look at the number of degree-awarding creative programs and the AWP extravaganza).

The 1990s appear to be an important moment for creative writing to start conversation on making more use of theories in the field, theories from both rhetoric and composition and literature. With regard to bringing

back literary theories—from the theories related to reading and interpretation to the theories about the creative process—the decade seemed to be a bit more conducive than in the previous ones, for a couple of reasons. This time around, "theories" as such were losing steam in the English department, with its interest shifting to cultural studies. In this new environment, discussing theories in creative writing would not be considered as big of an encroachment to literature's territory as it would have been in the past. (The disinterestedness of theories in creative writing also had to do, to a large extent, with territorial claims within the English department.) One other reason must be that by now creative writing had overcome the sense of disciplinary insecurity—and so the need to carve out its disciplinary identity away from English Studies. Also, the emergence of theory-oriented creative writing teachers, under the influence of research and scholarly work in—and in many instances using the forum of—rhetoric and composition, created a more conducive atmosphere for theories to make a re-entry to creative writing, at least in certain corners, and certainly for further calls to theorize creative writing and use more literary theories.

Paul Dawson's 2005 book, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities,* and Tim Mayer's, also published in 2005, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, played an important role to take the discussion forward. Some more recent works, such as Dianne Donnelly edited *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?*, contribute to the discussion but there's a dire lack of discussion of literary theories themselves. However, her *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as and Academic Discipline* devotes a whole chapter on theories under the title "A Taxonomy of Creative Writing Pedagogies," in which she identifies four different "orientations" of critical theories.[14] *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-Frist Century,* published in 2015, anthologizes articles that make a case for creative pedagogies that are based on rhetorical theories. In "Rhetorical Pedagogy," which works as an introduction to the anthology, Tom C. Hunley and Sandra Giles argue, "[G]rounding our pedagogy in both Greco-Roman rhetoric and the work of more recent rhetoricians would provide for our students a framework for deeper, richer training and understanding of the tools, the messages and methods and media, of their chosen art."[15] While this has been an argument of many who have had a training in both rhetoric and composition and creative writing for some time, to have an anthology that brings many scholars together focusing solely rhetorical theories for creative writing is an interesting development. However, it is a questionable "that a return to the rhetorical tradition will benefit creative writing students and add legitimacy to creative writing as an academic discipline," something Hunley and Giles claim will happen.[16]

Patrick Bizzaro argues that there's an "epistemological difference between creative writing and more theorized disciplines such as literature and composition."[17] In their 2017 article, Christine Bailey and Patrick Bizzaro argue for the need to "…to break out of the confines of composition methodology and study creative writing as and through creative writing."[18] Their proposal to theorize creative writing in the form of creative writing is a novel one and has yet to be seen how the field will respond to it in the long run. While this and the Rhetoric-guided developments should contribute, in some way, to making creative writing a more theoretically grounded discipline, as a field that deals primarily in literature—from reading and analyzing to producing it—creative writing has no reason why it should shy away from working more closely with theories from English studies in general.

In his 2020 talk at the annual conference of Creative Writing Studies Organization, titled "Creative Writing Studies and Literary Studies: Converging Agendas?", Tim Mayers revisits and revises his position that he took in *(Re)Writing Craft* that "creative writers and rhetoric and composition specialists should band together and secede from college and university English departments and form their own departments of writing," and that they should leave "literary studies behind, at least at the institutional level," and admits, he "no longer believe[s] that."[19] He asks a question: is it the time that literature and creative writing come together? "Not merely as a matter of institutional convenience but also topically," he adds, quoting from Amy Dewitt.[20] I take this moment as an opportunity to reconsider our relationship with literary theories.

Craft Criticism and Theories

As Paul Dawson points out, "If we examine what actually goes on in a writing workshop we quickly realize that, like the class in Literary Studies, it is a discussion of texts."[21] John Parras sees it the same way and claims that we already practice literary theories in workshops, except that we don't call them theories, but give them a coating of 'in my experience of 20 years,' or 'the way it worked for me'.[22] Dawson observes that the reason we shy away from "critical principles which underpin and allow discussion (reading)…remain invisible and undertheorized"[23] is that the primary object of discussion for us is the *writing* itself. It is a "*writing* workshop" that we are talking about. Hence, we tend to limit ourselves to "craft," the technicalities, as exhibited by the text itself, and we tend to neglect what goes into the production of the text and what literary and aesthetic theories and principles govern it, broadly speaking. Creative writing is not, however,

literary studies, and so the teaching of literary theories at a level we do in literature cannot be considered a possibility unless we re-envision creative writing radically differently. In this context, I believe that bringing in theories to better understand craft as we practice it can be a practical course of action, to start with, and that's where I find Tim Mayer's discussion of craft criticism helpful.

In the context of creative writing in the university, craft-as-technique has a lot to do with making our practices tangible, and so teachable. Mayers approaches the question "Can creative writing be taught?" in relation to the division of aesthetics of work and aesthetics of inspiration as Carl Fehrman discusses in his book *Poetic Creation: Inspiration or Craft?* "Aesthetics of work," as opposed to the "aesthetics of inspiration," evolved into the concept of craft, according to Fehrman, as Mayers explains it.[24] Fehrman categorizes Rousseau's *Confessions* as one of the first self-reports, and *Poets on Poetry* and *Writers at Work* in our times.[25] Fehrman argues, "In addition to providing an account of the author's experiences, these reports offer interpretations of the creative process, and frequently they provide a perspective into the wellspring of the creative act."[26] However, how reliable can such reports be? Fehrman argues that "the scholar has to deal warily with this material."[27] He explains, "For there can be a long period intervening between the genesis of a particular work and the account of this offered by the author. Temporal distance facilitates rationalization and fantasy, for the memory of artists—perhaps particularly so—is selective. How facts are then interpreted is determined by the public's expectation and by prevalent aesthetic conventions."[28] And, this is the problem with untheorized craft talks. Mayers addresses the issue through the notion of craft criticism.

Mayers defines craft criticism as "critical prose written by self- or institutionally identified 'creative writers'."[29] He explains that "in craft criticism, a concern with textual production takes precedence over any concern with textual interpretation."[30] Hence, "Craft criticism has an evaluative element, in the sense that craft critics are frequently concerned with how they (and often their students) can write 'better' poems and fiction or choose the 'best' among available poetic and fictional forms."[31] He goes even further and explains, "Craft criticism is engaged in theorizing about creative production—theorizing that arises from and is responsive to social, economic, and institutional contexts for creative writing."[32] His examples include Katherine Haake's *What Out Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies* and Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House*. In this way, Mayers fully embraces what has been done and is being done in the field of creative writing outside the narrow confines of craft discussion

and teaching. But in the meantime, Mayers delimits his definition to exclude "such landmarks as Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition,' Shelley's 'Defense of Poetry,' the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and so on."[33] He says, "It might be interesting to try to make such a case."[34] for such works as Horace's "Ars Poetica," Sidney's *Defense of Poetry,* Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent," Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* and so on. But he falls short of doing it.

Teachers of creative writing would fare better if they went further and worked with the kind of theories that Mayers thinks "might be interesting to try to make … a case" for,[35] but does not, the "discourses about the production of poetry and literature."[36] Theorizing our practices, our craft experiences, and the critical works produced by authors themselves is an important step forward but not sufficient. Production, circulation, and consumption of literature, even within the university setting, cannot be oblivious of the factors that determine those practices, and it is theories—from the ones that relate to gender and politics to aesthetics and writing processes—that help us see what actually goes into writing a piece and what it means to be a writer, especially as a university graduate.

My Practices

Understandably, the flexibility I discuss in the opening section of this chapter does not mean I can fully reimagine my courses to take a theoretical approach to teaching creative writing. Even if I could, that approach would not probably be a wise move given the resources that are available to us, the institutional and disciplinary needs (such as assessment requirements), and existing student expectations. What I do in my courses—which I'd like to divide into lower and introductory level, upper level undergrad, and grad level (thesis)—is introduce appropriate theoretical concepts as we discuss craft, readings, and the work by the student writers themselves, appropriate to their levels. In this sense, I largely follow what Paul Dawson calls the integrative model, which, as explained by Dawson, takes theories and creative work hand in hand.[37]

In the introductory level course, I begin with a discussion of craft issues, before asking students to produce actual pieces of literature. A lot of intro level textbooks take this approach and it makes perfect sense. However, where the existing textbooks fall short is the necessary theoretical basis for the discussion of craft and the elements of the genres they are trying to teach. For example, what is literature, to start with? What is fiction, and what's the genre of the short story? What is the essay, and the creative nonfiction genre? What are some theories about writing and revision

processes? In my teaching, I complement craft discussions with theories like New Criticism, formalism, expressivism, and revision theories that I often bring in the form of short extracts, discussion questions, and interpretive tools. In this course I often assign three craft writing assignments, which are two-page craft discussions, which I expect my students to frame around some theoretical concepts. For instance, one of the craft writing prompts asks them to define and theorize creative writing for themselves in relation to transactional writing (more specifically, a Composition essay) and encourages them to consider literary terms that they can use to explain their genre understanding. The final reflection that accompanies their portfolio gives them more opportunities to not quite theorize their work, as I'd expect from upper level students, but use some terms that help them explain their works to their readers. As such, theory at this level is mostly limited to understanding literature and genres of work they study and produce. I would say that at this level theory remains at the level of craft criticism, and maybe a little more.

In the syllabus of my upper level creative writing course, I tag the readings with theoretical terms like "realism/naturalism," "stream of consciousness," "expressionism," "postcolonialism," "post/modernism," "activism," "immigrant writing," etc. The goal is to get students to contextualize and better understand the texts they are reading, and develop a theoretical understanding even though we do not spend a lot of time discussing those terms. In this course, I give some elective assignments, and students can choose to write short critical pieces that are grounded on theoretical understanding about writing and literature. They also can choose to write a mentor essay in which they are expected to understand the artistic and theoretical underpinning of the author who they want to emulate. At this level, mostly during workshop and reading discussions, I introduce terms and theories like reader response, death of the author, formalism, negative capability, tradition and individual talent, writing as a situated activity, etc. Contextual reading of texts and exploring their own positionality helps students to establish their purposes and to write as part of a conversation, instead of being solitary writers working on their own. I require of graduate students to write a critical introduction for their final portfolio in which they not only discuss the genesis of the pieces but also the tradition they are writing in, with who they want to be in conversation through their work.

The Master's creative thesis that our graduate students can write requires a critical introduction. The students can go in either one of the two directions—one, they can place your creative work within a literary tradition, demonstrating knowledge of the major authors that come from the tradition and exploring theories and crafts they practice in their writing, and

finally connecting their work to that tradition. In this form of introduction students use both original works of literature as well as critical and theoretical tools. Two, they can focus on the theories and art and craft of the genre they are writing and relate their work to any mentor they aim to emulate. This form of introduction utilizes both craft criticism and original work of literature as appropriate. No matter what form of critical introduction they write, it is essentially an outward-looking work, that is, it is an engagement with the literary, historical, theoretical and/or artistic context(s) in which their writing is situated, instead of just a reflection on their creative process.

To Conclude

As Stephanie Vanderslice puts it, "we must continually re-examine our pedagogy and our curriculum to ensure that we are teaching our students both about life and craft of writing and the multifaceted, ever-changing world of creative writing industry in which they will ply their trade."[38] Recent critiques of the workshop and creative writing pedagogies are part of our re-examination efforts, and many of these conversations point in the direction of more theoretical approach to teaching creative writing in the U.S. and elsewhere. Two craft books published in 2021, Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* and Matthew Salesses' *Craft in the Real World,* make mostly political cases for why it is necessary to discuss issues of race, gender, class etc. in the writing workshop. Arguing that "craft is part of the history of Western empire that goes back to the Ancient Greek and Roman Empire," Salesses asks to challenge them as nothing but "more or less a set of expectations" that are not neutral.[39] Chavez, in a similar vein, contends that in silencing the author, "particularly of writers of color," the traditional creative writing workshop "is especially destructive in institutions that routinely disregard the lived experiences of people who are not white."[40] Junot Diaz's 2014 article "MFA vs POC" to Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2017 article "Viet Thanh Nguyen Reveals How Writers' Workshops Can Be Hostile" frame the workshop in such a way that they not only helped establish a new premise for the questioning of workshop practices but also opened up new possibilities for a more theoretical approach to the whole enterprise of teaching creative writing.

These works have opened up new discussions about being inclusive in text selection, redefining what is good, and advocating for and introducing craft practices from the margin. This all has an impact on who gets to write, what gets to be defined as good, and whose work gets to be promoted and consumed, hence the impact on from production to distribution and

consumption. While this political project is important and is helping carve out a new path for creative writing in the university, I see a need for openness and further discussions on making space for them in terms understanding literature and literary writing—what theories at this point would help our students become good readers of the texts we assign them, how will understanding the concept of the death of author, for instance, help them understand their positions as authors? How can our students benefit from understating intentional fallacy? What can they learn about their own writing from the concept of formalism or psychoanalytic criticism or post-structuralism? Knowledge of such theories makes students more aware of the mechanics of meaning-making processes in texts. The author of *Understanding Contemporary American Literary Theory,* Michael P. Spikes, says, "The focus of the theorist is *how,* rather than *what,* texts mean."[41] This "how" is what is going to benefit our writers, and make them more than doing what literature students would do—deal with the "what," interpretation of texts. By making literary theories an integral part of what we do in creative writing, we build on a tradition, give our students tools to better understand the kinds of texts they are producing, and, beyond that, become part of what Paul Dawson calls "the new humanities," something I believe creative writing should be aiming for as a university discipline.

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CHAPTER 2

COMICS TO THE RESCUE: GRAPHIC LITERATURE IN THE INTRODUCTORY CREATIVE WRITING COURSE

MAUREEN MCVEIGH

Introduction

An ideal creative writing workshop might include a few students, all dedicated readers and writers. The proliferation of creative writing courses, however, has meant larger classes that enroll students who do not read extensively and feel overwhelmed by the writing process. These novice writers often find inspiration in genres with which they are familiar, such as film and television, without understanding the different opportunities and limitations between text and audio-video sources. Graphic literature, which critics suggest is in a golden age, can bridge these genres for students. It offers a transition from visual media to the creation and critiquing of text-only works. In addition, the courses often feature students with widely different experience levels. While this can be valuable in some courses, in a workshop environment, it can create an unproductive tiered system. Since graphic literature is a less common genre in creative writing courses, it can level this divide. In this chapter, I will present pedagogical approaches for creative writing courses to encourage reluctant readers to analyze published works, develop their own writing process, and offer constructive feedback to their peers. I will introduce graphic texts to which students respond enthusiastically as well as writing prompts and assignments for short fiction.

Course Description and Concerns

Introduction to Creative Writing is an undergraduate course with no prerequisites at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, the four-year college where I teach. It includes analysis, creation, and workshop of

fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Students enter the class with vastly different experiences and goals, so I begin every semester with the same question: What do you read and write? Some mention classic and popular fiction, but even more admit they do not read unless given an assignment. The same applies to writing. When I ask why they registered for a course based entirely on those two activities, some say to fulfill the Writing Emphasis requirement or because it seemed easier than other options.

Students can, however, analyze television and films with passion and insight. This provides a starting point to discuss text and analyze elements of literature. When creating their own stories, essays, and poems, though, they use the tone, style, language, and subject matter of visual media, producing pieces that are imitations of popular favorites such as *The Godfather* and *Law and Order.* They reject their own lived and witnessed experiences to inhabit worlds they have only observed through a screen. This limits the veracity of their creation and hinders the development of their own unique style.

While I am excited to introduce newcomers to my passions for both reading and writing, their lack of interest and experience can also be a hindrance to discussion, especially with the more prepared students. This causes a distinct imbalance in the classroom between students with a prior investment in creative writing and those who have less foundational knowledge. To address these concerns, I use graphic literature, with its combination of text and visuals, as a bridge between the TV shows and films that students can discuss and the text-only pieces we use and create in class. As a newer genre for the more experienced students, the two groups are more balanced in their analysis and creation skills.

Golden Age of Graphic

My timing is not random. In the article, "To The Instruction Cave, Librarian!: Graphic Novels and Information Literacy," Trinity University Texas Librarian Steven Hoover noted that "It is fair to say that there is something of a golden age of graphic novels occurring today" (2009, 3) and sales figures seem to support the proliferation. A September 2021 *Library Journal* article noted this development, "with graphic novel and comics sales estimated at $1.28 billion in 2020, an increase of 6 percent over 2019. Online sales skyrocketed during the pandemic lockdowns, and the trend has continued in 2021. (Rouse)" Quantity, of course, does not equal quality, but both have expanded for graphic literature.

Graphic artist Bryan Talbot agrees with this assessment in his introduction to *Shorties! The Best of the Graphic Short Story Prize,* a

collection from the annual contest sponsored by *The Observer,* publishing firm Jonathan Cape, and Comica, the London International Comics Festival. He writes, "There now exists a substantial canon of work of such excellent quality and variety that we can safely say that we have reached the beginning of the golden age of the graphic-novel form." A quick perusal of the winners of this ongoing contest supports the claim. The decidedly literary offerings available here and in other sources noted later in this chapter will assuage those who still consider graphic literature more superheroes in spandex than nuanced characters in complex plots.

There is also a significant increase in graphic literature pedagogy. Most entries focus on the creation of graphic works for the dedicated writer/artist or consider how to use graphic literature to teach rhetoric, literacy, or even science or history. The research often suggests using graphic novels and memoirs in conjunction with traditional text-based sources to supplement readings, engage students, or present topics not covered in other works. This chapter differs from those in several ways: the material is not used to teach another subject; we explore the graphic work as writers, but not comic artists; and we examine short works, which fall between comic strips and graphic novels in length and depth. This is inspired by my course's description as well as my own attempts to address the original issue of students' varieties of literacy experiences. We use the medium to facilitate our discussions and creation of text-only literature. For my students, graphic literature is a means, not an end. In addition, most of the research and pedagogical analysis focuses on novels and memoirs while, by necessity of the course description, my approach addresses short-form fiction and nonfiction. This also allows for the following assignments to be integrated into a short course unit instead of requiring a large component of the class time. It therefore might be helpful to those just beginning to explore graphic forms in creative writing courses.

While some instructors may be hesitant as they still view graphic literature as comic books for children, one rebuttal in addition to the quality produced during this "golden age" is the prevalence of visual literacy in modern culture and our charge as educators to prepare our students to interpret, assess, and create visual media. With these assignments, I hope to meet students where they are in this visual environment and prepare them to produce and analyze multimodal media in creative writing.

As a note of definition, in this chapter, I consider the terms comics and graphic literature to be interchangeable. Certainly, there are varying opinions on the definitions and classifications. Using the term "comics" to be inclusive, Hillary L. Chute notes in her informative book *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere,* "Comics, on the other hand, is a *medium*