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'A body in time': reading and writing Australian literature

Abstract:

In the press, a lament for the study of Australian literature is often coupled with mistrust at the popularity of creative programs. It can be disconcerting for writers and teachers of writing in Australia, who work in a practical as well as pedagogical sense in the field of Australian literature, to be placed in an antithetical position to it. One response to the narrative of the decline of Australian literature in universities has been an assertion of its 'embeddedness' across the curriculum. The creative writing classroom is one place in which it can reliably be found, and the act of reading for the purpose of writing brings a distinctive charge to the study of Australian literature, produced by a movement across modal peripheries. This essay argues, via a 'body in time' (Jose 2011) model of Australian literature, and a reading of the novella *Vertigo* by Amanda Lohrey (2009), that the key elements of process and proximity in this mode of reading make a distinctive contribution to the study of Australian literature.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Peripheral visions – Australian literature – creative writing – *Vertigo* – Lohrey – Jose

There is a narrative of the declining study of Australian literature that sits alongside and is often hostile to the rise of creative writing enrolments in Australian universities. Articles with titles such as 'When everyone's an author: the only books students want to read are their own' (Neill 2008), 'A novel idea turns creative writing into an academic racket' (Pryor 2010) and 'Whatever happened to Australian literature in the universities?' (Hassall 2011) place creative writing in opposition to the study of literature, and are markers in what might be called a 'culture skirmish' that continues to run along under and above the surface of discussions about the study of literature. Key to this argument is a metaphorical set of scales in which creative writing's weight (in terms of student numbers) is gained at the expense of Australian literature's:

> It seems the death of the author, first heralded by the French postmodern thinker Roland Barthes, has spawned the birth of the wannabe author. According to a recent overview by novelist Frank Moorhouse, creative writing is taught at all 37 tertiary institutions in Australia. Yet, as reported above, undergraduates can major in Australian literature at just one. (Neill: 2006)

In this narrative, the destructive forces of theory and cultural studies have cleared the way for a hostile takeover. Tony Hassall wrote several years later of the 'parasitic stranglehold' of cultural studies and the aftermath of its ascendance, in which:

> Students with an interest in writing who come from a popular culture that worships elite sporting achievements, but views literary and artistic achievements with indifference or suspicion, will understandably opt for a content-lite 'creative' subject rather than one that requires them to confront a large body of demanding master works. (2011)

A logical response to the narrative of the decline of Australian literature in universities is to point out the dynamic contexts in which it is taught and its broadening reach across the curriculum. Its teaching is changing because the conditions in which teaching happens have changed. As then President of ASAL, Peter Kirkpatrick, wrote in response to Neill's article, the teaching and study of Australian writing has moved beyond specialist units into such contexts as creative writing and cultural studies:

> The interdisciplinary drive of the new humanities has actually increased the range of Australian literature being taught … The perception of a decline … fails to recognise its deeper infusion into non-traditional and cross-disciplinary fields. (2007: 21)

Brigid Magner, in a concise overview of the debate and its historical precursors, has outlined the ways in which various critics of the decline narrative have echoed Kirkpatrick's views, asserting the 'embeddedness' of Australian literature across the arts curriculum, and how Australian literature is 'becoming less visible within universities though perhaps more widespread …' (2015).[1] In many ways, this is an argument about the contexts in which Australian literature is taught, about a perceived dilution in rigour. The language used about creative writing classes in some of the pieces mentioned here – 'content-lite' (Hassall 2011), 'the creative writing racket' (Pryor 2010) – suggests a particular stance towards the creative writing context, but also, in my view, a lack of knowledge about what happens in our classrooms. My main purpose here is to explore the context of the creative writing class as a setting for the study of Australian literature, and I hope, to assert the rigour, value and distinctive role of creative writing in this field.

Creative writing academics interact with Australian literature via multiple relationships and modes of thinking about writing; it is disconcerting for them to be placed in an antithetical position to the study of it. As practitioners and teachers of writing, working in the field outside and inside the academy, they interact with the publishing industry, literary history, literary study in the university and the workshop model. Their experience of Australian writing may shift through commercial, research, technical and pedagogical modes within the space of a day. They are not necessarily Australian literature specialists, and yet, in their undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, thesis supervision and in their own writing and research, they are, collectively, and as a distinctive complement to their literature colleagues, a significant source of Australian literature teaching in the curriculum.

Creative writing classes are one place in which Australian literature can reliably be found, and they offer energetic and generative elements to the reading of Australian literature. This literature, as well as being the ecosystem in which creative writing teachers live and work, provides rich, proximate materials for their classrooms: texts which may speak in recognisable ways of familiar experiences. At the same time, the dual emphases of their teaching and assessment methods, reading and writing – close reading and the workshop model, assessment through creative work and a research statement or exegesis – bring a charge to the teaching of Australian literature. Rather than the outcome-based objective of creative writing courses, i.e. publication, that is often emphasised in debates about their value,[2] I am interested here in exploring the intrinsic value of what happens when we learn to write by reading Australian literature, and of how an active and generative form of reading nourishes the ecology of its regeneration.

One obvious difference between Australian literature and creative writing classrooms is the emphasis in the latter on process. Commitment to process, a degree of courage in undertaking its uncertainties, are central to the work of a writer and an attribute that can be modelled and developed. One of the most important contributions to my own (ongoing) movement towards acceptance that books are created through a complex and improvisational series of decisions, revisions and killings of once cherished ideas, was reading Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe's *Making stories* (1993). In this collection of draft-segments of Australian novels and accompanying interviews, Grenville and Woolfe persuade established Australian writers to offer a valuable, perhaps essential, gift for an aspiring writer: evidence of process and its accompanying anxiety, blind hunches, faith and moments of discouragement and breakthrough. As they write in their teachers' notes, 'A novel is shaped by the author's will acting on a series of contingencies', a fact that they say 'becomes obscured in the course of critical study' in which we 'cannot talk properly about intention' (1993: 283).

It is crucial to the development of a writer that they learn, and keep learning, that works of literature do not arrive fully formed but are made. As Andrew Cowan puts it, 'For Literary Studies, literature is what has been written; for Creative Writing, literature is what is being written. Literary Studies attends to the product, Creative Writing to the process' (2011). The revelation of *Making stories*, for me, was to demonstrate that the novels of Peter Carey and Helen Garner were not bestowed upon them by a capricious writing god, but that these writers made continual small and large decisions about their

books at their desks every day: that before a book appears to us, there is a long process of it 'being written'.

In class, we don't necessarily have access to a writer's drafts, although even a slide of, say, a Plath poem with crossed out lines, scribbled notes and multiple versions is a powerful thing to consider. What we do have more usually is a class or course whose time is divided between the study of published works and space for workshopping students' drafts. To read literature in this context is to make it clear through repeated example that the students' main task – the difficult, exciting process of getting the words down in fits and starts and then the replacement of perhaps most of them – is the prerequisite for work that has *been* written. The exciting part of this process is the lack of inevitability of what we produce, the contingencies of everyday life and our experiences that constantly feed the work and its development. This responsiveness between our work and its contexts is one of the most exciting things about writing, and it is amplified in a communal setting.

Process then, the commitment and diligence to engage with the prerequisites of our ambitions, underlines everything we do in the creative writing classroom. But proximity can also be a key ingredient in the transition from reader to writer. It seems logical to read the work of the place you are writing from, but writers working in Australia do not necessarily readily identify as being producers of Australian literature. Students may resist the idea, too (Plunkett 2011: 309). The term 'Australian literature' can evoke for many the restrictions of a list or curriculum and the dullness of duty carried over from school (Magner 2015), but there are ways to characterise the field that resist canonicity and approach the subject with 'flexibility and an openness to change and reassessment', as advocated by John Kinsella (2012).[3]

Nicholas Jose, speaking of the connections that might yet be made between the study of Australian literature and creative writing, acknowledges that it is not necessarily an easy fit for writers working in Australia to identify with Australian literature. Resistance, unfamiliarity and exclusion might all apply for different reasons (2011). We come to Australian writing along a number of paths. For myself, I developed a knowledge and appreciation of Australian writing after school and university, having grown up mostly in the UK. Gorging on Australian fiction was part of the process of making a home for myself in a new country with a different English: of learning about the language and the landscape and the people, their sense of themselves. But there are many ways, to do with gender, ethnicity, class, and other strands of life experience and identity, in which the idea of Australian literature might hold us at bay. Jose suggests we might consider Australia's writing as:

> a connective body of material, an entity that moves beyond the individual to a community of writers and readers linked through history and geography and culture, if not always common cause. Australian literature not as a haphazard aggregation of texts but a set of relationships, an accumulated production that reveals patterns, contours and recurring questions: a body in time. (2011: 104)

To think of Australian literature in this way, as dynamic and relational, picks up Kirkpatrick's threads about the ways in which its teaching has broken its previous bounds of history and nation to find other contexts of relevance. This model speaks to

the complex networks of transmission navigated by its practitioners and its teachers, and it presents, as Jose says, a compulsion towards 'rewriting'. Creative writing students are entering a set of relationships in which their place is made by their own work and its implicit or explicit responses to the context in which they write. Appreciation, impatience, resistance to what it seems to have been possible to say in the literature, might spur the writing student on to make their own iterations in this field.

Just as students learn that when they form an argument for an essay they are entering a conversation, new writers become a part of this 'body in time' that will produce fresh connections and iterations, reading works of literature with the new perspectives of their era, and in their own work speaking to their time as only they can. Jose writes that in his own development, 'Several key writers were enabling exemplars, precisely because they were Australian and had walked where I had walked, conceptually, and articulated things I needed words for' (2011: 98). As the field diversifies, the territory of what it feels possible to talk about becomes broader, offers more enticement to join this conversation. And in this multiplying set of relationships, there is a stronger chance that the writing which already exists might help developing writers with questions of voice and experience.

A recent collection of essays by Australian writers on reading offers a number of salient examples of the kinds of the transitions and transformations that occur when we read as writers, or as people who are discovering we might be writers. Debra Adelaide's collection *The simple act of reading* (2015) illustrates the process of the writerly self being made by reading. In the collection Tegan Bennett Daylight acknowledges a debt in 'A phone call to Helen Garner'. She says that '*Monkey grip* changed reading for me … For the first time I was consciously learning about *writing*' (2015: 26). Garner's language, she writes, 'is embedded in my way of thinking. We [Australian writers] would be different people without her' (2015: 28). The title of the essay references Holden Caulfield's wish in *The catcher in the rye,* that after reading a great book he could call the author and talk anytime he felt like it. Daylight is compelled to speak to Garner, not just in this essay but through her own writing career. Wayne Macauley, in his essay about Gerald Murnane's *The plains*, recounts actually writing a letter to Murnane. 'I first read *The Plains* in 1985,' he tells him, 'and it had a profound effect on me. At the time I was a 27-year-old writer wondering if there was any new Australian literature I was ever going to like, let alone get inspiration from' (2015: 148). Macauley goes on in his essay to explain that 'We are all of us, at some point … looking for some line of steerage, something to set our course by … This is what *The Plains* was for me' (2015: 148).

Daylight and Macauley are articulating a process that is not always so clearly defined, but expresses an important element of what is happening when we find a literature that is close to us and that makes our own desire to write seem possible. We write back, occasionally literally like Macauley, but more usually in our own stories and poems and plays. We are involved in a process of transmission, receiving and responding, changing what we are made of, and what we make. In these accounts, reading is understood as formative, as the making of these writers. When they talk about what they have read, especially as a young person, there is a retrospective sense of becoming. In these transformations there must be a moment, or any number of moments in a

lifetime, on a continuum from reading to making. There comes a stage of writerly progress in which one is shifting from being a reader to a writer, a line one moves back and forth across in a life as a writer. As Maria Takolander says:

> the experience [of reading] is always ultimately about the non-fictional you. It is about what you bring back from the reading: how it affects your mood; how it shifts your understanding of yourself and your world; how it makes you see or dream anew. In that way every reader engages in a highly individual creative act: re-envisioning his or her relationship with the world in terms of the patterns offered by literature. When a reader transcribes that vision into words, he or she becomes a writer. (2014: 40)

Australian writing might become a rich feature of the patterns we know and express afresh in our own writing. Its incorporation into modes of teaching in which students are asked to make something new feeds into a process that is connected, generative and valuable in itself. Our writing, the dream life and the conscious life that sustain and fuel it, are remade by our reading, and our reading is remade by our efforts on the page.

The creative writing classroom is a concentrated effort to induce such transformations, to apply pressure in the hope of a reaction. Various writing academics have spoken of the energy of a successful creative writing classroom. John Dale writes of a 'special vitality' (2011), Tegan Bennett Daylight of a 'buzz, a slightly magical feeling' (2014) and Felicity Plunkett of 'the charged classroom' (2011: 307). There is a productive spark, a kind of ignition, in the bringing together of methods of reading and writing, that contributes this charge to the study of literature. Plunkett outlines the gifts the practices of literary studies and writing bestow upon one another, how movement across the peripheries of reading and writing, or of fields of study, generate an energy in both:

> If we can shape curricula to create connections, creative writing can be part of a critical practice, and literary criticism a creative practice. Creative writing can provide a means for literature students to get inside writing to see how it works. Critical reading, meanwhile, is an essential means of understanding and improving writing as well as developing what writing teacher Katie Wood Ray calls a 'responsive, literate community', in which students learn to 'read like writers'. I see the corollary as invaluable: learning to write like a reader. (2011: 311)

Engaged, reflective reading makes itself felt in a student's writing and in their interactions with their peers. Their reading enlivens the work that they do, the experience that we have together. It enriches simultaneously the world of their writing and the life of their 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991).

How do we read in a creative writing course? What is different about the approach to the text, when the reading purpose is not primarily the parsing of meaning, but the examination of technique for the purpose of adding to one's repertoire? Grenville and Woolfe suggest that writerly reading is interested in 'how we mean' (1993: 283). The usual interest in meaning is consistently made to relate to technique and its production of effect, not for replication, exactly, rather for a broadening of range, of working knowledge. A brief examination of the novella *Vertigo* by Amanda Lohrey (2009) might be usefully employed as (in Nicholas Jose's phrase) 'an enabling exemplar' (2011: 98). How does *Vertigo* mean, in its handling of time (a technical problem that seems to increase in proportion with every story I try to tell)? Aside from a technical

attraction, I have personal, biographical reasons for choosing this story as a classroom text. It feels close to me, proximate. Its description of a couple fleeing the city for a wilder place on the coast speaks to daily longings of my own and reminds me of my own migrations between culture and nature, my distressing encounters with fire. The emphasis in class is on technique, but the book needs to lodge itself in my mind before I bring it to my students.

The images and events of *Vertigo* have blended with my real memories of fire and of my own writing about it. It has, to paraphrase Takolander, made me see and dream anew. Reading is a strange process, and yet there are elements of the book that I can straightforwardly lay out for students and ask them to consider. This mixture of practicality and mystery in our encounters with the text is enjoyable, productive and active on different cognitive and experiential levels. While I discuss points of technique and effect, I am aware that for me at least a deeper transformation is happening, in which the story and our discussions about it enter the ecosystem of what is available for me to nourish my work. Although the stories that will ignite my students' imaginations are difficult to predict, these transformations and enrichments are what I hope will occur for my students too, and what I see evidence of in their discussions, critical essays and in the glimpses of influence in their stories.

Vertigo is in a sense a 'rewriting' of a Henry Lawson poem 'The fire at Ross's farm' and story, 'The bush fire' (2009: author's note) and so makes a nicely interactive example of the 'body in time', relational, model of a national literature, but to 'rewrite' may simply be a case of a book having been raised in the soil of existing literature, rather than making specific references to pre-existing works. This novella compresses a novel's scope and sense of lives embedded in time into its 140 generously spaced pages, though its plot is simple: Anna and Luke flee ill health and house prices, moving from the city to a small coastal village, where they encounter drought and eventually a terrible fire. The story encompasses a cataclysmic event, hinted at throughout but only addressed directly in its later stages. It's a masterpiece of misdirection; the catastrophe on which the story appears to expend its narrative energies is not, in spite of its furious tension, the main game.

This is an important element of this novella, but we can approach it through a technical entry point. Where we might begin is the way that this story breaks with the mainstream, perhaps film-influenced fashion, of favouring 'showing' over 'telling'. Rather than dividing time into illuminative 'real-time'-ish scenes, that one could film or stage, if one wanted to, the narrative slips in and out of moments and periods with fluidity and flexibility, providing a dynamic kind of information about these lives that manages to feel more comprehensive in this short form than an accumulation over several hundred pages of closely-rendered scenes might have been.

If we think of narrative as a solution to the problems of time, as a way of representing our experience of it, then the balance between narration and dramatisation is central. The choice whether to show or tell is a question of how much relative attention to give to the events of story. When creative writing teachers, editors, and any number of books and online blogs exhort a writer to show rather than tell, it is usually because they are not rendering the action closely and in its unfolding detail, so the reader remains outside

the story, kept at a distance. There can be a sense that the writer is telling the story to themselves, giving a kind of shorthand for later. Readers of popular and mainstream literature have become used to a filmic kind of immersion. By this I mean that the tension of plot often comes from a moment-by-moment unfolding of events, where we see actions happen in sequence and in a convincingly detailed setting. As we move between narration and scenes, what is important is demonstrated in a dramatic sense through this way of concentrating attention. The stakes are in play *now*, even when the action is in the past (the reader is in that past too); we read to discover how things will fall out.

Actually, in *Vertigo*, it is frequently not clear whether the action is being strictly 'told' or 'shown', because of the fluidity between modes and time signatures. What Lohrey does, more prominently than many contemporary writers of fiction, is to layer her time signatures so that we at once get a sense of the moments, the days, the weeks, and the months that might help us to understand a life in its multiple dimensions. Here is the opening to the story:

> Luke Worley grew up on the edge of the city, in a neat suburban garden with a green lawn and a date palm, and in all that time he never developed the least interest in birds, not even, as a boy, to throw stones at. But now, at the age of thirty-four, he has taken to bird watching. It's true he might once have laughed at this, but since then much has changed. Now, with his wife Anna, he has moved to the coast. (2009: 3)

From the simple past of the first verb formation 'grew up' through the several time markers and more complex past forms, we encounter the distant, finished era of childhood, then childhood as ongoing – 'in all that time' – and an unfolding present – 'he has taken to bird watching.' We are in the present with 'now' and 'it's true', but Luke's present is constantly compared with previous forms of his still ongoing self: 'he might once have laughed'. Finally, with a touch of drama, we learn the current reality, 'he has moved to the coast.' A sophisticated narrative account will present various forms of the past in order to reflect on the present, but in this brief introduction, we see in graceful but distinct emphasis, a character in various static and shifting states which reflect on one another, and give us a dynamic sense of how this character experiences, and is acted upon, by time.

A common creative writing tip is to open a story with a character *in media res*, and have the reader figure out what is happening on the move and in the midst of concrete details of character and setting. But where is Luke? In childhood in a green garden, not watching birds, 'on the coast'. He is nowhere specific, and is not performing any specific actions; he is just generally married. And yet, here is the immediate sense of a life that is changing, led by a person who can become a different person in different settings. We have a proper sense of being at the beginning of a story, of being present here and now, to witness specific change in this life. This story is being 'told', here, rather than 'shown', but Lohrey often zooms in from the fluid, even abstract sense of time passing. We move in and out of the flow of time, or between different flows perhaps, where one flow encompasses abstraction and years, a whole childhood, a whole life in the city, and another records its moment-by-moment unfolding. A few pages into the story we learn that for Luke, 'The clarity of thought that enlightened his

twenties had begun to darken, in the way that a smog haze settles by degrees over a bright morning' (2009: 6). The specificity of the image allows us to assimilate Luke's descent from certainty towards this life-altering instant:

> The moment of truth arrived late one night as he lay in bed with his wife. Outside the rain was hurtling down; inside they were breathing mould and damp. Anna was propped up awkwardly with pillows, wheezing and sucking in gasps of Ventolin from the small metal tube of her inhaler. Her short blond hair stuck to her skin in limp strands and when she slumped back against the wall, sallow and greyish, he knew it was time to go. (2009: 6)

In the midst of a long passage of narration we are nevertheless immersed in a moment with its attendant revelation and meaningful change. This focusing technique is used a number of times in *Vertigo* to great effect. It creates a heightened drama, a drawing of distilled attention from the reader. There is a sense that something important is surfacing, which I think is what tension is, a glimpse of what lies beneath the surface of a story, of what is changing, of what wants to change. And because Lohrey tends to move between narration and 'scene' continually, when a scene is actually laid out at any length, or in a close sequence, the tension is electrifying.

When fire arrives in the final part of the novella, actions become more closely attached to specific times, and play out in a finely calibrated sequence of cause and effect. This section begins 'On the last Saturday in November' (2009: 89). Two thirds of the way through the story, we are finally immersed in the flow of time that plays out in moments through concrete particulars. A few pages later, the section begins 'In the morning, when they wake, the bedroom reeks of burning eucalypt: pungent, sweet and weirdly intoxicating' (2009: 92). We are interested in moments now, in their sensory and affective specificity. The off-kilter perceptions of Anna and Luke have put us on alert; we are attuned to the distillation of the instant just as their senses command them to be watchful of the manner of the day's unfolding.

This method, of layering time in such a way that we can experience context, slow shifts and the moments of quickening in Luke and Anna's lives, suggests a kind of intermittent surfacing of significance. At the same time, there is a ghostly presence in this story that appears and disappears unpredictably. It is as though the blending of time signatures has prepared us for the infiltrations of the spectral past, or an alternative version of the present, into the ordinary world. If memory is tangible, has a physical form and can move through the present and the future, Lohrey's treatment of time, her grammar, allows for such fluidity. In an interview with Charlotte Wood, Lohrey said that

> A text has a literal surface – the 'story' – and then it has its own unconscious, a poetry that you the writer can either obscure or reveal … Any narrative that doesn't have a few messages from that realm is, for me, deficient. Too mastered, too known, too literal. (2016: 220)

Lohrey's continual slipping between time signatures feels beautifully apt given this impulse. Perhaps, in order to see between the gaps in reality to what is beyond, we cannot experience time as one uniform unfolding material, but as a multidimensional texture whose gaps and crossings allow us to catch glimpses of what lies beyond

everyday surfaces. To reduce this to a straightforward pedagogical principle: problem = the expression of a message from another realm; solution = a dynamic and multi-layered presentation of time. A text is much more complex and open to interactions with students' experiences, memories and mental habits than I can account for in such a formulation, of course. We may begin with the technical, and end up somewhere quite different.

As well, this equation does not account for the 'proximity' of the text, its references to the weight of the city and its demands, the lure of the bush and the beach, the conflicts over land and its uses and meaning, the instant calamity of an out-of-control fire, the mystery of birds. The passage in which the title appears seems to resonate with the vexed claims non-Indigenous Australians have to the land. Anna watches Luke return from birdwatching and sees him as a stranger. She 'falls into a spiral of panic' (Lohrey 2009: 84).

> She finds she is looking at her husband in an almost impersonal way, as though at a figure in the landscape, or one of those birds he is always gazing at. Perhaps that's all any of them are, figures in a landscape. In each era new figures come, others go, but the land remains and their sense of ownership is an illusion, a mirage brought on by too many days in the hot sun … At any moment they could disappear from this place and nothing would change, nothing of consequence, so vast is the land and so small are they. And the thought of this brings on a rush of vertigo … (2009: 85)

Moments like this, in which Australian literature considers the fundamental difficulties of belonging, underline the significance of writing from a body of knowledge. There is a conversation happening in which we might listen, reflect and respond rather than speaking across. On this subject, there are voices that will take priority. We might talk about this passage in class and go looking for responses to the land that are not vertiginous but rooted, embodied, with access to a different conception of time and place. And we might think in our writing about what our own formulation of home may be, and whether it seeks an ethical dimension.

None of these discussions, technical or thematic, would necessarily be out of place in an Australian literature classroom. The main point of difference about the way we are looking at the text is in our purpose, in that now we must respond by making. The text is constitutive in its indirect ways of new works, but before that of our inner lives and frames of reference, of the kinds of makers we are, of ourselves. Debates about the outcomes of creative writing courses often seem to me to be in some way beside the point. It does matter what happens afterwards, of course, particularly to postgraduate students who have signed up with the express intention of breaking into publishing. But something happens in the reading and writing we do before we get to that stage that is in itself valuable in the way in which humanities education is valuable. And, it's important to note, that for many, many creative writing students, they are simply there because they like reading and writing, and expect the experience to be worthwhile in itself, free of expectations about outcome. Scott Brook (2012) notes, in an essay on the relationship between creative writing education and the labour market, that in the genesis of the writing classroom in the United States was the idea that learning to write was beneficial in the fundamental ways that a humanities education is beneficial, before

we get to discussions about outcomes and career paths, 'that attempts at writing affect the student's habit of thought' (2012). In a humanities degree, we are learning to think in new ways that change us and change our communities. When writing makes up a part or the whole of that degree, particular processes are occurring, to do with how we imagine ourselves, our place, our histories and futures in a way marked by the imperative to not just record but remake. When we read Australian literature in a creative writing course we say: this is what is happening here, what can I make of it? Before we remake the literature, we read, and in doing so, we remake ourselves.

Endnotes

1. See also Doecke, McLean Davies and Mead (2011) in the opening chapter of *Teaching Australian literature*, a collection of essays that were in part a response to the decline narrative.

2. Lisa Pryor uses the term 'pyramid scheme' (2010) to describe a system in which she says that creative writing classes produce creative writing teachers, but it's also the case that universities are aware that their courses' marketability depends upon the literary fame of their graduates.

3. The openness Kinsella suggests in relation to set texts extends to the contexts in which they are read: 'once we start declaring what they should be, especially when foisting a national literature on students/readers, and how and why they should be taught in universities, we are blatantly gatekeeping: setting agendas of control and manipulation' (2012).

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