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Beyond Trigger Warnings: Working towards a strengths-based, trauma-informed model of resilience in the university creative writing workshop

Abstract:

The creative writing workshop is an environment that relies on intimacy, empathy, trust, and connection. While the writer's workshop in the university is not a therapeutic space, it is not a place of emotional neutrality. The way students experience the workshop as a place of safety or risk can affect their capacity to learn. How do we promote resilience among our students, particularly those experiencing mental ill-health or trauma? While trigger warnings may have a place in creating a safe space, they risk drawing attention to negative emotions and negative experiences, narrowing the focus of the threatened individual, and this may have the unwanted effect of reducing the capacity to learn. This paper explores two frameworks for a strengths-based model of trauma-informed practice in the creative writing workshop that builds on positive emotions, positive meaning, autonomy, competence and social relatedness.

Biographical Note:

Penni Russon is the author of several novels for children and teenagers including the Undine trilogy, the award-winning *Only Ever Always* and the forthcoming novel, *The Endsister*. Penni has been teaching creative writing at The University of Melbourne for ten years, and for the last five years has co-ordinated the Writing for Children and Young Adult Fiction subjects in the Master of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing. She is currently doing a PhD in Creative Writing exploring the use of graphic narratives in therapy.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Trauma-informed – Strengths-based – Trigger warnings – Resilience – Writer's workshop

One in four Australians are survivors of childhood trauma, including abuse (Blue Knot 2017). Further, one in four Australians aged 16 – 24 has experienced some form of mental illness, with anxiety and mood disorders being most prevalent (ABS 2008). In the same social and cultural milieu, public discourse calls young people coddled millennials (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015) from *Generation Snowflake* (Rumbelow 2016), bubble-wrapped (Agness 2015) by 'helicopter parents' (McNally 2016). The locus of these two positions is the recent debate carried out in major news publications about the practice of issuing trigger warnings in tertiary courses. A trigger warning alerts students that course content may cause emotional distress. This is predicated on the fact that, for students who have experienced trauma, certain images can 'trigger' the brain to re-experience traumatic events. The word 'trigger' is also used in psychology to describe stressors that can catalyse symptoms of mental illness. I understand the trigger warning to also serve students suffering from depression, anxiety or psychosis.

In this paper I explore both sides of the recent debate about the practice of trigger warnings in tertiary settings, and then go on to propose additional strengths-based approaches in the writer's workshop, based on Self-Determination Theory and the Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions. I write with the intention of acknowledging the socialising function and the socio-emotional dimensions of tertiary education and specifically the creative writing workshop, while understanding that the writer's workshop, though at times intimate and highly personal, is not a therapeutic environment. This paper does not offer a critique of current practices, but rather represents personal reflection on my own practice and a desire to speak in practical terms to the broader issue of student wellbeing and our duty of care. I am not a psychologist, though I am involved in a collaborative research project with psychologists writing therapy for young people online (so I approach with caution, knowing a little knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing).

The creative writing workshop is a distinctive learning environment that relies on intimacy, empathy, trust, and connection: to the tutor, to other students, and to the body of critical theory, imaginative constructs and literary texts that inform the content of each class. Vulnerability – defined by Brene Brown as 'uncertainty, risk, emotional exposure' (2012) – is more than a by-product of the creative writer's workshop – it's a pedagogical imperative. While other courses in literature and humanities habitually organise themselves around discussions of pre-existing texts and artefacts, the writer's workshop takes as part of its core material the nascent states of early creative work produced by the students, sometimes in the moment of the writer's workshop. Andrew Cowan uses the phrase 'receptiveness of experience' to describe the 'fully alert, fully alive' energy in the workshop that draws its power from the spontaneous and the unexpected (2012: 68). How do we manage the demands of the space, that at once must allow for spontaneity, encourage authentic communication, promote personal and artistic risk-taking, and support intellectual, creative and emotional growth, while at the same time accommodating diverse voices and experiences, including experiences of trauma? How can we ensure that even the most vulnerable students are empowered enough to be 'receptive'?

Creative Writing and Disclosure

Nancy C. Andreasen's study of Iowa Creative Writing Workshop Participants indicated a 'close association between mental illness and creativity' (Andreasen 1987:

1292). Over the years, my students have disclosed chronic illness and pain, auto-immune conditions, neurological diversity, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, grief and loss, generalised anxiety, social anxiety, depression, psychosis, schizophrenia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, PTSD, substance abuse, eating disorders, lived experience of suicide, lived experience of war, insecure housing, other traumatic or distressing experiences like being involved in a car accident or being a victim of crime, relationship break ups, negative experiences related to race, gender or sexual identity, sex industry work, and the stress of caring for a sibling, parent, partner, child, or friend. It is important to note that in addition to past experiences of trauma, some of them may be experiencing trauma or distress in their current daily lives.

They usually disclose in one of four ways: in class, usually to defend the veracity of their written work, or to position themselves in relation to a text or discussion; in private consultation with me, whether it be in the corridor after class, in an arranged meeting, or through email; via the disabilities liaison unit, who contact me on the student's behalf, and, finally, through their creative or sometimes even critical written work. This can happen at any stage of the semester – from before classes even begin, to mid-semester after we've built up a relationship, to late in the semester when requesting an extension for their final submission.

While disclosure can be accompanied by low mood, agitation, relief, embarrassment, defiance and sometimes pride, it is more often than not delivered in a matter-of-fact manner, and the emotional impact of the experience may be remote or invisible to others present in the room. Despite the fact that students often disclose calmly, it should be recognised that disclosure always comes with a certain amount of personal risk, and students are aware to varying degrees of that risk. It is of paramount importance to recognise that some students with lived experience of trauma or mental illness will never take this risk. In other cases, traumatic memories are hidden – people can suffer the effects of trauma without being aware of it. Therefore trauma-informed practice must be inclusive of all students, whether they disclose or not.

I am not suggesting the regular undergraduate or graduate writer's workshop classroom constitutes a therapy space or treatment model, nor that a creative writing teacher can be expected to equip themselves as an expert in psychological wellbeing. However, education is a fundamental human right (UNESCO 2016), and the reality is that people with lived experience of mental illness and trauma are enrolling in our classes. Moreover, they *want* to write about their experiences. Even students who have not experienced trauma or mental illness are likely to approach sensitive experiences and may invoke feelings of vulnerability and distress. As social connectedness and work towards meaningful goals improves young people's lives and mental health outcomes, barriers to successful participation in the creative writing workshop should be dismantled.

Trauma and Learning

While PTSD is rare, 'trauma changes the brain', writes Bruce D. Perry in his analysis of the effects of experiences of educational trauma on adult learners returning to study (Perry 2006: 21). Trauma increases activity in the amygdala, the part of our brain that scans the environment for danger and activates a fear response. Childhood trauma also inhibits growth in the hippocampus, the part of our brain associated with processing short-term memory and encoding memories for long-term storage (Sherin

2011). The hippocampus also plays a role in emotional expression and subjective experience, and is shown to be active in creative writers during the writing process (Erhart et al 2014). The other area implicated in trauma response is the pre-fontal cortex (Sherin 2011), where activities from the various areas of the brain are integrated, linked to the rest of the body's physiological processes – the heart, intestines, muscles (Seigel 2014). The pre-fontal cortex focuses our attention, regulates our emotions, processes social information, and perceives pain – it is also where we perceive and imagine other people's thoughts, memories and emotions (Siegel 2014).

Perry writes that traumatised learners may be in a constant state of low-level fear, unconsciously scanning the environment for potential threats, which can be exhausting and distracting. If their fight-or-flight response kicks in, they may inwardly flee – this is called dissociation, which Perry describes as 'a mental mechanism by which one withdraws attention from the outside world and focuses on the inner world' (Perry 2008: 24). Dan Siegel writes, 'When we dissociate, we dis-associate different aspects of ourselves, such as separating feelings from memories, thoughts from actions' (2014: 100). On the one hand, there is a provocative link between the retreat into an inner fantasy world, and the imaginative processes of creative writing – which may go some way to explain the correlation between creativity and mental illness. On the other hand, dissociation clearly poses risks for the creative writing workshopper, disengaging from the lived time and space of the workshop. Perry writes that people who have suffered trauma may have difficulty taking risks, such as speaking out in class, or sharing their work, or making social connections with their peers, and may have developed avoidance and safety behaviours – maladaptive patterns to avoid potentially stressful situations – like skipping class or not handing in work for assessment (2008). Optimal learning depends on a cycle of 'curiosity, exploration, discovery, practice, and mastery' (Perry 2008: 26). But for a learner experiencing a fear response, attention is narrowly focused on safety. Addressing the learner's need for safety is the first step in creating an atmosphere of trust and support in the writer's workshop, in order for them to feel supported to take the emotional, social, creative and intellectual risks required to optimise learning.

Trauma-informed practice and trigger warnings

'Trauma-informed' is a paradigm of care or practice that recognises that many people live with the lingering effects of distressing physical and psychological experiences. Trauma-informed practice seeks to minimise pain and avoid further distress or re-traumatisation by putting into place strategies that minimise the impact of trauma (Evans and Coccoma 2014). A number of models of trauma-informed pedagogy have been developed in Australia for use in primary and secondary schools, including the Berry Street model, the Australian Childhood Foundation's 'Making SPACE for Learning' and 'TRUST in Schools' designed by researchers at the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network at Australian National University (ANU).

Again, I make the point explicitly here that the creative writing workshop cannot be considered a place to set therapeutic goals, but nor is it a place of emotional neutrality. In the creative writing workshop, it is essential to 'identify learning as the primary goal and student emotional safety as a necessary condition for it' (Carrello and Butler 2014: 163). In creative writing, rather than suppressing emotional

response, the writer's workshop must be framed as a place of exploration and co-construction of knowledge, and a safe place to contain and promote healthy self-expression. A safe place does not mean risk averse, but rather a place where young people feel supported to take interpersonal and creative risks.

According to Greg Lukianoff and Jonathon Haidt, the phrase 'trigger warning' began as a courtesy on Internet forums, used to alert readers to potentially distressing content, and broke into mainstream use around 2011, with campuses following suit, often driven by student demand (eg Palmer 2017). Strong arguments against trigger warnings frame them as 'anti-intellectual, consumer-oriented, and in opposition to academic freedom' (Morris 2015: 374), conflating institution-imposed trigger warnings with issues of freedom of speech and censorship. Writing in *The Conversation*, João Florêncio worries that 'learning does not happen without challenge', and expresses concern that students will avoid classes perceived as unsafe (Florêncio 2016). In *The New Yorker*, Jennie Suk Gersen writes of the problems of teaching rape law in the age of trigger warnings, where the perceived risk of discussion 'is of a traumatic injury analogous to sexual assault itself' (2014). Jay Caspian King, also in *The New Yorker*, argues that trigger warnings may be overly prescriptive, inferring there is only one way to read the text, and this in turn may inhibit the creative process (King 2014). In a statement on the issue, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2014) puts it this way: 'The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual', and warns against prioritising comfort over intellectual engagement (AAUP 2014). The AAUP expresses concern that teachers could be held responsible for the unpredictable and highly personal responses of trauma victims, which may lead to repercussions for staff who inadvertently elicit a traumatised response.

Counter-arguments in support of trigger warnings see them as empowering for students, allowing them choice about the way they interact with, say, a potentially triggering text. For example, they might choose to read it at home rather than at the library (King 2014). It can set a tone for discussion, ensuring all students approach sensitive topics with care. Rather than promoting avoidance, Ika Willis argues in *The Conversation* that a trigger warning can enhance student engagement (Willis 2016). In her class, a trigger warning promoted reading compliance and engaged discussion, with students 'managing to articulate their intense responses to the novel and to negotiate their profound disagreements respectfully' (Willis 2016). While some triggers are hard to predict, agrees Kate Manne writing in *The New York Times*, 'others are easy enough to anticipate, specifically, depictions or discussions of the very kinds of experiences that often result in post-traumatic stress and even, for some, a clinical disorder' (Manne 2105).

Thus far there appears to be no empirical evidence that encountering difficult materials in a pedagogical setting is harmful; nor that trigger warnings protect against such harm. Neither is there evidence to suggest that trigger warnings cause students to disengage from content, nor that trigger warnings have a negative effect on student's resilience. Simply put, there is no evidence. While trigger warnings have been the subject of much debate, I have been unable to find any evidence-based studies investigating the risks of giving – or of not giving – trigger warnings.

Behind the call for trigger warnings by student bodies, and the resistance to the practice in some pockets of the academic and wider community, is a suite of questions

about rights and responsibilities and how they are dispersed across the university community. What are the rights and responsibilities of traumatised and non-traumatised administrators, teaching staff and students in their interactions with each other and towards themselves? To what extent do these rights and responsibilities mirror those of any social setting, and in what ways are they distinct to the pedagogical environment? These are valid questions, and while I cannot address them in their entirety here, I can propose how the trigger warning debate may delimit, rather than expand, the discussion.

In the absence of evidence, the risks are unsubstantiated. However, I can see distinct limitations in wholly relying on trigger warnings. To some extent trigger warnings are impractical in a creative writing setting, where the tutor has limited control on the material that enters the classroom, since some of it is being spontaneously generated within the space. Student material to be workshopped (read and critiqued by the class) can feasibly be screened beforehand, but what are the ethical implications of labelling a student's work triggering? Furthermore, it would be concerning if trigger warnings were delivered with an assumption that the only recourse for students who might be traumatised is to withdraw – leave the room, skip the readings – or steel themselves, drawing on whatever inner resources they can muster to prepare themselves for being in a potentially triggering moment. In fact, could the trigger warning itself *be* the trigger? Trigger warnings may be used as a 'may contain traces of nuts' type disclaimer, where teachers, or the administrators who mandate such warnings, do the bare minimum, otherwise abnegating responsibility for student distress.

Finally, and most pertinent to my further discussion, trigger warnings draw attention to negative emotions and negative experiences, narrowing the focus of the threatened individual, and this may have the unwanted effect of reducing the capacity to learn. While trigger warnings may form part of a trauma-sensitive approach for an individual workshop facilitator, teacher or lecturer – and if students are requesting them, then I think that position should be respected – here I want to propose other protective models for thinking about a trauma-informed pedagogy that draw on positive emotions and positive experiences: self-determination theory and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions.

Broaden-and-Build Theory

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, developed by Barbara Frederickson, redresses a perceived imbalance in theories of emotions that focused on the meaning, biology and utility of negative emotions. For example, fear or anger narrows our focus, allowing us to concentrate on problems, or respond to threats in our environment. Positive emotions were initially seen as indicators of well-being (if you're happy then you're not sad), as well as 'internal signals to approach or continue' (Frederickson 2004: 1368), that is, if something feels good, or makes you happy, or interests you, you'll be more likely to want to start doing it, or keep doing it. Frederickson sees 'approach behaviour' as one general aspect of positive emotions, shared with other positive affective states (like sensory pleasure) (Fredrickson 2004). Just as negative emotions may narrow our thought-action repertoires to promote swift and decisive action, positive emotions appear to broaden our thought-action repertoires, 'widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind' (1369). When we experience positive emotions, Frederickson asserts, we learn enduring lessons. Childhood play builds durable physical, social and intellectual

resources. Exploration builds knowledge. Savouring and contentment encourages self-insight and alters world-views.

Frederickson's experiments show positive emotions such as joy and contentment promote broadening psychological processes that are creative, flexible, novel, and open to new information. Positive emotions like joy or contentment can act as an antidote to negative emotions; Frederickson found that positive emotions undid the lingering cardiovascular after-effects of negative emotions (2004) faster than a neutral emotional state. She suggests that positive emotions may help people break out of the psychological process of preparing for a specific action, by broadening their thought-action repertoire, placing a negative experience in a broader context and lessening its resonance. People who are resilient experience more positive emotions, which help them deal with adversity and bounce back. Further, Frederickson proposes anyone can learn to harness the beneficial effects of positive emotions and become more resilient. Frederickson found that a group of students asked to report 'the positive meaning and long-term benefits within their best, worst and seemingly ordinary experiences each day' (1372) showed increased resilience. There's a natural reciprocity here: finding positive meaning in events is key to positive emotions, and positive emotions help us find greater meaning.

A downward spiral occurs when depressed mood and negative emotions narrows our thinking, which can lead to rumination, worry, and self-criticism, which further worsens our mood, and further narrows our thinking. Frederickson suggests in her broaden-and-build theory positive emotions may inspire an upward spiral, in which positive emotions and the associated creative, flexible, and open-minded thought-action repertoires help us find new meaning. This can lead to greater wellbeing, allowing us to create new enduring resources to protect us against times of adversity.

Building Resilience in the Writer's Workshop

Is this a science of why publishers traditionally describe what they love about a manuscript before they launch into critique? Rather than handholding or coddling, is it about priming the brain to be open and adaptive to criticism? I am not talking about a feedback sandwich, in which negative feedback is wedged between two tasty slices of positive affirmation (Parkes et al 2012), because that assumes that the real 'meat' of the feedback is the negative feedback. Specific positive feedback is hugely informative; just as students may not know what is *not* working in their piece of writing—they often do not realise what *is* working and why. It can be easy to say, 'the characterisation is great, so let's talk about the weak narrative structure' or 'the prose is lovely, so we don't need to address that', but *why* are the characters so well-realised, or *why* is the prose so evocative? Where is the evidence on the page for that? It can be easy to perceive our role as offering corrections and pointing out mistakes. However, there are lessons, perhaps even *durable* lessons, in constructively worded positive feedback that is detailed and descriptive.

Don't get me wrong: my students don't crave praise. Most are anxious to be told where they are going wrong and how to fix it. Perfectionism and fear of failure can be a barrier to success. This year I invited a number of guest speakers who were successful in their field, though their definitions of success varied greatly. For one writer success meant having his first novel published; for another it was having her novels dominating the New York Times bestseller list, and a lucrative film offer; for

yet another it was having her tenth book published; while for another it was about opening up more space for the representation of gay teenagers in Australian YA. One guest speaker, who had recently had her first novel shortlisted for a prestigious award, had been a student in the same subject four years before. While experiences varied widely, they shared commonalities. All had experienced failure and rejection, and some had failed many times over. Success for each author came not from writing the perfect book, but from building up supportive relationships with writers, agents and publishers, and learning how to meaningfully engage with feedback. These authors' personal stories offer models of resilience, which frames failure as an essential part of professional development. Negative feedback that is framed in a long-term context fits with the broaden-and-build model. Tying corrective feedback to short and long-term goals can contextualise momentary setbacks in terms of longer-term gains, drawing the focus away from anxiety of the workshopping 'moment' and refocusing the attention in terms of artistic development and professional growth. Long-term goals for my graduate coursework students may include getting accepted into a PhD program, winning a scholarship, finishing a novel, securing employment as an editor and, for some, getting published. Short-term goals can include *extrinsic* motivators like a good grade, but also *intrinsic* motivation like getting the story right, or effective self-expression. Intrinsic motivation depends on three key factors, which I will explore further in the next section.

Self-Determination Theory of Motivation

Many students are willing participants in the workshop. Creative writing teachers are at an advantage: creative writing is fun, meaningful, and relevant to the student's short and, often, long-term goals. My students are graduate diploma, honours and master's students, usually seeking novel and challenging learning experiences to extend and exercise their capacities, often with aspirations to a career in writing or publishing. From the first class, these students display the 'natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development' (Ryan and Deci 2000: 70), and see creative writing as a highly valued activity, worth doing for its own sake. That is, most of my students are intrinsically motivated to participate and succeed. However, I concede that 'social contexts catalyze [...] differences in motivation and personal growth, resulting in people being more self-motivated, energized, and integrated in some situations, domains, and cultures than in others' (68). A number of factors determine the success of both the workshop space and the individual students who inhabit it and use it in order to learn.

Self-determination theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, acknowledges three innate personal needs for optimal functioning: competence, relatedness and autonomy. Competence in creative writing classes generally spreads across five interrelated domains: the ability to write creatively; competence as self-directed readers; the ability to read and critique another student's writing, and the ability to read and comprehend theory. Subdomains may include their capacity to recognise and apply different writing techniques, their ability to meaningfully absorb and utilise feedback, their ability to construct a research question, their ability to communicate effectively, and the facility to apply critical constructs to extend and articulate their own creative experiences. In each of my two-hour classes teaching Writing for Children and Young Adult Fiction I include lessons on technique and

practical skills, discussion of theory, and writing exercises that explicitly connect theory with practice. I provide a broad range of readings across the literary-commercial spectrum of children's and young adult literature, contextualised by critical readings. I explicitly teach workshopping skills, and model a strengths-based approach. I always keep the last week free for a second workshop for any student who wants to take the opportunity, and this gives the class the ability to examine models of texts in development. The students who take advantage of this opportunity to workshop twice are often driven learners who are working at a high level. Asking them to elucidate the choices they have made in developing their work becomes a practical lesson for everyone in how to apply knowledge from the workshop to their own writing at home.

Autonomy works alongside competence, where students experience their own behaviour as self-determined. '[C]hoice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction' (70) all enhance student's intrinsic motivation and cultivate curiosity and a willingness to challenge themselves. I encourage students to curate their own reading lists and to come up with their own essay questions, based on their academic interests, including the option of a fictocritical or evocative autoethnographic essay that gives the student insight into their own reading competencies and tacit knowledge, and allows a greater degree of creative expression. Some students struggle with composing their own research question, and I make myself available to help students construct a question with the necessary utility to enhance their chances of success. This enables students to set their own level of challenge, and accommodates different levels of experience and ability, as these vary widely in my classes, which may include students already working in the industry and students who are taking their first creative writing class; students who have come back to children's books through the experience of parenting or teaching, and students whose interest in young adult fiction is because they are still broadly within that market demographic themselves.

Intrinsic motivation is 'more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a sense of security and relatedness' (71). In a successful writer's workshop, relatedness is key. The workshop is fundamentally a collaborative space, a socially driven think-tank, in which students and the teacher visibly co-construct knowledge, by exploring artistic, intellectual and emotional responses to works-in-progress. If vulnerability and risk-taking can be understood as a pedagogical imperative – the sharing of early, raw drafts and the accompanying fear of criticism or rejection; negotiating the fine balance between the craft of the material and the content that feeds into it; the thin, sometimes tenuous line between the work and the self – building a sense of trust and community in early classes is vital. Fun and meaningful interpersonal activities in the early weeks of semester (in pairs, small groups and with the whole class) can help engender a sense of community and connectedness in the room. I strongly believe in getting people up and moving around the room, to increase the ownership of the room and sense of belonging to the physical space.

The competence, autonomy and relatedness triad boosts the effectiveness and enjoyment of the class, while helping students achieve long-term goals. I have taught groups of students who have remain bonded for years after meeting in my class, continuing to share and critique each other's work. Anecdotally I can report that the students who achieve their long-term writing goals are ones who have fostered lasting connections. Past students of mine who have signed publishing contracts, successfully applied for mentorships, grants and residencies, been shortlisted for literary awards, or

found meaningful employment in the industry, are the ones who have kept in regular contact with other past students, and who have stayed in contact with me.

Areas for Further Research

This paper raises many areas worthy of further research, including the effectiveness of trigger warnings in helping students manage anxiety, distress or dissociation; resilience building in the creative writing workshop, and the best way to support traumatised or anxious students to feel safe in creative writing spaces. Broaden-And-Build and Self-Determination Theory offer positive, strengths-based theoretical constructs to further design educational interventions for vulnerable students. Exploring the ways in which students experience 'safety' and 'risk' in the writer's workshop, may help workshop facilitators engage vulnerable students and help more students meet their short and long-term goals.

Conclusion

'"People ask me if I ever thought of writing a children's book," Amis said [...] "I say, 'If I had a serious brain injury I might well write a children's book', but otherwise the idea of being conscious of who you're directing the story to is anathema to me, because, in my view, fiction is freedom and any restraints on that are intolerable."' (Page 2011)

Amis is half correct. The labour of writing for children and teenagers requires a dual act of creation: the young reader must be constructed along with the text. One of these acts – the creation of the reader – is always at least partly autobiographical, even if the text is not. The young reading (or non-reading) self must be reconstituted when faced with the question: 'What do teenagers like? What does a ten year old want to read? What purpose does children's literature serve? What is my story about?' In many ways a children's book or YA novel is a conciliatory letter to the young self, to the child or teenager you were an intimate bystander to, that you were not yet old enough to shelter from harm. The construction of the reader is an art in itself – performative, sensory, requiring compassion and imagination – determining what the text will and won't show. Rather than a mere limiting of the writing self as Amis coarsely implies, it requires an expansion of the reader (the social and cultural nexus of lived texts) that lingers behind every writer. The child-self that students have learned to repress and conceal in order to pass in the adult world must be attended to in my classroom, and it is my job to recognise that for some students this is a more confronting task than for others, and many of the negative *and* positive personal impacts may never be known to me. This is why trauma-sensitive practices must be inclusive of all students. Students take social and emotional risks in any classroom but risk manifests itself in a very particular way in the writer's workshop where vulnerability is a pedagogical imperative.

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