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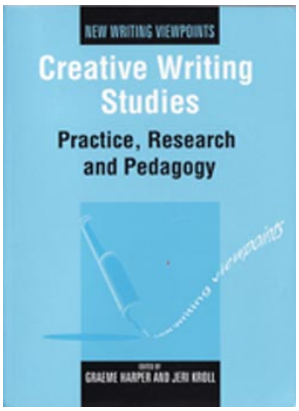
Reviews contents

TEXT review

A truly international contribution

Donna Lee Brien



Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll (eds)
Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy
Multilingual Matters, Clevedon UK, 2008
ISBN 9781847690197
Pb, 169pp, GBP 24.95

I hesitated before accepting the invitation to review this volume. That hesitation was not prompted by uncertainty regarding whether I was qualified to review the subject matter implied by the book's title. Nor was it because I was unfamiliar with, or uninterested in, this subject matter. In fact, my hesitation was prompted by what could be described as the exact opposite of these last points. I am not only extremely interested in this subject area, but also in this particular book. This interest is general, in that university creative writing is the discipline area in which I research and publish. It is also particular, in that I am professionally familiar with the work of the editors and many of the contributing authors. I know these editors and a number of the contributing academics personally. I am also familiar with the work of the publishing house, and have a professional connection with a journal from this publisher.

The possible conflict of interest implicit in this situation was the source of my initial uncertainty regarding whether I was the best reviewer for this book. Thinking this through before I replied to the invitation, I could identify two interlinked notions at work. The first was prompted by the idea that all reviews are a form of peer review, with the most valued of these the double-blind review, where neither the author being reviewed nor the reviewers are aware of each others' identities. The second is the associated idea that all reviews - whether of a book, movie, concert or restaurant - are, at their best, objective appraisals of artefacts or events. In this case, both of these factors would presume that the best review of this, or any, book would comprise a detached and impartial assessment that is uninfluenced by the bias that cannot help but attend a personal knowledge of the authors. Many have, of course, recognized the impossibility of any kind of perfect objectivity. We know that human beings are subjective, driven by our beliefs, desires, hopes, observations and motivations. Within

this, the book reviewer can at best, I believe, aspire to begin from a position of neutrality, and then, as I have here, acknowledge any possible influences on his or her judgments. Despite attempting to begin from a neutral position - with no pre-existing personal enmities or disciplinary axes to grind for instance - I do not see how anyone can maintain a position of neutrality while actively engaged in the act of reading. Especially if a book reviewer is someone knowledgeable and - as I am - passionate about the subject of the book, there is no hope that a position of detached neutrality can be sustained.

There is, however, another meaning of the word 'review': that of *reconsideration*. This implies that a review can be a re-examination or re-assessment, in effect a re-view of an artefact or event, after that artefact or event has been completed. It was in this engaged spirit that I read this book, and offer the comments below.

In the first chapter, the editors define the scope of the book as a focus on creative writing as a subject in universities, with the contents of the book arranged around the three organising sub-themes of practice, research and pedagogy. This introductory chapter states that, in this case, 'creative writing' refers to that which is undertaken and taught in English, making the point, however, that creative writing is also occurring in, and around, universities throughout Europe, Asia and Africa. This collection makes a truly international contribution to the field, with the co-editors based in Australia and UK, and five contributors from each of Australia, UK and the USA. These fifteen are represented by six female and nine male contributors, who range from senior academics to doctoral students in the discipline. Given that the two editors both have Australian connections, I missed any representation of our Australasian neighbours, New Zealand, and note that only one article, that by Stephanie Vanderslice, provides a comparison of the different approaches internationally - focusing on teaching creative writing in the USA and UK. Although, again, I would have liked to see a broader comparison including Australia (and New Zealand), I do acknowledge that no such compilation can ever include everything that every reader can suggest could have made a contribution.

The book that the editors have compiled comprises a series of discrete, loosely linked, articles that have one thing in common. They all feed into ongoing discussions regarding a number of issues that have been of concern within the discipline for some time. These include how to nurture a critical or theoretical understanding of creative writing as a discipline; how to develop both successful teaching methods and practice-led research in the discipline; and how creative writers who are also teachers and/or postgraduate students can manage the competing, and sometimes irreconcilable, demands of these roles (xii). As material on these issues has been published in articles here in *TEXT* as well as other international fora, I read through the chapters with real attention as to how the various authors would add to these discussions. I did find new perspectives, ideas and proposals presented, and suggest this alone makes the book worth reading. Another element of real interest in such a collection is the editorial arrangement of the series of pieces and the way this highlights common themes and interests. To me, the various linkages, synergies and (at times) disagreements across the chapters in this collection most closely approach the kind of engaged information exchange that happens at conferences about creative writing in the academy, where everyone's discrete work is nevertheless cognate and interrelated due to shared concerns. This collection reveals its authors' shared passion for university-based creative writing. This is clear in a consistent display of real concern

for improving the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate student learning and the quality of the classroom experience for these students. It is clear in the respect expressed for the quality of the writing that results from the university experience for students, postgraduate candidates and their teachers/supervisors. Not least, it is communicated in the regard, and often open affection, with which teachers and students write about each other. This is not always the case in publications dealing with educational subjects, and is - I believe - a hallmark of the creative arts disciplines in the contemporary academy.

In this way, Jake Adam York and Kevin Brophy both write about teaching poetry. York shares his use of new media software to alert his students to the material dimension of language, while Brophy utilises the frame of the poetry workshops he runs and the poems therein discussed to discuss the balancing of emotion and intellect in the creation of a work of art. Also focusing on personal pedagogical approaches, Nat Hardy presents how a workshop approach that borrows from Bahktinian formalism and gonzo-journalism can assist non-traditional students, and Gregory Fraser discusses the teaching of theory in the writing class. Jen Webb contextualises her teaching of collaborative creative practice within a valuable survey of theoretical and practical literature on this topic.

Discussing where the professional intersects with the personal, Aileen La Tourette ruminates upon the effect of teaching creative writing on her own creative work. Nigel McLoughlin posits how the integration of approaches that he summarises as 'poesis, praxis, process and pedagogy' inform his own research and teaching methodologies, while Rob Mimpriss focuses on a discussion of the short story - a personal research interest - and how various authors have felt they had to offer apologies for working within this form. Both Nessa Mahoney and Inez Baranay reflect upon their experiences as doctoral candidates and writers, and how these roles, as well as the writing therein produced in these roles, can influence each other. Also writing about doctoral level study, Nigel Krauth questions institutional process and cost benefit analyses in his discussion of the doctoral novel and the innovative work his students have produced within this degree.

The collection is thus rich in anecdotal and reflective evidence but, as a vocal lobbyist for the discipline, I would also have liked to see some inclusion of empirical, statistical, quantitative (as well as methodologically-based qualitative) research backing some of the more personal claims and assertions. If creative writing research wants to claim a place in the academy that can be understood as equivalent to other disciplines, it seems to me that it needs to engage in, and promote, significant research studies that can be judged alongside the work of other scholars working in such modes in the higher education area. The theme of practice-based research as a whole is more muted than that of teaching and writing through this collection, suggesting the significant work in which the creative arts as a whole needs to engage to tease out the definitions, processes and ramifications of practice-based research in the academy.

Missing for me in this collection was any substantial recognition of how creative writing as a university disciplines works to achieve - and sometimes does not achieve - viable levels of engagement with both the general community as well as what we call 'industry and the professions'. How such community and professional interaction influences, informs and enriches university practice is, I believe, an integral part of the contemporary academic agenda and one which was only briefly touched

upon in this collection. I recognise this is a particular interest of mine, and that this is not to suggest that what has been included is not worthy or interesting in itself.

The book is completed with a brief 'Afterword' by David Fenza, the Executive Director of the US Association of Writers and Writing Programs (the AWP). This features excerpts from two of this influential figure's articles, full texts of which can be found on the association's website. While largely reflecting on the history and development of creative writing in American institutions, his final lines form a fitting - albeit, for most of us, still aspirational - conclusion to a book about creative writing as an academic discipline:

> The making and exchange of literary talents and gifts is, of course, a highly civilised and humane act; and appropriately, academe has accepted the practice and making of the literary arts along with study and scholarship in the literary arts. (167)

As creative writing, like most other creative arts disciplines, works towards that full acceptance in the academic context, books such as this are important steps in assuring that acceptance is gained. Besides the stimulation this book offers to those interested in its subject matter, this is another point of commendation for this volume. As a passionate, engaged reader on this subject, I sincerely recommend this book to you and your university libraries.

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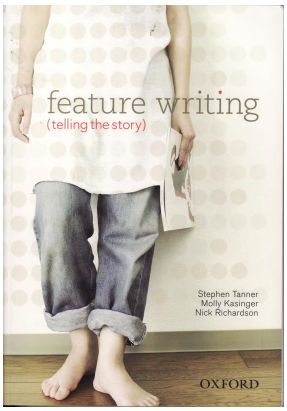
TEXT review

Changing journalistic environments

Jane Johnston



Stephen Tanner, Molly Kasinger and Nick Richardson
Feature Writing: Telling the Story
Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2009
ISBN 9780195561746
Pb, 363pp, A$ 62.95 / NZ$ 79.95

If in any doubt about how to write a book review, it's covered in Chapter 13 in the book in question: reviewing, among many other sub-sets of feature writing, is explained in this latest text *Feature Writing: Telling the Story* by Stephen Tanner, Molly Kasinger and Nick Richardson.

Like many university-pitched texts, this book's chapters roughly correlate with teaching weeks (with a few spares) - 16 chapters comprising 'Part A: Mastering the Techniques' on topics like story ideas, research and story construction, and 'Part B: Different Styles' on profiles, reviews, columns and issues-based stories. Part B also includes chapters on 'Writing Indulgence: Travel, Food and Drink' and 'Book-length Writing: Creative Non-Fiction'. These final two chapters, together with ideas scattered elsewhere in the book, push the boundaries of simple feature writing. The book's blurb explains: 'While news reporting remains the staple of contemporary journalism, opportunities are increasingly opening up for feature writers and even those who aspire to write the longer forms of journalism and creative non-fiction'.

Tanner et al comes into the marketplace five years after Ricketson's *Writing Feature Stories* (2004) which was welcomed into the rather barren landscape of Australian feature writing texts. With a few titles which had either part-way filled the gap or become a bit dated - like Maskell and Perry's 1999 *Write to Publish* (more a manual for freelancers), David Leser's 2000 *The Whites of their Eyes* (a collection of profiles), and (the late) Len Granato's early foray onto the scene with *Newspaper Feature Writing* in 1992 - Ricketson became the confirmed text for many feature writing courses. Matthew Ricketson included in his contents a final chapter on Literary Journalism, which dipped a toe in the water of the creative non-fiction font. The trio behind this new book expand this

approach, wading in ankle-deep. And when you consider the names behind the book, it's not at all surprising. While all three are journalism scholars and/or practitioners, Molly Kasinger's recent PhD investigated creative non-fiction and its use in journalism education and Stephen Tanner is head of the School of Journalism and Creative Writing at Wollongong University.

This approach introduces potentials and possibilities for feature writing, in part at least, through the peppering of examples and elements of creative non-fiction. For example, there's a longish section in Chapter 6 'Getting into Character' which deals with dialogue. Discussion about dialogue provides an unusual element in feature writing construction because it's not widely used, except in Q & A interviews. The authors cite an example from Sarah MacDonald's book-length travel memoir *Holy Cow* to illustrate their case, rather than using an example from a newspaper or magazine article (I would have loved a feature example - anywhere in the book - where dialogue was used). The influence of creative non-fiction is evident throughout the book, and Kasinger's research is very apparent here, with references to New Journalism, Hunter S. Thompson, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway and so on - names we might not once have found in undergraduate feature writing texts. This boundary blurring approach, which we also saw in Ricketson, is part of a wider move within journalism education and practice, which now operates within expanded frameworks and contexts. In changing journalistic environments, potentials and possibilities in writing style are now just as important as the basics.

And this book also does cover the basics, the standard elements of feature writing: finding story ideas; researching; interviewing; writing leads; bodies and endings; using quotes, anecdotes and description; developing tone, pace and rhythm. Much of it also deals with fundamental issues of journalistic practice and education. Chapter 7, 'Ethical Concerns,' analyses the MEAA Code of Ethics, clause by clause. It discusses a range of issues within the context of the 12-point code - from respecting private grief (clause 11) to placing unnecessary emphasis on characteristics (clause 2). The one disappointment with this chapter is that two key clauses - clause 4, which deals with accepting payments or gifts ('freebies'), and clause 11, which deals with photo manipulation, both of which are highly relevant to feature writing and have very real ramifications for this genre - are rather glossed over with warnings to be careful but no further references or explanation to tease out these contentious issues. Chapter 8 'Legal Pitfalls', on the other hand, provides a solid run-down on the legal environment for the feature writer, suggesting a comprehensive range of follow-up texts and websites for further information and investigation. Notwithstanding any limitations, the inclusion of these chapters is a definite plus for feature writing classes, which can attract both journalism and creative writing students who come with varied levels of experience and knowledge in the fields of law and ethics.

All chapters include objectives, a brief summary and questions and activities, and this at-a-glance approach makes the book very user-friendly. Most chapters conclude with a feature article example, usually accompanied by an interview with the journalist who wrote it. These features serve not only to illustrate and ground the chapters but provide a strong launching pad for class discussion. As working examples they provide the 'why' and 'how' of the journalistic process, so we read, for example, that John Hamilton used archival records, libraries, the Australian War Memorial, letters, interviews with family members, and visits to former schools of war diggers to research his story on ANZACs.

We also read, for instance, how Tiffany Bakker's profile on Missy Higgins called for the writer to question her distance from her subject and to ask the 'usual' *and* the 'unusual' questions to get her story.

Likewise, there's a range of writing tools that help in story construction. Some chapters provide checklists to help navigate through specialised features, like reviewing literature, theatre, art and film in Chapter 13, and writing articles on food, wine and travel in Chapter 14. Chapter 5 ventures to illustrate feature writing structure diagrammatically, a risky move given feature writing's flexibility and movable boundaries (unlike the reliable inverted pyramid, which is easy to draw and simple to understand). Some of these diagrams work better than others - the 'Sleepy P', which describes chronological structure, starting in the middle, is by far the most effective.

For the most part, the elements of this book make it work and, most importantly, make it appeal to student readers. *Feature Writing: Telling the Story* is a balanced mix of practice and theory, illustration and technique. Journalism education in Australia will undoubtedly embrace this latest addition which, inclusive of its expanded contents and style, fills a place in the small suite of Australian titles that deal with longer-form journalistic writing.

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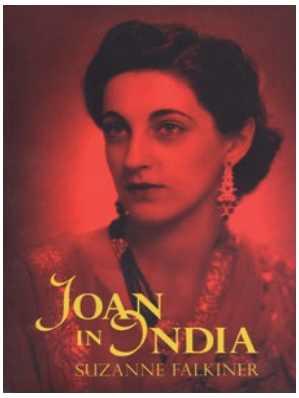
TEXT review

Behind the gossipy stories

Willa McDonald



Suzanne Falkiner
Joan in India
Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2008
ISBN 9781740971621
Pb, 315 pp, AUS $39.95

Bejewelled with rubies and backlit by an exotic red glow, 'Joan' gazes intently from the formal portrait that covers this book. Taken in 1940, the photograph is a tantalizing image that both suggests and challenges notions of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in this story of a marriage between the beautiful, young daughter of a wealthy Victorian grazing family and the older, Muslim ruler of a small Indian principality.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Falkiner portrays this union primarily as a love match, yet also as more. In this story, set mostly in the last years of colonial India, Joan is both the desired and the one who desires. On one level, she is the 'exotic' object, wooed and then prized by her older Indian husband Taley, whom she married against the wishes of her family and the social mores of the time. At another, she is the manipulative performer, running away from stuffy, aspirational South Yarra 'society' and a barren home life overseen by her cold, social-climbing mother to marry Taley and secure a fairytale life in India as his Begum.

The thrust of the book is the author's search for the 'truth' behind the gossipy stories about the marriage, which she wove fantasies around from the time she first heard them as a child. That 'truth' is hard to pin down as Falkiner travels across three countries, investigating Joan's story via libraries, public offices and interviews with people who knew her. It's a quest that demonstrates the challenges of writing biography where there is little first-hand information to bring the subject to life. For all Falkiner's efforts, and they are admirably thorough, she discovers very little about the emotional truth of the marriage and the couple's life in India, but a great deal of documentary fact detailing life in the dying years of the

principality and the behind-the-scenes machinations of the British 'Political Department'.

Without personal letters or other material that would give voice to Joan, she always remains a flimsy figure in this tale - shadowy and insubstantial, despite the author's best intentions to pin her down on paper. Taley is a more clearly drawn character, perhaps because there is more information about him, and what there is reveals to some extent his interior life. In one telling anecdote he is observed drinking at a party after the loss of Palanpur to the new Indian union:

> Why, observed a fellow guest, was the Nawab, a good Muslim, drinking alcohol?
>
> 'Because I don't want to go to heaven,' Taley had replied soberly. 'If I go to heaven, I will meet my father, and if I meet my father, he will ask me how I came to lose my state'. (231)

Perhaps too, Taley is simply a more interesting person than Joan. Around her there is a swirl of conflicting anecdotes. There is mention of her doing charity work, and suggestions that she was an immaculately groomed socialite who spent little time with her child. But we are left without a clear picture of Joan's day-to-day life. What did she do all day? What were her thoughts? Her feelings? Her passions? It's impossible to say, given the dearth of material Falkiner had to deal with. Yet Falkiner has done a laudable job. From my own experience working on a partial biography where access to material about the subject was severely restricted, I know how hard it is to write engrossing narrative in these circumstances. No wonder writers from Anthony Burgess to Drusilla Modjeska have fictionalised their biographies to animate their subjects.

Rather than turn to fiction though, Falkiner embraces the material she has. Towards the end of the book, she finally meets Joan - old and apparently demented - in the South of France. But even this meeting can do little to flesh out the character of the daring young woman who fled Melbourne to India at the outbreak of World War II:

> I said to her now, 'I wanted to talk to you about Palanpur, but I gather you would prefer not to talk about those days?' and she smiled and once again changed the subject, as if she did not hear my remark at all. (270)

Instead of twisting the information into a more traditional account, Falkiner cleverly uses dialogue and anecdote to suggest the elusiveness of Joan - to leave her character an open question:

> At one point she said to me, with disarming frankness, 'I have been letting people think that I need to be looked after for so long now, and I have got myself so much in the habit of it that I seem to have convinced myself'. (269)

The reader can't help but surmise that perhaps Joan has always been this way. A chameleon both vulnerably dependant and cunning in getting her needs met; a person who is both active and passive, victim and seducer, performer and audience, sane and demented, known and unknown. At the core of the biographer's dilemma is the feeling the reader gets that Joan may not have had a strong sense of her own self. In the end, she is the least

understood character in the tale and the reader is forced to go beyond character stereotypes to make sense of Joan's story.

In the absence of a strong narrative arc provided by Joan, Falkiner includes herself in the tale as the biographer detective, using the device to draw the reader along with her in her quest for information. The most vivid sections of the book - those where the writing really shines - are the parts where Falkiner describes her own experiences in her travels, particularly in India, often with engaging humour:

> It was at this point, of course, that things began to go down hill rapidly. The luxury, non-government bus, very small and in a dilapidated state, made us wonder what a non-luxury, government bus would be like. We left fifteen minutes before the advertised departure time, with the driver, a small, beetle-browed man, crouched over the wheel who drove dementedly. We were bouncing and swaying at breakneck speed even before we had cleared the township. While I waited passively for death, Coralie marched doughtily to the front and began berating the driver, threatening him in English with all sorts of retribution, including her fictitious uncle the Police Inspector in Madras, if he didn't slow down and stop overtaking petrol tankers in the face of oncoming buses. Although the driver appeared to be listening attentively, he showed no sign of slowing down… It dawned on Coralie at last that, logically enough, the driver did not speak English… (52)

Falkiner also adds colour and builds character by including dialogues from her interviews, as this excerpt from a conversation with Joan's sister, Ann, shows:

> 'Tell me more about Joan and Beatrice. Did she get on well with your mother?'
>
> 'Joan knew how to control her perfectly.'
>
> 'Manage her?'
>
> Ann nodded. 'And she just adored Joan.'
>
> Ann struck a match and held it briefly to her cigarette.
>
> 'Did Joan like her?'
>
> 'I doubt it.' She paused. 'Though you wouldn't always be able to tell, if you listened to what they said'. (63)

There is mention of Falkiner's research methods that is instructive for the student of biography and creative non-fiction. Her persistence in her search for information is clear from the sheer amount of material she accumulates. She even checks the 1939 records of P&O liners to determine if Joan was a passenger at that time (77). And the reader shares her frustration at the discovery that the woman who accompanied Joan to India as chaperone - the only other person besides Joan who could give a first-hand account of those early days of her marriage - died only a few weeks before Falkiner located her with an interview in mind (82). Particularly given that fact, one wishes Falkiner had asked more direct

questions of the locals about Joan's life and how she was viewed in Palanpur, although one has to trust her judgment in the field - her reticence to push for information was no doubt culturally sound and appropriate in the circumstances (104).

The ethics of writing this story obviously played on Falkiner's mind. Echoing Janet Malcolm's concerns about the journalist as betrayer and Joan Didion's famous dictum that 'writers are always selling somebody out,' Falkiner ruminates on the ethics of persuading Joan to be interviewed for a story that was essentially one that Falkiner would be constructing, and not necessarily a story to Joan's liking (270). And the vexing question of how much weight to place on the conflicting accounts of Joan, clearly continually exercised Falkiner throughout the research (271). Accuracy was something Falkiner was intent on achieving. It seems it was her practice to let her interviewees check transcripts of their interviews (19). At one point, she discloses that she honoured her promise to abstain from publishing anything about Joan while she or her sister Ann were alive (283).

Falkiner closes the book with a fantasy ending. In the last few pages, she recreates the moment of Joan and Taley's meeting - a moment of connection, of promised happiness, perhaps even of love reaching across gulfs of difference. Yet this does little to change the essence of this story. Where Falkiner began with the fairytale of the farmer's daughter who became a fêted princess, by the end of her search she is left with a subject who is ultimately unknowable beyond the observable facts of her old age. Joan, despite the glamour of her earlier life, is lonely, broke and apparently losing her mind. Ultimately it is a sad story of loss. Of the transience of fame and fortune. Of the inevitability of change and the futility of materialism as a source of enduring happiness. But a story well worth reading, not only for the history contained in its pages and the lessons it contains for would-be biographers, but also for the enjoyment of the tale.

* * * * * *

Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, New York: Dell, 1961. return to text

Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, London: Bloomsbury, 1990. return to text

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. return to text

Dr Willa McDonald is a Senior Lecturer in Writing in the Department of Media at Macquarie University. Her books include: The Writer's Reader: Telling Stories in Journalism and Non-fiction *(Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007) with Susie Eisenhuth (co-editor), and the forthcoming* Dorothy (Auchterlonie) Green: Warrior for Peace *to be published in 2009 by Australian Scholarly Publishing.*

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