

University of Canberra

Kristen Davis and Sarah St Vincent Welch

***(K)nots and nots: teaching creative writing and creative reading***

Over flat whites, no sugars, and faltering life-lines wavering across our shared office space, we joke, Sarah and I, that one of us teaches creative writing, the other creative reading. But neither of us is really sure where one begins and the other ends. Are our tutorials and lectures really so disparate? Doesn't the writing bleed into the reading, and vice versa? Isn't it all reading-slash-writing or writing-slash-reading? Or reading-not-writing and writing-not-reading?

Does it matter?

It's the word 'not' that gets stuck in my throat.  
It's the 'not' that I'm running after.  
It's the 'not' that I'm chasing.

It's the (k)nots we're both tangled up in.

Put your glass up to the wall.  
SSHHHHssssshhhhhhhhhhh.  
*Careless talk costs lives*

'Students can make or break your day.'  
That was going to be my opening line, but I faltered.  
I don't normally insert students into my work, even on creative practice; I usually try to edit them out. They become the s-word, relegated to the margins, the appendix, the PS, the PPS.  
Don't ask me why.

You're not yourself today, I tell Sarah.

He'd come at her with a water pistol.  
Right between the eyes.  
Bang. Bang. Bang.  
I can't reveal his name, address, facial features, distinguishing characteristics.  
Much later, he said he didn't mean it.  
She wasn't laughing.

'Students can make or break your day.'  
That was going to be my opening line but instead I crossed it out, put a big red line through the middle of it.

DELETE DELETE DELETE.

Throughout semester I scrawl comments inked in red across my students' words.  
Coffee cup rings bleeeeed s-l-o-w-l-y across their white-leafed pages while red

wine circles stain the paper.  
Red ink. Coffee cup rings. Red wine stains.  
These are the traces I leave behind.  
Ink. Rings. Stains.

I set my students Bret Easton Ellis *Lunar Park*, Jeanette Winterson *The Passion* and Lionel Shriver *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. In these texts unreliable narrators run amok. In the underbelly of American suburbs, young boys are Missing, Presumed Dead; in Venetian canals and casinos, life and love are wagered for with kisses and cards, while in *Kevin*, a high school gymnasium watches a disaffected student on a killing spree. BANG. BANG. BANG. Chill...

I can't get away from them. However hard I try.  
The (k)nots keep pursuing me.  
The monkey tightens its grip.

I attempt to turn these lines into something abstract, conceptual, intellectual, rigorous, theorized.

I try to channel Judith Butler but she's not listening.  
Zizek doesn't want to know.  
Foucault tells me to f\*\*\* off.

And as for Sarah, she wasn't laughing.  
She was having a bad day.  
Much later, he said he hadn't meant it.  
She hadn't asked.

I told her I'd written pages for our collaborative paper. Polished. Word-perfect. Highly theorised.

I lied.

I was having a bad day too. Forget that, I was having a bad year.

I'd spent the weekend devouring students' essays that discussed the unreliability of narrators and the rewriting of history. *In dreams* I was Bret Easton Ellis coked off my head at a Halloween party. I was swimming in Venetian canals with a woman with webbed feet. I was Kevin's mother talking about my son ripping out the heart of a birthday cake.

Lines of coke, Venetian canals, birthday cake. *In dreams*.

I was trying to stay afloat then the text came through.

'Hi mate. Thought u better no. Remember sleepy-eyed S ..., B's friend, she hung herself. Another 1 bites the dust'.

I turn the mobile to silent and head to my first tute for the day.  
Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe.  
I try the brown paper bag trick. It doesn't work.  
People swear by it but I still feel *not quite right*.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe.

The tutorial runs smoothly: the cat comes out of the hat.  
I head back to our office.

Sarah's having a good day. Things are coming together. The anthology she's editing is taking shape, filling out, moving in surprising new directions.

But she notices.

That's what happens when you share a room with a writer-reader-writer. They observe things. They take notes. They write things down in their spiral-bound notebooks. Or tap enthusiastically into their keyboards.

You're not yourself today, she says.  
There's a lot of that going round our office.  
Maybe it's contagious.

Students with water pistols.  
Texts with bodies hanging somewhere in-between.  
A strand of grey hair: *I want to paint it black*

And is. Is not.

Perhaps that's where the liminal zone between writing, reading, creativity, theory, resides: in the (k)nots we dangle with, tangle with, toy with, chase after, desire.

They tread softly, unexpectedly, in and out of our unit outlines, our texts, our office conversations where students loom with fake guns and old friends are suspended in space.

Things are *not quite right*.  
They're both here and not here.

So back to the texts.  
Lost boys Missing, Presumed Dead.  
The wagering of life over a deck of cards.  
A high school massacre, a mother's ambivalence.

Does any of this matter?

A touch of death.  
A whiff of fear.  
The faint smell of excitement.  
The rush of a drug, peaking on E near the neon COKE sign at the Cross.

These are the shadows that play in the liminal spaces, the ghosts that add the letter 'k' to the word 'not' then take it away again. These are the cats in the hat that pull the letters 'a' to 'z' in and out, and out and in again. I promised I'd edit myself out of this paper. I begged for a direct line to a Higher Theory but that went awry too. I saved the text my old friend sent me but I didn't savour it. 'Another 1 bites the dust'. Is it writing? Is it creative? Is it practice? Does it speak to me? Can I press the RETURN TO SENDER button and go back to my original line? Or maybe hit the DELETE key and start this whole paper again? But the writer/reader/writer/in me/in her/in me was still taking copious notes, still tapping on the keyboard, still observing the subtleties of daily life. I peer over at Sarah's desk. There's a letter addressed to the 'Family Assistance Office' and a jar of Nescafe Gold. On an A4 pad of paper the word 'ring t-shirts' is circled in a biro-net. Scattered across the desk I see paper clips, roll-on glue, erasers, red pens and Amendments to Examiner's Reports. To the right of her computer I find an image of sky and clouds, bluey-green paint swirls, and the word *SURRENDER* blowing slowly, hesitantly, across the landscape. It was time to call it a day.

[illegible][illegible]

TPKD TPKD TPKD TPKD TPKD BDGD BDGD BDGD  
BDGD BDGD BDGD

ANDISANDISISNOTISNOT

I have to tell Kristen I was a research subject on lecturing and stage fright in the class-free break. Amanda Burrell sent round an email inviting staff to participate.

This was free training for me with corporate training professionals, voice and movement teachers, inspirational speakers. I'm just on a contract. I'm a pretend lecturer. A bit of a ring-in. Someone made a mistake. I'm a fraud. I am.

I did a one-minute Harvard survey with the students in my creative writing lecture before the research and training started. I was really surprised that overall I seemed to be going ok according to them. But my confidence was going down the slippery dip from about the second lecture as I fumbled over 9A1's console. I got a call from the tech guys part way in.

'Your mike's not on.'

'I know. It's not working,' I say.

'We'll be over soon.'

So I rearranged the lecture, got the students to do a quiz on their creativity; asked them, if they situated their creativity somewhere in their body, where would it be? Oh dear, all my guys are really brainy. All their creativity is in their brains. Inside I scream - *but it's in my skin it's in my tongue, my womb, my voice*. I'm dying for someone to say, 'It's in my dick.' But we don't know each other well enough for that yet.

The tech guys jackhammer a hole through the ceiling and slide into 9A1, leads coiled around them like snakes. But they can't fix the mike.

In the lecture I say, 'In your brain? Really? Very interesting.' I wonder how I will teach them to write with their bodies.

Later in the semester we read the last paragraph of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* in a discussion of endings. I ask a student to read it out for us. This is a tactic I learned in

I say, 'I wonder if it's a happy ending?' - almost to myself. A student says with certainty, 'That's a happy ending, it is.' I wish I had such certainty.

MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA  
AAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Kristen dashes in. She's wearing leathers and a Russian army hat. 'My student is giving her paper on transgenderism - I'm playing the part.' It's the day when her schedule is a tute, then a lecture, then tute, and tute. She flies with her designer shopping bags full of books and marked assignments, her mobile ringing. We have the same ring tone. A text lands like a gunshot.

As a creative writing teacher I make myself vulnerable. I do all the exercises I set. I read out really crappy stuff I've just written in class along with the students. I always set exercises and I don't always know if they will work and sometimes they don't. I love dreaming them up. What if this, and what if that? Imagine you are walking alone at night and ... Sue Woolfe says she never gets her students to read out work they've just written, but how will I hear their voices early enough in the semester if I don't? It is imperfect, perhaps, but it's what I can do. Our oral presentations are week after week, and there is always someone who is last, and the first written assignment is in week 6. I just have to hear the students writing; feel that energy of writing in the room. Sometimes I look up and the pens are running, a lone laptop clacking, someone is staring out the window at the shadows in the gum leaves and then they look down at the page, and like Margaret Atwood's narrator, sink below the surface of the page. They disappear for a moment. We rescue them.

5/7

eyes, a perfect hit right behind my glasses. A miraculous and uninterpretable aim.

There's a knock on my door after a handle rattle.

'Who's that?'

'It's Kristen.'

'Sorry Kristen.'

I stick the wedge under the door and lock us in, and I think we are both safe. But I have to let her in and out. She understands. It's only four days before I find out the water pistol shooting was a mistake and not deliberate, but it is four days where the fragile net of my teaching is rent. The last campus massacre was by a creative writing student. We debriefed at work. Swapped stories about strange and threatening behaviour. We've managed incidents. We talked to the students. My students were mildly interested, but didn't seem to think it applied. That's good really. Not our students. Not us.

In the lecturing workshop we did drama exercises. We had to cast an imaginary net over our audience and then haul them in. I thought - *I can fake this*. But I couldn't. My charade reflected exactly how I felt. I could haul them in, but then I wanted to run away.

I have a recurring dream during marking time. My house is full of people. I get up and stumble over them, they are lazing about, gossiping, using my plates and cups, a crowd of young dishevelled people have come to live with me. They are drinking and smoking and touching each other in my living room and I wander between them. A young woman stands at my sink with cut wrists, her blood trickling down the drain. A brother picks up his little sister and swings her to the sky. I watch the hesitation of a first kiss at my front door. A noose hangs in the hallway. It is them, the students, not their characters or their stories that have come to stay. *Your stories are my dreams*. I begin writing a story about a creative writing teacher who is haunted by his student's stories. It will end - *my dreams are your stories*.

Once I wrote in a grant application, 'I live close to my unconscious.' I got the money. The Council liked it. I'm not sure if I do. At marking time I always imagine myself at Kovalam beach in Kerala and I imagine the hotel where I stayed, right next to a fishing village that just continued as it always had. I imagined the two boats that dragged the net out to the heads each morning and then slowly rowed in. As they approached the shore the fisher people swam out to the net. Then everyone gathered to inspect the catch. And I ate fish for dinner from a tandoor oven.

Each marking time I trawl for stories with my knotty gnarly net of criteria. I catch frayed apostrophes, and sea monsters, and hopes. I wait, and row, and swim out, and I'm always impatient and eager. I want that shift of recognition inside my body when I hear a writer's voice and sometimes I get it. I want the

denouement of the story. I sit with the fisher folk and mend the net, make it work. Re-tie the knots. This is the only thing I am confident about. I am a reader. I fish for stories. I suggest changing points of view, or structures, or to write from the body. I ask how it really felt, or looked or tasted or smelt or sounded. Go below the surface. I say *write about yourself*. 'Kristen, did I tell you I have webbed toes?' Sometimes I ask the students to tell the class something that is special about them. When it is my turn, I always tell them about my toes. I want to laugh and gossip with all the other readers inspecting the catch.

And I'm listening. And doing my exercises, and trying to breathe.

I look over at Kristen's desk. When she's not here I pinch her sticky tape and scissors when I can't find my own. Her Astro Boy clock is ticking. Her papers are arranged with parallel edges; her pens are lined up, red, blue, black. She's not here but I think of her. We've agreed to write together, AND we've listened to each other, AND listened to phone calls, AND to moments with students, AND children, AND to our breath, AND our whispers of love, 'I'll be home soon, I love you,' AND to stories, all those courses and lecturers and tutors and students AND ...

Atwood, Margaret 2002 *Murder in the Dark*, London: Virago

Easton Ellis, Bret 2006 *Lunar Park*, London: Picador

Shriver, Lionel 2006 *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, Melbourne, Text Publishing Company

Winterson, Jeanette 1993 *Written On The Body*, London: Vintage

Winterson, Jeanette 1996 *The Passion*, London: Vintage

Woolfe, Sue n.d. 'Teaching Overview', School of English homepage, University of Sydney [http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/english/staff/profiles/woolfe\\_s.shtml](http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/english/staff/profiles/woolfe_s.shtml) (accessed 16 April 2008)

*Kristen Davis and Sarah St Vincent Welch teach creative writing and creative reading at the University of Canberra, and write about murder and motherhood and madness.*

---

**TEXT**

**Vol 12 No 1 April 2008**

**<http://www.textjournal.com.au>**

**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**