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Reviews contents

***TEXT* Review**

Thinking about writing and research

review by Donna Lee Brien

Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research
Paul Carter
Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2004
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Paul Carter is well known as the author of a series of important interventions into our understanding of history, space and culture including *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), *Living in a New Country* (1992), *The Lie of the Land* (1996) and *Repressed Spaces* (2002). Currently a Professorial Research Fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building, and Planning at the University of Melbourne, Carter is an acclaimed artist whose main works have been public, collaboratively produced works of art. His latest book, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, published last year, takes this artistic practice as a basis to make an equally significant contribution to one of our discipline's most enduring discussions - the status of creative practice as research and, moreover, as the subtitle suggests, how such research practice can be conceptualised and theorised.

Carter begins:

> Material thinking occurs in the making of works of art. It happens when the artist dares to ask the simple but far-reaching questions What matters? What is the material of thought? To ask these questions is to embark on an intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process. Critics and theorists interested in communicating ideas about things cannot emulate it. They remain outsiders, interpreters on the sidelines, usually trying to make sense of a creative process afterwards, purely on the basis of its outcome. They lack access to the process and, more fundamentally, they lack the vocabulary to explicate its intellectual character. For their part, film-makers, choreographers, installation artists and designers feel equally tongue-tied: knowing that what they make is an invention that cannot easily be put into words, they find their creative research dumbed-down…their social and cultural function dangerously dematerialises. (xi)

I like Carter's use of the term 'creative research', although, as he identifies, it is tautological - for 'as a method of materialising ideas, research is

unavoidably creative' (7). In the context of creative writing, we know that writers have always engaged in some form of research as an integral component of their creative practice for, in its most simple terms, as Hoffman states: 'the writer has to know a great deal more than he [sic] actually puts into words if what he writes is to ring true' (Hoffman 1996: 1). Hemingway expressed this in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) in what has become known as his 'iceberg theory':

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway 1932: 192)

There is (or should be) no debate about the fact that writers read a vast array of books and other media texts, observe, eavesdrop, visit places, and utilise all their senses to mine the reality around them to inform their writing. But, as many in the creative arts disciplines nowadays have to ask, writers are interrogating whether their creative activity is scholarly *in itself* (in action and/or outputs) and, therefore, able to be classified as research in the way this term is currently used in the institutional setting.

The relatively recent recognition of creative writing as a viable academic discipline in Australia has prompted a number of writers (and especially those within the academy) to interrogate and conceptualise their practice in such terms. At first, I found this a relatively stimulating activity but, more recently, struggling to come to grips with the newest elaboration of the Research Quality Framework and the latest current round of bureaucratic demands that I justify just how the various work I do - even the most scholarly - is research, Carter's work is a breath of fresh air. Among all the stony-faced 'please explain' requests, Carter compellingly reminds us not only that the artist's primary work is to create art, but that, in the process of doing this, artists actually can't help but reflect upon how their ideas have become art and what exactly it is that they are learning during the creative process.

Carter clearly identifies research in the creative arts with creative practice, stating that 'creative research is, in itself, an act of reflection and invention' (191). This is a combination, moreover, which, at its best, produces knowledge that establishes fertile ground for future invention (8). Carter's argument is premised on an idea that writers are familiar with: that while critics and theorists can only describe or rationalise the creative process based on its final outcome (the work), makers of that work of art can productively reflect on the creative thinking that created such works (xi). In Carter's terms, 'creative research' integrates this usually unarticulated knowledge with the craft 'wisdom' of the artist (xii) to retrieve the 'intellectual work that usually goes missing in translation' when making art (xiii).

What *Material Thinking* does so lucidly (and inspiringly) is to capture and illustrate, through a series of case studies of works Carter was intimately involved in as a creator, how this creative research thinking can be described in a text that is not only informative and instructive, but also a pleasure to read.

While specifically writing about the visual, plastic and largely non-verbal arts, Carter's persuasive argument also holds for the many creative writers

who perceive a tension between the forms of their creative practice (writing) and the scholarly expression of that practice as research (when writing scholarly books, journal articles, theses or other exegetical artefacts). Although dealing with how a series of collaborations result in exhibitions, performance works or video pieces, there is much that Carter discusses that is of direct relevance to those of us who work artistically to produce our artworks in writing. This is because, besides providing a series of models for all creative practitioners (and, perhaps, most especially postgraduate students struggling with the idea of their exegetical work or writers/academics wrestling with grant, job and promotion applications), Carter injects an energetic vitality back into the exercise of thinking about creative work in terms of research and research practice. On reflection, what was most energising for me in reading *Material Thinking* was Carter's liberating (and liberal) use of the words 'art' and 'artist', for this enabled me to once again conceptualise writing and writers in such terms, rather than as a bureaucratically auditable product.

That said, the significance of Carter's work runs far deeper than its use as a tool in the current policy and institutional environment. In *Wisdom, Intelligence and Creativity Synthesized* (2003), Sternberg contends that the analytical and quantitative abilities measured by IQ tests are not a true measure of intelligence. This is not revelatory to those who question the validity of such reductive examinations, but what is more stirring in Sternberg's analysis is the concentration of his argument on the idea that the kind of intelligence required by twenty-first century societies must include creative ability. Dacey and Lennon are even more pressing, arguing that as the world changes from being based on knowledge to information-processing, creative thinking is crucial to our survival as a species (Dacey & Lennon 1998: 226). Robert and Michèle Root-Bernstein elaborate this persuasive view:

> as more and more information becomes available, we understand and use less and less of it. If society cannot find ways to make integrated understanding accessible to large numbers of people, then the information revolution is not only useless but a threat to humane civilisation. (Root-Bernstein 1999: 29)

Enhancing creative ways of thinking, and finding ways to describe this thinking so that it can be disseminated and shared with the community at large, thus not only provides a compelling rationale for pursuing scholarship in the creative arts, but also supplies a good working summary of the core concerns of the new kind of research as it is practiced and generated by artists. Moreover, such conceptualisation keeps the creative impulse itself - which allows for movement beyond merely amalgamating information toward the productive imagining of new ways of reformulating existing problems and generating new ways of understanding - at the centre of this research.

The original, creative innovation which results from such practice - in Margaret A. Boden's terms, not 'mere newness' but 'genuine originality' (Boden 2004: 39) - can, as Carter so lucidly outlines, clearly be argued to form a valuable contribution to the resourceful and generative intelligence our world desperately needs. This removes the exegesis and other writing about the arts from the 'pigeon-holing obsession' (xiii) of critics to a much broader, and important, social context.

Carter, of course, understands this, and indeed defines the purpose of his book as:

> to put into words the distinctive character of creative research, to show how the process of material thinking enables us to think differently about our human situation, and, by displaying in a tangible but non-reductive form its inevitable complexity, to demonstrate the great role works of art can play in the ethical project of *becoming* (collectively and individually) *oneself in a particular place*. Nor is this in the least a solipsistic benefit. To understand how identities form, how relationships with others are actively invented (and therefore susceptible to reinvention) is essential knowledge if societies are to sustain themselves. (xii)

This is to only begin to discuss a few strands in Carter's multifaceted work. Another review could focus on how fascinatingly the descriptions of the six collaborative art making processes are built up and intertwined, how intelligently the many images complement the text, and how attractive and well-edited this book is as a cultural product. Carter's case studies and framing arguments are excellently referenced with descriptive endnotes and a far-ranging bibliography that provides writers-as-researchers with many useful sources for further consideration.

For these reasons, as well as for the pure pleasure of reading this excellent book, Paul Carter's *Material Thinking* is an essential text for all those engaged in the creative arts, whether in, or outside, the academic context.

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***TEXT* Review**

A genealogy of writing: Paul Dawson's Creative Writing and the New Humanities

review by Jen Webb

Creative Writing and the New Humanities
Paul Dawson
Routledge, London and New York, 2005
ISBN: 0-415-33221
254 pp. Pb RRP AU$57.00

There is a remarkably small literature on the teaching of creative writing, or on the place of creative writing in the academy. This has confused me over the past decade since it came to my attention. Why is it that people whose whole *raison d'être* is writing have failed to write about the tentative toehold they have in the Humanities, let alone in the academy as a whole?

Everyone has their own answer to this question. Some of the answers I've heard are: 'We're creative, not academic'; 'Creative writing isn't about institutional questions but about inspiration/craft/communication/[fill in the blanks]'; 'We don't really fit in the academy, so why fight it?'; 'I'm just here to teach writing'; and so on. Paul Dawson, by contrast, has responded to the limits of the literature by giving us this book, a new contribution to the recently and slowly growing list of publications in this discipline of creative writing.

There is something very alluring about any book on one's field, especially when it's a field whose background is not well known. It's a bit like the fascination with genealogy, and the pleasure so many people get out of 'doing' their family tree, finding out where they come from and getting an idea of why they have those particular traits: *Your essays look just like Great-Uncle Michel's! Uncle Roland had precisely that trick of the pen I see in your work, just that tendency to slide into criticism at the drop of an apostrophe*. For people like me who stumbled into the role of writing teacher from another discipline, it is also invigorating to have this evidence of a historically grounded discipline, proof that we are not the new kid on the block that creative writing often seems to be.

But there's more to it than that. For writers who are working as academics, academics who are teaching writing, literary intellectuals (or whatever definition suits), it is vitally important for members of this clan of writers-in-the-university to be able to demonstrate just what we're doing here if we

hope to stay here in the face of the ongoing restructure of the university sector. Are we just the stepchild of English or Literary Studies? Are we just providing a pleasant break for students from the brain-straining work they are doing in communication or cultural theory? Are we what Sue North, in her recent PhD dissertation on creative writing and research, referred to as the 'wild beasts' in the academy (unstructured, irrational, Dionysian rather than Apollonian). Or are we in fact able to take on contractual obligations, to fulfil research projects, to sit on Academic Board and know what is going on?

Paul Dawson's book takes up the critical question of origins and struggles for position, and teases out the complex background to creative writing in the academy, providing a lineage and a valid function for the programs in which we teach, and for the work we do. So principally, it seems to me, the book functions as a very readable history of the development of creative writing as an academic discipline within Humanities and the New Humanities. It also, and very effectively, sets out the quarrels within the field, the perplexities and complexities we face, and the challenges with which so many teachers of creative writing are currently engaged. Dawson does this energetically, in a highly articulate fashion, in a way that encourages, even demands, engagement on the part of the readers. And I did engage, and wrote pages and pages of notes that started off 'Yes but…' and 'On the other hand…' and 'But what about…?'. Inevitably, I disagree strongly with some of the positions he takes (why so little on so central a theorist as Roland Barthes, even if he is now 'virtually antiquated'? (163); why so little attention to the pleasure of reading as a writer, rather than the duty of analysis?; what is that argument about free verse making the craft of poetry more difficult to teach?) and am entirely convinced by others (the parallels between creative and critical reading/writing; the re-definition of ivory towers and garrets; problems with the tendency to leave inviolable and under-theorised the epistemological and critical preliminaries upon which a writing workshop is based).

One of my arguments with the book is that it looks in far more focused a fashion to the US tradition than I found entirely appropriate given the limited attention offered the UK experience and background. (The Iowa Writers Workshop has a whole section plus subsection in the index; Iowa University has a whole section too; but there is only a passing reference to East Anglia University by way of comments made by Malcolm Bradbury, and the UK context doesn't emerge until page 127.) It's worth remembering, as we gaze at Iowa, that the Oxbridge tradition has long facilitated the production of creative responses to works of literature, which suggests a concern in UK universities with the process of literary production as well as with critical interactions. The US model for teaching creative writing is not necessarily the one followed across Australian writing programs, and the heavy emphasis on the US patterns therefore doesn't necessarily shed light on the Australian context.

The book also works from a perspective very much grounded in literary studies, which meant I necessarily had some quarrels with or questions about the argumentative logic and trajectory. Principally this was in the attention given to Theory, not least because the term remains rather under-explained, and in its capitalised form is a pretty archaic term, from a cultural theory perspective. I would have valued a more nuanced approach to the issue, a clearer argument about how it articulates with the creative writing discipline, and more precision about what constitutes Paul's own position on the issues, and what is his discussion of a broader field. I was never clear whether 'theory' or Theory is just another name for cultural

studies or whether it is meant to refer to the whole smorgasbord of *theories* which emerged at the poststructural moment, including all the arcanities of psychoanalysis, feminist theory, media theory, identity theory, Marxism, neo-marxism, social theory, postcolonial theory, Frankfurt School, risk theory, et cetera et cetera et cetera. The reduction of multiplicity to a single term is shown in all its excesses in a quick search of Google.com (my favourite research tool!). Google lists as the second entry (of 114 million) for 'Theory' the website <theory.org.uk>, a site that includes in its disparate band of 'theorists' Jacques Derrida, Julie Birchill, Anthony Giddens, Auguste Comte, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Ulrich Beck, bell hooks and Henri Lefebvre, among others. Such a promiscuous juxtapositioning of time and culture and orientation demonstrates (irreverently) that Theory constitutes a very broad church, and any attempt to collapse it under a single term is fraught with intellectual and political problems. Indeed, as soon as Theory turns up in any text with a capital letter, and especially when it is accompanied by complaints of its dispersion 'to provisional, localized, pragmatic interventions, rather than building to or drawing from a systematic critique' (Jeffrey Williams, cited in Paul's book, 180-81), there is a sense that it has been reified, centralised, rigidified.

This is always going to be a problem when a general noun receives the mark of the proper in the form of the capital initial, because then it begins to work as a master signifier that, in a kind of lay down misere, institutes authorised ways of thinking about it, and makes it a Truth. But this is a small quibble in a response that is in fact filled with admiration, and pleasure that this book has been published, one of the first among (I hope) many about our discipline. And the attention to the question of theory/Theory, which weaves across the book, is a reminder of both its contingency and its importance to creative writing in the academy. It is something that delighted me as I read the book and something I'm confident will continue to be chewed over in conferences, issues of *TEXT* and other publications for some years to come.

The institutional relations are dealt with in a way that seems to me both clear and convincing, and this is a major contribution. There is often a sense that we writers in the academy are the poor relation. Given that writing is not a highly valued profession (at least in terms of its financial returns), lacks a strong institutional framework, and has come latish to the academy, it is not surprising that it is having trouble making headway across the university sector. We have not yet attained the position from which we could effectively influence the university or have effective input into the landscape of value that obtains in this field. Until we do (come the revolution!) we can only benefit from more such discussions about how writers might set out to demonstrate their function in the academy (beyond the basic and obvious one of teaching students). One of the stronger points raised here, to my mind, was Dawson's concept of applying a sociological poetics to the workshop, something that has the potential to produce creative writers who are sensitive and rigorous thinkers as well - a truly attractive blending of creative and intellectual practice, and a smart tactical move.

By pointing out the many approaches to practice, and the sometimes contradictory legitimating statements made by practitioners, this book indicates the heterogeneity of creative writing in universities, and demonstrates the richness of the field. It also, and very effectively, shows the need for more attention by subsequent research, to the questions unanswered or under-theorised about the complexities of the field, and the

shifting relationships between writing and the academy, creative and intellectual pursuits, literature and the market, criticism and the polity. This is an excellent foundation on which we as members of a discipline can - dare I say, should? - build.

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