

Malaspina University-College, British Columbia

Stephen Guppy

Creative Writing in Canada: A Brief Overview of Degree Programs

With a couple of exceptions, credit programs in Creative Writing are a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. In comparison to programs in the traditional academic disciplines, they're also surprisingly scarce. Even compared to the trendy multidisciplinary degrees offered at many Canadian universities - What institution doesn't have its Women's Studies and Cultural Studies departments? - the Creative Writing degree is rare. This is in marked contrast to the US, where the Associated Writing Programs website lists over 300 member institutions, and there are 34 degree programs in California alone, 12 in Florida, and 7 in Connecticut. (Pro-rated by population, Canada should host more than 30 degree programs rather than the current eight.)

The University of British Columbia (UBC - located in a suburb of Vancouver) pioneered Creative Writing workshops in Canada. As their department website tells us, "UBC first presented Creative Writing in 1946 when Earle Birney, then of the English Department, requested one course for the writer 'naked in academe'." The Creative Writing Department was founded in 1965 - "learner-centered, workshop-driven, and interdisciplinary" - and merged with the Department of Theatre and Film in 1995. The UBC program emphasizes the importance of breadth as well as depth in its structure: students are required to explore a variety of genres. The program offers a Major and Honours Bachelor of Fine Arts, a Double Major, a Non-Fiction Diploma, and a Master of Fine Arts - the only MFA in Creative Writing available in the country. For the last few years, UBC's graduate school has been the object of considerable attention in the national media, as its recent graduates have enjoyed extraordinary success as the latest "new wave" of Canadian novelists and short story writers. While the fiction writers among its alumni have attracted the most attention to the program, UBC is also noted for its strong screen-writing and poetry programs and for its inclusion of children's writing and creative nonfiction in the curriculum.

The graduate program at Montreal's Concordia University bills itself as "arguably the best, and the highest recommended, professional writing program in Canada". Concordia's course matrix differs radically from UBC's in that at Concordia graduate students are required to take literature courses as well as writing workshops. ("The 45-credit program consists of 12 credits in Creative Writing, 12 credits in academic English courses, and 21 credits of Creative Writing Thesis.") Reflecting this academic orientation, the degree is a Master of Arts.

The University of New Brunswick (UNB), the University of Windsor (UW - in southern Ontario), and the University of Calgary (UC) also offer graduate degrees in Creative Writing. As at Concordia, these are MA programs, and they require completion of academic courses in addition to Creative Writing workshops. All four of these institutions run their Creative Writing degree programs through their English Department; while specific faculty members are designated as writing teachers, there is no separate Department of Creative Writing.

The schism between workshop-only and hybrid literature/writing programs also exists at the undergraduate level. Three west-coast institutions - UBC, the University of Victoria (UVic), and Malaspina University-College - offer undergraduate Majors in Creative Writing. The remaining undergraduate programs - at Concordia, UNB, UC, UW, and Toronto's York University - are options within a BA-English configuration. York University's website frames the philosophy of the hybrid programs succinctly: "Two major assumptions inform this program: first, that the capabilities of talent can be increased through training; and second, that the necessary curriculum for aspiring writers consists of the study of the language and the writing idioms of past and contemporary writers."

In addition to the eight public universities listed above, a couple of private, specialized institutions offer a relatively narrow spectrum of writing courses. The National Theatre School of Canada (NTS) "is a private, non-profit institution with a permit from the Quebec ministry of education." Located in Montreal, the NTS has the distinction of catering to both Francophone and Anglophone students: its three-year program in playwriting combines writers' workshops with productions. Vancouver Film School includes screenwriting courses in its range of film- and multimedia-related offerings; its focus is on preparing writers for employment in the media - "This program takes a radical perspective: it believes that writers should make a living from writing."

The writing courses within Canada's degree programs are largely "traditional" in the sense that they emphasize the writers' workshop as a method of instruction and learning - like most American programs, Canadian pedagogy emulates the system developed at the University of Iowa. Exceptions include scriptwriting courses with production components (at, for example, the National Theatre School); publishing-management simulations (Malaspina); and lecture-oriented "structure" courses in poetics, narrative craft, and dramaturgy (Victoria and elsewhere).

Canadian Creative Writing programs - especially those administered by English departments - don't generally include journalism or publishing in the curriculum. (The looser category of "creative nonfiction" has been increasingly popular, however; UBC has a strong creative nonfiction component, as do several other institutions.) Newspaper and broadcast journalists are educated in J-Schools - Carleton University, Western Ontario, UBC's Sing Tao School of Journalism, or King's College in Halifax - or at technical schools rather than in Creative Writing programs. (It's not uncommon to run into writers who have taken both an MA or MFA in Creative Writing and a Master of Journalism, pursuing their interest in fiction-writing, say, in one program and developing more easily-marketable skills in the other.) Malaspina is a minor exception to this rule (though its Journalism courses tend to be concerned with "literary journalism"), Victoria a major one. Though its roots are in the teaching of poetry and fiction, the Victoria program has evolved toward an equal emphasis on commercial writing, with courses in photojournalism, for example, and certificate and degree programs in Professional Writing - they've even dropped the word "Creative" from the name of the Department of Writing. Simon Fraser

University, near Vancouver, has developed a respected Master's degree program in Publishing, the advent of which provides Creative Writing students with another option for postgraduate study.

Writers-in-Residence programs - funded by private donations, institutional budgets, or public resources accessed through the Canada Council for the Arts - are an important facet of several degree programs. Calgary hosts the Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writers Programme, "a ten-month residency with an honorarium...given annually to a promising Canadian writer". Malaspina has the Ralph Gustafson Chair in Poetry (this year, it's British poet Carol Ann Duffy) and both Victoria and Concordia have been home to a distinguished list of visiting writers.

A Creative Writing program is more than a program of studies: the formal system of courses and degree programs is paralleled by a culture of informal mentorship. This aspect of the workshop experience is evidenced in Canadian practice by the number of writing professors who have doubled as anthologists and publishers. Former Concordia program Chair Gary Geddes is perhaps Canada's most successful anthologist of poetry (he has also compiled anthologies of fiction); his *20th Century Poetry and Poetics* and *15 Canadian Poets x 3* are as close to a Canadian canon as one is likely to encounter. Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane of Victoria's writing program have been active in promoting young writers through their poetry anthologies. Victoria's founding father, Robin Skelton, devoted a fair amount of his extraordinary energies to editing anthologies and first collections by his students. Marilyn Bowering (formerly of Victoria, now with Malaspina's writing program) has anthologized the works of her students and other young writers, as has Concordia's Terence Byrnes. Tom Wayman, who has taught in several workshop programs, most recently at the University of Calgary, edited a series of anthologies of "work poetry". Malaspina's Keith Harrison recently included a couple of Malaspina graduates in his anthology of west coast short fiction.

The list of Creative Writing faculty who have founded or worked as editors for small publishing houses is impressive. Malaspina's Ron Smith founded Oolichan Books in the mid-seventies; Geddes established Quadrant Editions and then Cormorant Books; Skelton was the poetry editor for Dick Morriss' Sono Nis Press after Morriss (a Victoria printer) acquired the firm from its founder, former UBC Department Chair J. Michael Yates. Long-time Victoria Chair Dave Godfrey founded both House of Anansi and Press Porcepic (now Beachholme Press) in eastern Canada before he arrived on the coast. Many of these small presses have provided a conduit for promising writers entering the publishing world: at one time, Concordia students tended to turn up on Cormorant Books lists, UVic alumni published with Sono Nis, Malaspina students with Oolichan Books, and so on.

Unlike Australia, Canada does not have a national association of writing programs. Some Canadian institutions - Victoria and Calgary, for example - belong to the U.S.-based Associated Writing Programs, and many are involved in provincial-level committees. Given the scarcity of degree programs in Canada and the proximity of the AWP and its American member institutions, it's unlikely that a movement toward a Canadian-only association will emerge any time soon. What is likely is that more institutions, public and private, will begin to develop Creative Writing programs. The market for such offerings, particularly in populous areas such as southern Ontario and the Edmonton-Calgary corridor, is already strong.

For more information on the programs discussed in this article, as well as on non-degree institutes and workshops in Canada and elsewhere, consult

Malaspina's Creative Writing Programs
<http://web.mala.bc.ca/guppy/crewlinks/programs/>

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Stephen Guppy is Chair of Creative Writing at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. He has published several books of poetry and short stories. His new novel, Another Sad Day at the Edge of the Empire will be released in the Fall.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@griffith.edu.au