ACT Writers' Centre, Canberra**Craig Cormick*****Mentoring - alternatives to the curriculum***

Brendan Mackie is a writer. He looks a bit like your average awkward dread-locked teenager, he talks like your average awkward dread-locked teenager - but Brendan is a writer.

He carries large note books, wherever he goes, and fills them with poems and sketches and outlines of stories - and he makes up his own little magazines and peddles them on street corners.

During 2001 I was partnered with Brendan in a mentoring program. When I went through the applicants from young writers taking part in this youth writing project, most were from your average 14-17 year-old writing students as you might expect them to be - a mix of fantasy writing and teenage angst-ridden catharsis - but Brendan's work stood out.

I interviewed the shortlist of young writers who had applied for the program and talked to them about why they wrote and what they got from it - and again it clearly stood out that Brendan was a writer. He wrote not because he had something to say, but because he had to say something. Had to write.

But, being a teenager (a 17-year-old in year 11) this need - this drive - to write was isolating Brendan from his peers at school. He has more passion and dedication to his writing than 9 out of 10 creative writing students at university do - but when we began the program I could feel this background tension about his work - that he wanted to talk - about something beyond the writing - something more about how to fit it into a life? How to treat it - as a curse or a blessing or both? And over the weeks we have talked about that. We find we get on pretty well. We can kid each other and laugh.

He was a bit cautious about the whole mentoring thing at first and wasn't quite sure what to expect. He showed me some poems and a few stories first before coming out with the big one - he's got a novel he wanted me to look at. (Two, in fact, but it's his second one he wanted to show me.)

So what is this mentoring business really all about? He calls me his mentor - but I tell him to think of me as his Tor-mentor.

Brendan and I have trouble remembering exactly how we were approached to take place in the mentoring scheme - and both joke that it is actually a secret conspiracy that matched us.

The Program is run through Express Media in Victoria and, with Australia Council funding, matches a young writer with a mentor in each state. I'm the ACT Mentor because - well - I don't know really - maybe because I've done mentoring of writers before, or maybe I was just in the right place at the right time when they were looking for somebody - or maybe it was really a secret conspiracy by a larger literary force to ensure that Brendan and I got together.

I have to spend 20 hours with Brendan, via phone, email or face to face - but 8 hours needs to be face to face. Considerably more direct feedback than a student at university would

expect to get until they're at the Master's level.

As I said, Brendan, in many people's estimation of the tribes of youth, might be described as a "pot head" - and while talking to me at the outdoor cafe we meet at once a fortnight, some of his friends walk past occasionally.

Hey Brendan, says one.

Hey, says Brendan.

How's things dude?

Yeah, he says.

Then he indicates me and says - Hey, this is my mentor.

No shit? they ask, not quite sure what he's talking about.

Yeah, says Brendan.

Cool. Ok. Catch ya.

Catch ya.

This is Brendan's world and his language that he uses in his work. He catches the sparse dialogue and the silences between it so well.

Let me use Brendan's own words to tell you what he writes about in a sample from his novel:

Right now I'm sat in a dark room. A light is on, dimly. A pad of paper opened out in front of me. I am hunched over it, my hands blurring across it, writing furiously. Sometimes I stop to erase something. Or I get up and get a drink of water.

Some Pink Floyd is playing in the background, sometimes I stop and knot my fingers together and press. Stretch them out. I am alone.

I can hear people walking by my house, happy, clouded by drink, man. Their nighttime sounds filtering in through an open window. Sometimes I pause, maybe chew the end of my pencil a bit. Stretch.

Right now I have no past, I only have these memories and thoughts that rise to the surface and flow through me. No future. No hope. No rest and no sleep and the night pounding in. I'm right here, sitting in some cracked chair hunched over some paper listening to some Floyd. Nothing much.

I remember sitting outside on this bench one night with this guy named Si, it was cold out, the type of still cold that hits you when you sit down. A cold that sinks past your jumper and through your skin and makes you shiver deep down in the bone. I mean it penetrates. We were talking about a party. Or some girl that I didn't want to talk about and I just kinda paused and said: 'We've got history.'

But that was a lie because nobody really has history. History's something for maps and countries. We're just these hunks of flesh that rise up out of the ground and dirt. Nothing much.

Shit. I suddenly felt this wave of insecurity pass through me, this rising lightness at the front of my chest and at the pit of my stomach. That I'm crap. That I can't really write and that I should stop kidding myself and cool it, maybe do something normal for a change. Do something that all the other 16 year olds do. Get drunk a bit more maybe. Go shopping or something. Become this empty suit waking up in the morning and staring blankly into a mirror and then into some cup of coffee and then into a blue screen and just seeing your same old empty reflection day in day out. Make money and see people and live a lie. Shit. I can't do that, man. I can't live like that so I guess I'd better keep on writing, you know? So I have a chance at least.

What I'm trying to say is that two bodies lying together in the night isn't history. I mean wars are history. Bones and graves and newspapers are history. Not people. Not thoughts or feelings or flesh, because when you're dead your body just rots down and in a while there's nothing left. I mean after a while everything piles up and gets written down or something. Then it's history. Then it's important.

Because we're just flesh sitting around right now. We've been fooling ourselves that we're as big as countries and as important as print but we're not really, are we? We're just lumps of flesh sitting around. Whether you're Einstein or Picasso or someone else everybody reckons great you're just flesh. If you're some junky you're just flesh.

What I'm trying to say is that we don't have history. Not something definite and important pushing our lives forward. But memory, man, memory. Just the gentle weight of memory resting on our fleshy old shoulders.

That's what all this is I guess. It's just all these bound-up memories. I mean I'm sitting here at my desk listening to Pink Floyd, writing. Outside something strange is happening and there are booms and cracks and the sound of fireworks but tomorrow morning when I tell somebody it'll just be some memory. If I remember it that is.

Right now I'm sitting down, my back hunched and poking, the night sounds drifting out, scratching letters and words and bare ideas down onto sheets of night black paper. Music is playing. Nothing else really matters. Everything else is just memories...

That and silence.

Brendan's novel, if summed up in a one-paragraph marketing blurb, might say it is about a young guy, about 16 years old, looking for meaning and looking to score dope and get stoned.

But it is in fact about so much more. It's about what it is like to be 16 or 17 and isolated from your friends, but wanting to belong to a group too, and finding all these feelings and emotions that need expressing in some way, but concerned that the act of expression can isolate you as well. And it's about a view of the world from that age.

At its heart, the book is the story about many young kids Brendan's age.

And, as Brendan admits, the book is lifted entirely from his life - his turmoil with girls, his insecurities, his anger and fears.

And together we sit down with his manuscript and discuss how we're going to take Brendan's life, as written there, and make it Brendan's novel - free from the formal

constraints of course structure and need to seek high marks. It's only about the writing.

But mentoring is so much more than that too. It's also about sharing fears and insecurities and dreams. It's about letting Brendan see what the writing life entails - showing him my mountain of reject slips. And it's also about discussing the business end of being a writer - possible publishers and contests to enter, and letting him know that the fears and uncertainties and so on are all a part of the business and life of writing.

Mentor as life teacher

The mentoring relationship is so much more intense than the tutor/student relationship at university can ever be - because it is about sharing lives rather than just how to write. And it can happen in so many different places.

I've invited Brendan along to a few literary events, to expose him to new things and other writers. We went to a poetry night that was a part of the Festival of Contemporary Arts here in Canberra in October. And Brendan got up and read some of his poems and really - really felt a part of it.

Mentor as encourager

I also invited Brendan to the launch of a book I'd co-edited, also a part of the Festival, where 13 ACT Writers contributed to the writing of six stories. Each writing a part and then passing the story on blind to the next writer to continue.

It was a great launch, and all contributors stood up in sequence to read from around the room, each progressing the story a bit further - just like they had been written. It had such a feeling of community about it. And that was something I found Brendan was missing - a feeling of belonging to a group of writing peers. Something that is sometimes taken for granted in a university tutorial.

And I had also recommend that Brendan go to the Newcastle Young Writers Festival...

Mentor as turning pages to new opportunities

...His dad drives him there and back - and he comes back to Canberra wide-eyed with excitement. The place was full of people just like Brendan - young, filled with ideas and a need to write - and absolutely oblivious to the Newcastle Knights winning the rugby grand final that same weekend.

There's a satisfaction he's found in knowing that he belongs to something larger. That he's found like souls. That being a writer needn't be so isolating.

That's something I can't really offer him as a mentor. I'm of a different generation. Have a different voice. Have different concerns. But I can read his work and tell him when and where he's really got it working well.

And I go over his novel, slow and carefully, and give it back to him at one of our fortnightly meetings at the outdoor cafe in Civic where we meet. I've gone over the manuscript in fine detail, marking spelling mistakes and putting question marks beside strange expressions that have mixed meanings - and I've given him five pages of detailed notes as to how he might consider improving the novel both in detail and what he might like to do with the overall structure to improve it.

Mentor as editor

He reads it carefully with a big grin on his face - even the criticisms. He's delighted.

And I've got to tell you - it's not the same look on the faces of most undergraduate students at university when they read the notes I've written on their work.

Why? Well - maybe because the relationship between us is so different from a student/tutor relationship. Maybe Brendan has no feeling of being pegged against others in a group? Maybe because we've been working on the one piece of work so long that he no longer feels any need for affirmation of its quality and can focus on the improvements it needs.

Man, he says. This is just what I needed - somebody to read it and say what really worked and what needed fixing. Everybody I show it to just says - Yeah I like it. It's good.

I stare at him and say - Yeah I like it. It's good.

Mentor as a bit of a wanker sometimes.

We both laugh.

Looking back I try and remember the down side to this mentoring experience. The times of annoyance and frustration or difficulties in effectively communicating between us. Or the times I'd sit in the cafe we meet in, staring at my watch, wondering if Brendan had forgotten again. But they all seem so trivial now. So unimportant.

When the mentoring process is over - Brendan will be out there somewhere working on his novel, improving it getting it closer to publication, which I'm sure he's going to achieve - and that's good - because that's where Brendan and your average tertiary writing student are pretty similar - they both want their work to be the best it can be and they both want to get it published.

And Brendan has sent his stuff out to competitions and ezines and has started getting commendations and winning prize money - and is reading his work more on local radio and starting to feel that his writing fits into something called "writing".

But Brendan's time with me hasn't been about learning the mechanics of writing and editing and preparing him to get out of the halls of academia and be a writer. Brendan lives out there in the world already and he's always writing - but I'm hoping he's now a lot more comfortable about it - and understands that to be a writer you don't necessarily need a degree that validates you - it's something you have to validate within yourself.

And that is something that does apply both to Brendan and to students I teach at university, when I ask them, When are you a writer? - and the answer, as I tell Brendan - When you feel you're a writer.

Mentor as Mentor!

Brendan Mackie's manuscript All of this means nothing has, since this mentoring project, been awarded the Mavis Thorpe Clark Award for Secondary School Students in the Victorian Fellowship of Australian Writers Awards, and was selected for the Varuna Harper Collins Award for Manuscript Development.

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