

## Inez Brewer

### *Varuna's Writing Program*

#### **Abstract:**

*This article seeks to open the discussion of writing programs in Australia to include the rapidly expanding number of professionally oriented writing programs available through Varuna - The Writers' House, and other writers' organisations outside of the university system. It outlines the professional development programs for writers that are available at Varuna, and suggests reasons why these and similar programs are in such great demand. It examines the different advantages and limitations of Varuna's independently run writing programs, compared to university based writing programs. Finally, the article raises some arguments for profitably opening up the dialogue between the different types of program providers.*

#### **The Writers' House**

Varuna - The Writers' House is thriving. For the last ten years Varuna has offered three-week Retreat Fellowships to Australian writers. To date, around 350 Australian writers have been selected to work at Varuna (including many of this journal's readers and contributors) and more than a hundred books have already been published with acknowledgements to Varuna. Varuna is unique, in that it is Australia's only national, residential writers' centre. The recent name change from 'Writers' Centre' to 'The Writers' House', reflects the fact that it is the only place in Australia and possibly in the world, that is wholly dedicated to providing space and time for established writers, as well as a wide range professional development programs for new and emerging writers.

Although it is now ten years old, Varuna's story is a work-in-progress itself. Over the last four years we have entered another phase in our own development and no longer simply offer these fellowships that so many writers have benefited from over the years. By 2002 we aim to consolidate the growing number of mentoring and editorial programs we have established into an integrated, annual series of writing, editing and fellowship programs. These programs are proving to be a valuable and effective professional development option for Australia's new and emerging writers. This year's list of at least 25 books published with (often very warm) acknowledgments to Varuna, is a fair indication that we are getting something right. (See Appendix A for a list of publications from the last three years.)

## The Development of Varuna's Writing Programs

Since its opening in 1990 Varuna has offered an average of 24 Residential Fellowships a year to Australian writers of demonstrated ability and commitment. Since 1995 up to eight New Writers Fellowships were allocated annually. Space and time have always been the gifts Varuna is able to offer writers, and the writers who come through on Fellowships work independently and are free to use these gifts in their own ways.

However the establishment of the New Writers' Fellowships in 1995 highlighted the great and largely unfulfilled need in Australia for professional support services for writers, and extended editorial attention, particularly for new and emerging writers. The consequent boom in Varuna's programs and productivity can be seen as a direct response to the demand for these services, and the decreasing availability of them within the publishing industry where they have traditionally been found. The discovery and nurturing of new and emerging writers, mentoring and editing, are all increasingly unavailable to writers from within the industry, an issue that has been widely discussed recently, in the media, at writers' festivals, and in books such as Hillary McPhee's recent *Other People's Words*. Programs such as Varuna's editorial programs, and mentorships across the country are being successfully developed to fill these gaps. For as long as the current situation exists in the publishing industry, it is essential that these programs, as long as they are carefully designed and constantly evaluated, continue to grow in number and strength.

Since 1998 Varuna has been running intensive residential writing programs such as mentorships and editorial mentorships. These programs, originally devised by Executive Director, Peter Bishop, are supported by the Literature Fund of the Australia Council, and led by appropriately qualified and experienced established writers, editors and other professionals in consultation with Varuna's program developers. In the past two years the writing programs have been the main focus of Varuna's expansion, and from 2001 a Writing Program Manager has worked in conjunction with the Director to oversee all aspects of their design, development, administration, application and evaluation. There is a particular emphasis on educational professionalism and evaluation, with the continued charter of supporting the development of Australian Literature.

Varuna offered its first Residential Mentorships for new and emerging writers in 1998. The first round of these mentorships resulted in publications from authors such as Christine Balint (Allen & Unwin), Craig Cormick (Aboriginal Studies Press), Kerri Glastonbury (Five Islands Press), Suneeta Peres da Costa (Bloomsbury), Michelle Taylor (Five Islands Press), Gerry Turcotte (Brandl & Schlesinger), and Charlotte Wood (Picador).

This program was repeated with the addition of a young adult fiction component and a radio drama component in 1999. Again the successes have been tangible. Six of the writers in 1999's Residential Mentorship and Editorial Mentorship programs have since been published or produced, including Vicki Hastrich (Simon & Schuster), Hoa Pham (Hodder), Anthony Sharwod (Allen & Unwin) and Lucy Williams (Five Islands Press), or have books due to be released later this year.

In 2000 Varuna added a further two significant programs to its operation: a Local Mentorship Program, from which two writers, including Sheridan Linnell (Five Islands Press) have since been published, and the inaugural Varuna Awards for Manuscript Development - an editorial mentorship program in association with HarperCollins Publishers, from which one writer has already been contracted.

In 2001 the program has again expanded to include: an extended Residential Theatre Mentorship (four writers), The Playworks/Varuna Fellowships (four writers), Regional Writers' Residencies (four writers), Progressive Professional Development Workshops

in Poetry, the Novel, and Writing and Illustrating for Children (sixty writers), and the Residential Development Forums for Works in Progress, in fiction, young adult fiction, poetry and non-fiction/fact based fiction (thirty writers), with a further Follow-On Mentorships for ten of the original thirty selected. This last program in particular demonstrates Varuna's main ethos for the interactive programs - to focus on the development of the writer and the integrity and structural soundness of the work, before the detailed development and examination of the manuscript itself. Critical and editorial intervention then comes when it is most beneficial - once the writer (rather than the publisher, editor or mentor) understands what they want the work to do.

The task of 2002 will be to consolidate all these programs into a fully integrated, professionally managed, and pedagogically sound support program. This means that Varuna's writing programs could conceivably support a writer through at all stages of their professional development, from beginnings, to editing, publication, and even the launch. (See Appendix B for a complete list of Varuna's Writing Programs.)

So what advantages and limitations do writing programs in government funded arts institutions have compared to writing programs in government (increasingly un)funded academic institutions? As this paper intends only to introduce these extra-university writing programs to the general discussion, I will only examine the differences between Varuna's writing programs and the programs available in the universities, in terms of the parameters of what we are able, and required, to do. A discussion of the methods, contents and effectiveness of the various programs is something that deserves its own separate space.

A review of the articles in this journal regarding the teaching of creative writing in Australia reveals two main issues of relevance to this discussion. The first is that while there has been some discussion of community-based writing programs, there has been very little research or discussion based on the extra-university writing programs that aim to provide support to intending professional writers. The reason for this could simply be that there aren't many writing programs outside of the university system which aim to do this. Institutions such as Varuna, The Australian Society of Authors, and various writers' centres around the country have recently begun to develop mentorship and other programs in abundance, but there has so far been no discussion of these programs in this journal, and little elsewhere. There is a great danger in these programs operating without self-reflection, and one of the aims of this paper is to encourage some serious discussion between these program providers as well as between them and the universities.

The second issue I wish to examine is that much of the discussion surrounding university writing programs, our closest cousins, centres on the challenges and difficulties of structuring the teaching and learning of a creative discipline within the confines of the current academic climate. The discussions in this journal often surround issues such as assessment and accreditation, research requirements for teaching staff and post graduates, and the elements of critical theory and so on that appear in contemporary university based writing courses.

An overview of the few articles in this journal which deal with non-university writing programs, reveals that most observations are based on TAFE community writing programs. In her paper 'What Writing Workshop Tutors Do', Molly Travers (1999) draws her observations from academic, community and conference writing workshops. Another paper by the same author - 'Older Women and Community Writing Groups' (Travers 1997) focuses on Neighbourhood Houses, TAFEs and The University of the Third Age. Irene Warfe (2001) reports on a combined writing program from the TAFE and higher education sectors. Mary Hutchison (1998) and Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchison (1999) report on a community writing and publishing project. At the time of writing this paper, no articles on the kinds of professional development programs provided by Varuna or in similar institutions, appear in past editions of this journal.

A review of some of the articles about university writing programs appearing in this journal over the last few years highlights the number of institutionally determined issues, aside from the fundamentals of the teaching and learning of writing, which our colleagues in academia have to negotiate. Paul Dawson pinpoints some of these issues in his article 'Creative Writing in Australia: The Development of a Discipline' in which he discusses the need

to define "creative writing" (or work produced by teachers of writing) as a form of research in order to grapple with institutional questions of funding and promotion, and the related issue of how creative work, especially at the postgraduate level, is to be assessed. (Dawson 2001)

Other common themes in the discussions centred around university writing programs, and coming from within the system, regard the nature of university education itself, and the necessary inclusion of elements other than writing in writing oriented degrees:

If you are going to be a writer, or indeed if you are going to lead a productive life, there should be an intense engagement with a subject matter or discipline. (Adams [with Duffy] 2000)

If higher degrees qualify students to teach rather than become professional writers, it follows they must also possess critical skills. In this sense Creative Writing is not so much an institutionalisation of the writer, but a place for the writer-critic. (Dawson 1999)

The universities seem to feel more secure or reassured if lecturers in writing possess postgraduate writing degrees, which leads to an understandable grasping for credentials. The explosion of Masters and doctoral programs in writing in Australia can be seen in this context, too. (Adams [with Duffy] 2000).

However it must be remembered that problems of assessment (see also Kroll 1997), the relation of creative writing to the research quantum (see also Dibble and van Loon 2000), and the roles of postgraduate degrees in writing (see also Krauth 2001), are the unique results of positioning creative writing within the academic context. I raise them here simply in order to highlight some of the institutionally created differences between university and non-university writing programs.

One clear advantage Varuna has over the universities is that we are able to employ whichever writer we feel to be most appropriate for the professional guidance of the particular program, even those who may not have the formal qualifications needed to teach in the universities. (See Glenda Adams' comments on the restraints on the universities in this matter in Adams [with Duffy] 2000.) However members of the teaching staff of numerous universities have also contributed greatly to our programs. In the last four years writers such as Inez Baranay, Tegan Bennett, Kevin Brophy, Robyn Davidson, Anne Deveson, Hazel Edwards, Amanda Lohrey, Jenny Pausacker, Dorothy Porter, Margaret Simons, Charlotte Wood, Sue Woolfe, Brenda Walker and Deb Westbury are amongst those employed by Varuna to lead one of our writing programs. Extremely successful editorial programs have been run by Judith Lukin-Amundsen, Louise Thurtel and Linda Funnell along with other senior editors from HarperCollins, and theatre and radio drama professionals such as Timothy Daly, Edward Primrose, Francesca Smith, Jenny Tate and Alana Valentine have mentored new and emerging script writers.

Some of the main disadvantages of developing writing programs in a place like Varuna, are the lack of financial security and the lack of supporting infrastructure. We currently have to apply for the funding for each program, each year, and can therefore never guarantee their continuity. However, due to Varuna's direct funding, independence from any larger institutions, and status as a non-profit organisation we do not have to charge

full fees or accredit the people who come through. There is no requirement to teach to pre-specified curriculums, or account for our research practices. There are none of the difficulties of trying to function within a larger bureaucracy, and having to deal with amalgamations, restructures and cutbacks. Varuna's selection process is based entirely on the quality of the writing and the potential of the writer, rather than less specific criteria including TER scores or the ability to pay.

For these reasons Varuna is in the privileged position of being able to select those writers whose future development is most assured, and to whom we feel most able to offer the necessary support. We are able to concentrate exclusively on their evolution as a writer, on the gestation of their work, and on the freedom to revise and redesign our programs in order to meet their needs as best we can. If we design a program that is truly valuable, it will be supported by the funding bodies. Participants' evaluations and comments can be immediately acted upon, and we have the freedom to redefine and improve the programs each year, in response to Australian writers' immediate needs. We have the resources to meet the needs of writers at all stages of their development - from beginners through to established writers - and the capacity to have a major new program running within months of conception.

In all, around 200 writers will participate in a writing program at Varuna in 2002, and many of them will be eligible for ongoing support in another program within that or following years. The short, intensive and residential nature of Varuna's programs mean that they can connect a small group of 5-6 writers in a personal and very supportive manner that is often continued informally after the event. Members of these groups often return at later dates and overlap with others, extending into the larger Varuna community, enabling valuable support networks to be formed and maintained. The mix of writers at the various stages of their careers also means a great deal of informal advice and networking is possible, and many agents, editors, and other valuable contacts have been secured in this way. Another informal benefit of participation in a Varuna writing program is the increasing recognition within industry, amongst agents and publishers, of the validity of Varuna's recommendations.

### **Conversation and Consolidation**

As Varuna consolidates this new phase in its development, we envisage both a rapid increase in awareness amongst Australian writers of what we can offer them, and the need for constant review and evaluation in order to provide the most relevant and professional services we are able. We will need to maintain close links with the commercial publishing industry, in order to prepare and advise our program participants. We will need to establish more dialogue with other arts institutions and government arts advisory and funding bodies, in order to share ideas and developments in the running of these programs. We will also need to maintain awareness of shifts in the academic world, and in the ways writing is taught in the universities. This will help us to provide the best complementary services possible to those writers who participate in both, and the most comprehensive alternative for those writers who do not wish to study in an academic manner, or do not have the means to attend or pay.

These are some of the reasons that we wish to make our aims and programs known amongst the Australian Association of Writing Programs. I hope that this paper will serve to offer the unique voice of Varuna's experience to the discussion of Australian writing programs. I also hope that this will encourage more voices from non-academic program providers and the publishing industry to enter the discussion of writing programs in Australia. Institutions like the Australian Society of Authors, Express Media, and writers' centres around the country are all now offering mentorship programs, masterclasses and so on for writers, and the demand for these programs is obviously great. However the possibilities for under or ill-considered utilisation of

funding resources are also great when providers are scrambling to fill the gaps. The Australia Council, the main funding provider for such programs, has recently called for tenders to establish a register and best-practice guidelines for mentorship programs across the artforms, and is also keen to support partnerships between these programs providers and educational institutions.

There is great scope for university and non-university writing programs to interact and support one another. Writers teaching in universities can benefit from fellowships and mentoring or teaching work in places like Varuna. Students in universities can participate in, and reap the advantages of both types of program, the program developers can potentially learn a great deal from one another, and there is great scope for more formal collaborations and partnerships. I hope this paper will serve to promote discussion about how the ongoing development of Australian Literature can best be supported by the different roles of academic and non-academic programs, and how these programs might profitably interact with, or complement one another in the future.

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## Appendix A

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### VARUNA CREDITS 1999 - 2001

#### 1999

Brenda Walker *Poe's Cat* Penguin  
 Suneeta Peres da Costa *Homework* Bloomsbury (USA)  
 Charlotte Wood *Pieces of a Girl* Picador  
 Christine Balint *The Salt Letters* Allen & Unwin  
 Bruce Russell *The Chelsea Manifesto* Fremantle Arts Centre Press  
 Carol Mara *Iron Cradles* Allen & Unwin  
 Christopher Cyrill *Hymns for the Drowning* Allen & Unwin.  
 Anne Summers *Ducks on the Pond* Penguin  
 Keri Glastonbury *Hygienic Lily* Five Islands Press  
 Michelle Taylor *First Language* Five Islands Press

#### 2000

Anne Deveson *Lines in the Sand* Penguin  
 Michael McGirr *Things You Get For Free* Picador  
 Penelope Trevor *Another Man's Office* Allen & Unwin  
 Adib Khan *The Storyteller* HarperCollins  
 Lau Siew Mei *Playing Madame Mao* Brandl & Schlesinger  
 Moya Costello *The Office as a Boat* Brandl & Schlesinger  
 Katherine Goode *The Worst Year of my Life* Lothian  
 Wendy Jenkins *Equations* Fremantle Arts Centre Press  
 Lucy Williams *Birthmarks* Five Islands Press  
 Jayne Fenton-Keane *Torn* Plateau Press  
 Colleen Burke *Pirouetting on a Precipice* Seaview Press  
 Jane Sullivan *The White Star* Penguin  
 Hoa Pham *Vixen* Hodder  
 Linda Jaivin *Dead Sexy* Text  
 Craig Cormick *Kurikka's Dreaming* Simon & Schuster  
 Brook Emery *and dug my fingers into sand* Five Islands Press  
 Lauren Williams *Invisible Tatoos* Five Islands Press

#### 2001

Tegan Bennett *What Falls Away* Allen & Unwin  
 Patti Miller *Writing Your Life* Allen & Unwin  
 Meaghan Delahunt *In the Blue House* Bloomsbury (UK)  
 Kate Shayler *The Long Way Home* Random  
 Gerry Turcotte *Flying in Silence* Brandl & Schlesinger  
 Philomena van Rijswijk *The World as a Clockface* Penguin  
 Gail Bell *The Poison Principle* Picador  
 Joan London *Gilgamesh* Picador  
 Rosie Scott *Faith Singer* Hodder  
 Shirley Walker *Roundabout at Bangalow* UQP  
 Vicki Hastrich *Swimming with the Jellyfish* Simon & Schuster  
 Linda Jaivin *The Monkey and the Dragon* Text  
 Sheridan Linnell *Cutting Room* Five Islands Press  
 Wilga Rose *Rituals of Light* Five Islands Press  
 Terri-anne White *Finding Theodore and Brina* Fremantle Arts Centre Press  
 Anthony Sharwood *You Talkin' To Me?* Allen & Unwin  
 Kathryn Lomer *The God in the Ink* University of Queensland Press  
 Trica Dearborn *Frankenstein's bathtub* Interactive Press

Other Varuna writers contracted to be published in 2001 include:

Loubna Haikal (Picador)

Barbara Temperton (Fremantle Arts Centre Press)

Bronwyn Lea (University of Queensland Press)

## **Appendix B**

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### **VARUNA'S FOUR-TIER PROGRAM FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

(The program, partially dependent on funding approval, for 2002)

#### **TIER ONE**

available to all writers / fee paying or partially subsidised

##### **Progressive Professional Development Workshops**

Consecutive one-day workshops and masterclasses specifically designed for writers (not necessarily beginners) embarking on, or engaged in a major project (60-70 participants).

##### **General Workshops and Courses**

One 8 week Life Stories course - (12 participants)

Two week long residential, special interest workshops (24 participants)

#### **TIER TWO**

selective / partially subsidised

##### **Development Forums for Work-in-Progress**

Six Residential Development Forums designed for writers already engaged in a major, viable literary project. (30 participants).

##### **Non Residential Development Support Program**

Application Reports and Manuscript Development Consultations will be available to writers who have either applied unsuccessfully for any of the programs, and writers who have participated in a program and require ongoing advice and support. (up to 30 per year)

##### **Local Mentorships**

Up to 8 writers from the local area to be selected for 6 months one-on-one mentoring with an appropriately selected professional established writer. (up to 8 participants)

#### **TIER THREE**

selective / partially or fully subsidised

##### **Follow-on Mentorships**

10 writers from the Development Forums will be selected for a further 6 months structured one-on-one mentoring, with an appropriately selected established writer. (10 participants).

##### **Retreat Fellowships**

24 writers are selected each year for 3 weeks' each of independent retreat. (25 participants)

##### **Playworks / Varuna Fellowships**

4 playwrights are selected amongst the Residential Fellowships writers for 3 week's Fellowship plus mentorship support from Playworks (4 participants).



### **NSW LitLink Varuna Fellowships**

2 special Mentored Fellowships to be offered in 2002 - 2004 for writers from regional NSW.

### **Regional Writers' Residencies**

As above for a further 4 regional writers from elsewhere in the country (with priority given to WA, Tas and NT writers) (4 participants).

### **Supported Fellowships**

Annually granted fellowships currently supported by: Queensland Arts Council / Everald Compton, South Australian Government through Arts SA, ACT Government. (5 participants)

### **Paying Residencies**

Subject to availability (20 per year)

### **TIER FOUR**

selective / fully subsidised

### **Residential Editorial Mentorships for New or Emerging Writers**

4-5 writers from tier 3 are selected for a week's one-on-one editing of their manuscript with a professional editor.

### **Residential Editorial Mentorships for Established Writers**

4-5 established writers from tier 3 are selected for a week's one-on-one editing of their manuscript with a professional editor.

### **Varuna Awards for Manuscript Development with HarperCollins**

4-5 writers are selected for one-on-one editing of their manuscript with one of 4 HarperCollins editors, over 10 days at Varuna.

*Inez Brewer has just completed a Master of Education in Adult Education at UTS in Writing Program Development. She works as the Writing Program Manager at Varuna - The Writers' House.*

*For more information on Varuna's writing programs contact Inez Brewer or Peter Bishop at [varuna@varuna.com.au](mailto:varuna@varuna.com.au) or download application forms from [www.varuna.com.au](http://www.varuna.com.au)*

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**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady**

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