

TEXT

The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs

Editorial

Waving: Two Stories About Teaching Writing

1. Writing Holidays: Teaching Creative Writing in the Greek Islands

Nigel Krauth writes:

I'm sitting with my laptop in the \$25-a-night Hotel Europa, two streets back from the port at Corfu Town. Within walking distance I can visit all the major settings of Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, and a half-hour bus ride will take me to the house where Lawrence Durrell wrote *Prospero's Cell*.

I expected this linking of the island to modern creative writing; indeed, that's one of the reasons I came here. The Durrells 'made' Corfu, so to speak - 'put it on the map' - particularly for the British, and for the rest of the English-reading world as well. What I did not expect was that Corfu might be associated with the teaching of creative writing.

Corfu is now the focus for a series of 'writing holidays' called *Great Escapes at Casa Lucia, Corfu*. These writing holidays are aimed at anyone with enough money to pay for a week of good Greek island accommodation plus tuition by an internationally famous writer. The people who enroll tend to be middle-aged English professionals, people who will hop on a charter flight in foggy London or Birmingham on a Monday afternoon and be learning to write poetry with Brian Patten in the Corfiot sunshine on Tuesday morning.

In an interview with Donna Lee Brien in this issue of *TEXT*, Michael Steinberg talks about the popularity of Master of Fine Arts writing courses amongst 'older' American students who return to (university) because they want to pursue a different life than the one they have been living since they left college. Many have been married (and/or divorced), raised families and/or pursued careers. And now they want to write - something they may have always wanted to do but either didn't have the time or circumstances that would allow them to do so... Since the MFA is self-enrichment for them, they come with full knowledge that the degree will probably not lead to gainful employment. They're in these programs because it gives them the opportunity to work on their writing under the guidance of practicing writers.

This aspect of university writing courses has not often been discussed in *TEXT*. As teachers in tertiary institutions we are directed away from thinking about education for leisure or entertainment purposes, or for lifestyle enrichment. Australian university mission statements in recent years have enshrined vocational-oriented teaching and career-skills learning.

The hidden agenda, however, has been otherwise. Universities are perfectly happy for areas of the arts and communications to earn money from fee-pay writing certificates or diplomas that have minimal vocational value. These 'on-going education' awards can be lucrative business for the departments/schools where they are taught.

Allied to this is the growing number of young students who now take creative writing majors in bachelors degrees for the same reason English majors were taken in the past - not with a career in mind, but as a generally-enriching learning activity (or a kind of Spakfilla for the degree, perhaps).

It is useful for university creative writing courses to keep an eye on things happening beyond the wall. Here in Corfu one of the editors of *Poetry Greece* runs the writing holidays for the British.

Wendy Holborow is a poet, TESL teacher and editor who has worked as a journalist and now organises *Great Escapes at Casa Lucia, Corfu*. The Great Escapes are week-long courses in poetry, short story and popular fiction writing, as well as in literary translation and film animation. Also included are T'ai Chi and Yoga courses, and the ultimate cross-disciplinary creative study 'The 3R's: Writing, Riding and Reiki'.

The Corfu courses are based on the better-known Skyros courses. According to Holborow, if you mention 'Skyros' in Britain, people don't think first of the Greek island of that name, but of a series of creative writing holidays. 'Similar courses are running in Mallorca,' she says.

The Mediterranean islands began as teaching-writing venues as an extension of on-going writing holidays in the more picturesque and literary parts of England and Wales. To the formula of beautiful landscape plus literary association the islands added sunshine and sparkling blue seas. The islands of Mallorca, Skyros and Corfu - where writing holidays are centred - are associated with the British writers Robert Graves, Rupert Brooke and the Durrells, respectively.

Holborow doesn't agree that this kind of writing course attracts the non-serious prospective writer. Similar to Steinberg's characterisation of the 'older' MFA student, Holborow identifies the writing holiday-maker as a professional 'doing the course as part of their work, but getting a holiday at the same time - rather like attending a seminar or conference.

'It's a learning experience first of all. But it's easier to get inspired in a context of sunshine and blue seas. It's hard to be inspired in London on a grey day.'

Holborow thinks these courses attract, especially, 'older' single people who are looking for something new and interesting to learn while also meeting and interacting with others at a cerebral level. 'Bouncing ideas off others is an inspiration,' she says.

Steinberg and Holborow indicate a world where mature-age students are keenly looking for new learning and new social interactions after having participated in structured career lives. The creative writing course - whether inside a university or extra-mural - has high appeal for these participants. Tertiary creative writing programs in Australia already need to cater to this clientele.

It is an irony that one outcome of the universities' narrowing down of courses for young people to singular career-mindedness will produce, at the other end of the career pattern, an urge to return to learning in a more creative frame, to broaden and experiment.

So when you retire from your career as a lecturer in creative writing, you may wish to take a writing holiday on a Mediterranean island. 'Your best inspiration is to book a flight to Corfu,' Wendy Holborow says.

2. Thinking About Story: Teaching Creative Writing on Glenhuntly Road.

Tess Brady writes:

I'm sitting at my pentium, old now, in my study at home. It's the last day of working on this issue of TEXT. I'm at home because my computer at the university crashed in quite a spectacular way. There was a terrible clanging sound and then a ticking. If I was in somewhere like Ireland I would have fled the building. Instead we extracted what we could from the ticking, crashing, bumping computer and I moved myself and loads of files to my home office.

My study over looks Glenhuntly Road. It's busy with shops and cafes and banks and trams and wires criss-cross the sky. I enjoy the activity, the people-noise of it all.

Looking out of the window I can see Sima, my neighbour, choosing flowers from buckets outside the florist. She doesn't know I'm watching her. Nigel Krauth is on one of the Greek islands- we're editing from my home study and his hotel and the local internet café. A phone call but I missed it- just another message, only this one from Greece. Our editing email is punctuated with social chit chat. Mine, as often as not, about building and plumbers and stripping the staircase back to the seasoned oregon. And Nigel comments on the people he's meeting, his story of a librarian stuck in my mind, and travel plans, and the islands themselves. And in this issue there's been a third player, Komninos Zervos, up there in Queensland, putting together our second special issue - *Writing On-Line/On-Line Writing*. He's commissioned pieces from around the world, set up a chat room, and he's organised the special issue, the story of on-line writing, to grow with a new contribution each month. The gradual formation of the special issue will take place over the six months between our editions of *TEXT*. It's an exciting idea.

So at times there's been a three way conversation, Nigel, me, Komninos, Greek Islands, Melbourne, Gold Coast. All through it I've noticed more of Komninos' story- he's from a Greek family and grew up in Melbourne. When I mistyped his name by forgetting a letter he sent me a story - so I'd remember that 'n'. He wrote, "k.omni[vore] [potent]nos"

I tell you these human stories because they are just that, stories. I'm becoming interested in how our need to tell stories, to each other, to ourselves, to the wider audience, this need we as writers understand, is moving slowly into the academy.

It's moving into the academy in two ways. In the way we teach and also in how and what we examine. And in this I think we might be developing something of an Australian style or flavour.

...in how we teach

As this issue is published Brenda Walker in Western Australia is editing a series of chapters on aspects of teaching writing for a book she's putting together. She's asked a lot of academic-writers to contribute and tells me in an email

"Editing this book is like unwrapping Christmas presents." Her book is important, perhaps more than any of us first thought, because it is asking so many writer-academics in Australia to think and write about aspects of our own curriculum. This call for chapters has generated a certain amount of email and phone talk between colleagues and what seems to be emerging, at least in the people I have talk to, is a desire to write about our curriculum in what I might call a humanist sort of way. Rather than looking at the teaching of writing as an almost scientific series of steps, many see it as an holistic activity where ideas, research and thinking are equally important, not with classes on technical aspects of writing, but with challenges, risk-taking and encouragement.

It seems to me that this is a very different kind of approach to those all too familiar how-to-write books which engage the reader in a step by step learning structure. What differentiates the two approaches is that the holistic one is less safe because it takes away the comfort of learning in small steps, of learning neat and defined tasks. It takes away the comfort that writing is just about acquiring certain skills - when you have enough you are publishable. And it takes away the safety from both teacher and student of knowing exactly what is going to happen in the next seminar.

Are we teaching into some grand narrative here? Are we teaching how to tell and write story by talking about ideas, politics, sociology, morality, philosophy, divinity and not by talking about full stops, repetition, character development, or scene? Or are we combining the two in some kind of intricate weave of sophisticated literacy?

And all this is at a time, as Nigel Krauth points out above, when universities are opening their doors to want-a-be writers and mid career professionals who will pay to have access to those scientifically taught and acquired skills.

How do we marry the two? Do we, in order to not bite the hand that feeds us, have two or multiple curriculums bringing out the step-by-step comfort one as soon as we smell a whiff of discontent? Or do we develop skills as salespersons, a particular kind of story-teller who sells the riskier curriculum to those who initially came for the comfort of safety?

...in how we examine

The other way story is moving into the academy, and *TEXT* has been at the front of this debate, is via our examination process. Most of the current debate on this issue consists of a string of argued positions as to the value of the creative work and its inclusion into the degree examination system. What now interests me in this debate is how, by allowing the creative to be at least part of the examination requirement for so many of our degrees, albeit gradually, the academy, in its most pure guise of research, is allowing the inclusion of narrative. Narrative in the form of fictocriticism, in the form of the novel, in the form of short stories, in the form of novella, in the form of script or play, in the form of biography, in the form of creative nonfiction.

What happens to the analysis of the worth and value of the creative PhD if we name the creative as story? To put this another way: if story is a way towards the PhD, the most stringent gatekeeping examination we have, then what kind of pressure has been put on the academy to accept the validation of story as a vehicle for knowledge? Is it *story* rather than *creativity* which is knocking on the doors of the academy? I wonder how much more radical a position this is, for story breaks down any talk of objectivity and builds grand risky ventures in the sky.

Recently the writing team at the University of South Australia, led by Prof. Claire Woods, won a national tertiary teaching award. It's a significant achievement both for that team and for writing as a discipline. *TEXT* hopes to carry an article about it in the near future. Talking with David Homer, a member of that team, I was impressed with one of their methods - they offer a subject called *Writing the City* and for that subject they move the classroom away from the safety of the cloisters to the city streets and lanes.

The students collect up the story which is there- leaning in doorways, at the back table of a café, in shop displays, or in a glimpse of a woman at her computer. If you look you can make her out, there, in the window above the shop.

I am back on Glenhuntly Road. Sima looks up from the flowers. She's selected a bunch of orange and yellow carnations. She sees me and waves.

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