

## The Mouse

University of Technology, Sydney/Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

### *Glenda Adams (with Judy Duffy)*

#### *Interview between Glenda Adams and Judy Duffy*

*(This interview script was initially recorded on 2 August 1998. It was revised and expanded by Glenda Adams in March-April 2000.)*

**JD. Glenda, you have taught fiction writing in America at both Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College, and you now teach fiction writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. You have been teaching writing since 1976. You are one of Australia's leading teachers of fiction writing. Would you speak about any differences and similarities you have experienced in the teaching of writing in these two countries?**

GA. In talking about writing, I am referring to what is called creative or imaginative writing. And my comments here stem from my own writing and teaching experience in Australia and the US and from the various discussions and debates I have encountered during the past ten years as universities throughout Australia have set up writing programs.

American universities and colleges (college generally refers to the undergraduate arm of the university) began to include writing in the curriculum about a hundred years ago, although it is only in the last fifty years that writing courses have become widespread first in undergraduate and then graduate programs. Writing is an accepted part of a liberal arts education and is available to students in all areas, not just English. It is not unusual for American undergraduates majoring in history or engineering to include a writing class or two in their program.

In Australia, the teaching of writing in the university is much more recent. At UTS, which has one of the oldest tertiary programs in Australia and has included writing subjects in the BA in Communication for some twenty-five years, writing is seen as an important part of the subject offerings, along with the postgraduate programs set up during the past ten years. But perhaps because writing subjects and courses are relatively new in most universities, it is my impression that we in Australia often seem to need to justify the teaching of writing within the university, to ourselves and to our colleagues. Certain academics already within the university worry about what they call intellectual rigour, as if there isn't any in creative writing. This attitude may be changing as more undergraduate and postgraduate writing courses are introduced or expanded. They are popular with the students; there is a demand for them; and not least, there is support for them because there is the prospect of such courses bringing in much needed money.

Regarding graduate programs, in the US there has been some debate about whether the Masters should be the terminal degree and whether doctorates in writing are appropriate for the field. I think there is room for debate on this issue. But at the same time, there is pressure on Australian universities to increase doctoral programs. I don't like writing courses to be seen as training programs for writers or teachers of writing - they are not a qualification as such - although many of those who study writing go on to publish their work and to become teaching writers. 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.

I see the postgraduate programs as a gift of time that allows talented writing students to pay serious attention to their work in a community of people with similar interests, for whom writing at this point is a priority in their lives. I once heard Kate Grenville say that studying for a Masters in the program at Boulder, Colorado, saved her ten years as a writer working in isolation. It is not often that writers get this chance to pay such close and continuous attention to their work, and it can be tremendously helpful for writers in the early stages of developing their art and craft. For most of their lives, writers are trying to earn a living and have to struggle to fit the writing in somewhere.

Not all students should be expected to become writers, just as students can study chemistry without becoming chemists. Undergraduate programs should be available not only to those who may indeed go on to become writers and publish their work, but also to those who want to try it as part of their overall education. Classes should be able to accommodate both kinds of students. Creative writing can help a student's writing in general; students often find that their written work in other areas improves by applying some of the concepts they learn in a writing class. For students who have a fear of writing, a writing workshop can help to demystify the writing process. Through writing you also become a better reader.

Basic to all teaching of writing is the writing itself. Students must write; teachers of writing should be writers. Now and then you get a gem of a lecturer already within the university who is not a writer but who has an excellent editorial sensibility and an ability to teach writing and that's great. But in principle, it seems to me that it should be writers - writers whose work is published - who teach writing, just as historians teach history...

In the end a writing workshop is a writing workshop. Once it gets going, it doesn't matter where you are, the US or Australia. Each class has its own dynamic and something happens, something that is good, that gets its life from the members of the class and from the writer who is teaching. Each writer has different strengths and different views, and students must take from each teaching writer what he or she has to offer and understands about the process, just as the teacher responds to the students and also helps them to learn from one another. It is a given that you conduct your class with integrity, both with teaching and with grading or marking, and that you run your class properly. If someone is teaching well or poorly, it becomes apparent. A big plus for the writer who is teaching is that you rarely get students who complain about having to take a workshop. They want to be there. This is a big plus for teaching.

**JD. There is a decline in the number of students wanting to study the humanities subjects. Does this have anything to do with university acceptance of writing courses?**

GA. The decline in the study of the humanities is lamentable. I've always seen writing as part of a broader education - and an important part - and usually writing is situated within the humanities faculties. Writing cannot exist in isolation. Undergraduate students should not be able to take only writing subjects for their BA. For post-graduates it is different. The student presumably has an undergraduate degree and has shown some talent and is now ready to do intensive work in writing.

Writing should not be separated from the study of languages, history, psychology, literature, music, and so on. 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. This is an unpopular stance to maintain in these times when universities are embracing the corporate model, offering extremely tailored courses cut to perceived current trends, and students are seen as clients, and from above comes the requirement to show that your course is preparing students for specific jobs and to guarantee definable outcomes. Australian universities are much more vocation and outcome orientated than they used to be, as a result of the present philosophical and educational climate. Students come out of school asking what job can I get with this? What good will it do me? Which is a sad question, isn't it, at a time when young people should be taking intellectual risks and exploring new possibilities? If students can no longer do this, then the whole society will be the poorer.

**JD. When we are running writing courses, we have to justify our existence by producing lists of students who have been published or gained employment.**

GA. While I am sure all programs keep track of those students who are successful in publishing their work and feel this gives credit or validation to the program, which in many ways it does, publishing is not necessarily the measure of a writing program, particularly an undergraduate program. There are the differences I have mentioned between the goals of undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

But in general, writing is part of this grand enterprise called education, and takes place within the university and outside it. A writing course in the university should contribute to your becoming a thoughtful and curious person. Several centuries ago it was considered essential for an educated person to be able to write poetry. But tertiary study in Australia, particularly at the undergraduate level, is becoming more specialised, and there is pressure on departments and staff to claim territory, to claim students, and thus to justify and protect their position. We compete with one another. We all feel under threat as funding is cut and the university as a centre of true learning and independent thinking is being dismantled.

In the US, in my experience, you do not have to justify your work or account for it in quite the same way. It is accepted that writers are the appropriate ones to teach writing. The tradition there is to invite published writers to come and work with the students. Writers come from their writing worlds to teach workshops in the universities. The students hear a variety of views and approaches from practising writers. And thus there is not a great division

between writers in the university and writers in the 'outside world', as unfortunately there tends to be here. This is a division I'll talk about later.

**JD. The teaching of writing, should it be taught by writers? Would you give more reasons for this?**

GA. As I said, I came from a tradition where writers teach writing. The writer understands there are no prescriptions for writing or for the teaching of writing. And yet the teaching writer, as a practising writer, has a certain knowledge and experience. Implicit in the teaching is an understanding of writing theory, which is different from critical or literary theory. Writing is not a vague pouring out of words and feelings. On the contrary. And anyone who has sat in a three-hour workshop, as teacher or student, knows how concentrated the attention is and how exhausted you are at the end of the time. In teaching, the writer tries to articulate and pass on what he or she understands about writing - about the process and the theory implicit in the process, about the literary tradition and the whole area, and how creative work originates and develops. We show how we work as writers, how we read as writers. (My most valuable classes when I was an undergraduate, the classes that have had the most enduring influence, were the ones where the lecturers allowed us students to see how their minds worked, how they tackled the exploration of their subject and arrived at their ideas.)

Just as there are no formulas for the writing of a creative work, there are no formulas for the discussion of a creative work. There is a critical language that can be learned. Nevertheless, I think it should be something of a struggle each time to put the criticism into words and to explore the work, without resorting to jargon or catch phrases or prescriptions.

Of course I'm not opposed to literary or critical theory and its intellectual intricacies. That would be silly. It is simply a different undertaking from what we call creative writing. (All writing, all scholarship, is creative, or should be.) The methods of each differ. The study of literary and critical theory have been termed disjunctive in that the text is taken apart, separated into its parts, analysed, organised and codified, whereas the composing of a text has been termed conjunctive, since it brings together unexpected and disparate elements in a new way each time. You can study literary theory as you might study history, and write in the discipline, but it is not imaginative writing. If an English department wants writing students to make their writing connect to theory, why don't we in writing insist that teachers and students of literary theory be required to connect the theory to the practice and write a novel or a collection of stories? (I have been told that the first writing classes set up at Harvard in the nineteenth century came out of a conviction that the logical outcome of the study of literature should be the writing of literature.) I am not setting up an opposition here, just drawing attention to the differences between the two endeavours and some existing tensions. I have encountered criticism of writing classes, that they should be based on theory, which usually means critical theory. Writing theory, as opposed to literary or critical theory, comes out of the practice of writing. Whenever we talk about writing we are naturally talking about writing theory. If I seem to be setting up an opposition, which I am not, it is because writing is new in the university and needs to be defined, without being slotted into existing disciplines.

For me, it doesn't really matter what a student studies alongside writing, as long as the student engages with some other subject matter, be it history, cultural studies, literature, languages, mathematics. It is that passionate engagement and stimulation and knowledge that I have already mentioned that is important. Writers come from all kinds of backgrounds and jobs. Among some of our established writers are a doctor, a nurse, an accountant, an engineer, a journalist, a Chinese scholar.

In my view, the ideal program would consist of a core of tenured staff, published writers - both established writers and those at the beginning of their career - with other writers coming in to teach for a short period, and paid appropriately.

**JD. Students of writing are quick to inform us that not every writer - no matter how famous - CAN teach writing. What qualities does a writer who teaches need to bring to the classroom?**

GA. Teaching doesn't suit every writer. Nor should it. Not all writers would be effective teachers, but in my experience those who would not teach well are not drawn to teaching in the first place. They might try a semester and if it doesn't work, they don't want to come back or they are not invited back. I asked a writer friend once if he wanted to come in and teach a class, and he refused, saying he would rather slit his throat. In my case, I had never actually thought of teaching until Grace Paley called me one day, when I was living in New York and trying to work seriously at writing fiction. She had read a story of mine in *Mother Jones* and was asking if I wanted to teach at Sarah Lawrence. I found myself saying yes to the idea of teaching. I was at the beginning of my writing career, having published stories in literary journals and also a small fiction collection. I had worked in other jobs - in the press section at the UN, in radio news, doing freelance journalism and editing, and at the time I was helping to run a nonprofit group called Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York City, doing my own writing at the same time. I was terrified to teach, but luckily discovered it was something I enjoyed and could do. And also luckily for me, that

early teaching helped me to develop as a writer, too, forcing me to think deeply about writing and to articulate my understanding of composing a creative work.

The main thing for a writer is to find a way to earn a living and somehow do the writing, and the job may well be teaching writing. We have not had a strong tradition of tertiary education in our society in general, and a lot of our writers don't come from a university background. Some of our finest and most intelligent writers have not been to university-and some of those who have been to university are not especially gifted as writers. Just as on the part of the academy there is a suspicion of writers and what they do, so writers are suspicious of the academy. There is a mutual wariness. The academy thinks the writers know nothing of substance. The writers think the academy insists on theory-based writing. I think this division is unfortunate.

When our universities advertise for a lecturer in writing they now ask for postgraduate qualifications in writing, which eliminates the possibility of employing many of our best writers. The emphasis favours the formal academic credential rather than focusing on the quality of the creative work, and in so doing we are implicitly rejecting some of our fine writers, who could very well teach. Peter Carey, for instance, did not complete a university degree and went into advertising, and think how fortunate we would be to have him teach one of our classes. I could name a dozen others like that. Many writers I know see the writing that takes place in the university as something apart from the writing done by writers. Many writers, who may or may not have a BA and usually don't have any kind of MA or PhD, but have behind them a trail of books, each one of which is the equivalent at least of a PhD, think they are not welcome in the university.

Not all writers want a full-time job. But to teach for a semester would suit many of them, between major projects, as a way to have a guaranteed income for a while, and their presence would enrich any writing course. At one stage at UTS we ran a Master Class. Kate Grenville, Rob Drewe, Murray Bail, Helen Garner, and Drusilla Modjeska came for two weeks, each giving a talk open to all students, and then running a workshop for advanced students. They all conducted the workshop in different ways. Each brought something different to the class; all could pass on something of value to the students. Each class was a unique creative endeavour, and that is how it should be. The following year we repeated the class, inviting five more writers to come, but unfortunately cuts to university funding and the resulting budget restrictions have put an end to this kind of flexibility.

#### **JD. The teaching is itself a creative endeavour?**

GA. Teaching in itself is creative, and this is why I like the idea that every writer will bring something new, something different to the class. Underlying all our classes at UTS is an understanding not only that questions of craft and technique can be directly addressed but also that there is a necessary uncertainty, not-knowing, and surprise during the process. As writers we have to establish that balance between craft and art and as teachers to pass this on to the student.

#### **JD. As writers who teach, we each find our way to pass on what we know about writing. What have you discovered in this process and what are the essential aspects we can pass on to our students?**

GA. One of my fears when I began teaching was that all the students would end up sounding the same at the end of the semester and moreover that they would end up sounding like me, because I would somehow teach the way I wrote and expect them to write like that. To my surprise, and I continue to be surprised and gratified by this, by the end of the workshop they sounded more different from each other than they were at the beginning. Other teaching writers have noted the same thing. The students might all start off sounding the same because they come with preconceived notions of what so-called good writing is, but by the end of the semester they have learned to drop the received ideas and sound like themselves. This is a true measure of the success of a workshop. I think it is the job of the teacher to elicit from each student his or her best, and at the same time to pass on ideas of craft and technique that are essential, not because they are rules or theories that have been laid down but because they are the tools through which the writer explores and makes discoveries. I don't care if a student writes realism or lights upon the strategies of formalism or transgression. I don't see an opposition there. What counts is the work itself.

#### **JD. Jan Hutchinson said yesterday that they also provide us with a common language from which we can move out...**

GA. Yes, and that is different from using catch phrases which in fact can limit discussion. Each time you talk about a piece of work you are making a journey into unknown territory as you try to articulate and elucidate what it is you are thinking about a work and what it is you are trying to give back to the writer. This is one of the most important elements of a workshop: to be able to listen to, attend to, and discuss another writer's work. Each has to be discussed in its own terms and this is arrived at during the discussion. In the process you must take the risk of offering

responses that might be off-target, not useful, but I have found that the off-target response can trigger a new response that is indeed useful, but the second could not have been expressed without the first.

### **JD. Structured teaching?**

GA. When I started teaching it was at Sarah Lawrence College, which is well known for its arts programs and has a relatively large writing staff. I started off thinking the students would write, and we would talk about it. I have become much more structured. For those who have never attended a writing class before, or who are trying writing for the first time, I found I saved a lot of time by looking immediately at fundamental elements, say, concrete imagery, dramatising as opposed to writing synoptically, approaches to characterisation. And as we did this, we were accumulating knowledge and practice of writing theory, which each writer has to discover for her- or himself. You cannot be handed the theory and then go off and apply it. You write and you uncover the theory for yourself.

At UTS, we give writing exercises in the introductory classes. What is important about them is that they are open-ended, in that they can be developed into longer work or form the basis of a more sustained exploration. I have seen some wonderful writing develop from these introductory assignments. Some students just take off with them, and three or four years later, when that student is writing a novel, I see the seeds in one of these exercises. So, there is no lid, no saying we've finished with that, now we'll do this. All the elements are connected. We are never done with them. They are intertwined. This is why we don't know what will come up in each class. And it is why a syllabus should be flexible, and the students should understand why that is so. I know what I want to cover during each class and over the semester, but there must also be room to adjust the plan and we should resist the tendency to make our courses conform and to codify what we do in our classes. Students might want instructions. They want to clutch something tangible that tells them exactly what to do-which is not necessarily the best thing in writing and the student should learn to understand this. I find it difficult to make in advance detailed outlines, with each hour accounted for and the reading list fixed. 'Week 1 characterisation, Week 2 read A, B, C.' For me, it changes every semester, reflecting changes in my thinking and experience. Whoever is teaching will create, or should create, their own approach and their own reading list. Naturally, we can also exchange ideas and draw on the experience of our colleagues in fruitful and exciting ways.

### **JD. You say that craft is often the means of breaking free from the self?**

GA. Or breaking free from requirements and expectations imposed by the self or by some imagined authority or judge that can hobble you and hold you back from developing your writing. Sometimes the very focus of an assignment can free you to take risks. You are anchored, you are holding on with one hand to the necessity of the assignment and then you can float off around the planet because you have a handhold. Instead of the exercise limiting or manacling, it functions as a little handle. You are not going to fall or get lost. And you are not going to worry if this is 'good writing' or not. You can go anywhere. This is different from the exercise that asks for the 'right' response, with the student asking 'Did I do it right or wrong?' or 'Is this what you wanted?'

### **JD. As long as these traditional elements are presented as potential, they do have this freedom. In the very setting down of these traditional elements in an approach to teaching, our universities are demanding curriculum outlines, there is more and more pressure on us. How are we going to hold on to our integrity and meet the requirements?**

GA. In these times we must count heads and the money each student brings. The pressure is on for huge classes and to think of different ways to teach writing other than the workshop, which in the current economic climate starts to seem like a luxury, although at UTS we continue to have strong support to teach writing as we see appropriate and this includes relatively small workshop groups. Workshops must be small in order to be productive, and the work that goes on there is quiet and unspectacular. The rewards or the results often come a long time later.

### **JD. So any 'blueprint' should be readily abandoned if needs be. Is that part of our philosophical approach?**

GA. Yes. But this doesn't mean a laxness. As for 'blueprint', I think we all acknowledge the notion of introductory, intermediate, advanced. We know that kind of progression. We develop a curriculum, and within each subject we know what we need to cover. We acknowledge that the teaching writer must develop her or his own approach. At UTS in the advanced or specialised workshops, teachers have the freedom to shape the class in accordance with their expertise. In first year writing, the teachers get together and agree on a syllabus, or what concepts will be introduced, and a reader or a reading list is assembled, but it is left up to each of us to cover the material in our own way. I have never found a textbook that I can use - parts of textbooks, yes. I introduce concepts in an order that makes sense to

me, and I would expect my colleagues to do the same. I would also expect us to share our ideas - problems as well as successes. The teachers in every program I have been involved with are extremely conscientious, always questioning, making shifts and looking for solutions if the class stalls for some reason.

I find I often can't use someone else's handouts and readings, and I don't think others can use mine. They are personal and idiosyncratic, and they change from semester to semester, and throughout the semester, depending on how the class develops. I can enliven the class with my own handouts and examples because they have enlivened me, but another teacher may not be able to use them. We are fortunate in teaching writing because we can reach into any century, any continent, any genre, any medium for our exemplary material. (When I say 'exemplary' I don't mean that the work introduced is to be imitated. Exemplary material is intended to expand awareness of the possibilities open to the writer of imaginative work.) In a fiction class, I might have the students read poetry, scenes from plays, nonfiction articles and essays, in addition to fiction. This broad reach is stimulating for the teacher as well as the student.

I think we have to hold on to a flexible approach, with teachers and programs developing distinctively, in their own way. I would hate to see any kind of uniformity imposed on our classes and courses in Australia. That would be deadly and run counter to the spirit of teaching writing.

It might be useful here to describe the somewhat unusual approach I encountered at Sarah Lawrence. They invited writers in and gave them the liberty to shape the class they wanted to teach. The fiction writers, for example, maybe five or six of us, formulated our own subjects, which would be put out in the handbook. It could change each semester. The students understood that they would do their own writing and also take part in an exploration that was important to this particular writer who was teaching them. During registration, the students talked to you about the class. You checked that the student was up to it, and they decided if it was what they wanted to do. It worked well, but such an approach probably needs a large program, with a number of teachers offering a variety of classes. Several American graduate programs incorporate elements of this structure, too.

#### **JD. You say there can be no blueprint for writing.**

GA. You can't say to students, 'You need a beginning, middle and end, you need rising action, a climax and a catastrophe, and now go off and write a story'. You can't say, 'Patriarchal dominance is implicit in the three-act structure, now go off and subvert it'. These are all interesting and stimulating ideas, to be explored, but the students need to discover them for themselves through the writing, along with the possibility of challenging them. Of course, as we know, craft, technique and writing theory can be understood through the writing. What must be nourished, and cherished, is that balance and tension within the writer between the composer and the editor, the creator and the critic, the supplier and the shaper, what Nabokov calls 'rapture and recapture'. It's a continuing athletic dialectic that is fundamental to all writing, which the students acquire the more they write.

#### **JD. No formula?**

GA. I would say you should make use of anything that is helpful, discard what is not, and hold on to your own vision and convictions, but adjust them as your experience and understanding grow. One of the things I ask students to do in the novel-writing class at UTS is assess those How To Write books that you see on the shelves in bookshops and the library. Each student chooses one and reports back to the class with a critique. The books are a mixture of what I think of as 'inspiration' books, such as the interviews with writers in the *Paris Review*, Annie Dillard's *The Writer's Life*, Donald Barthelme's *Not Knowing*, Ben Okri's *A Way of Being Free*, which can make you fly back to your desk thinking, 'I'm going to write!', and practical guides such as *Handbook of Novel Writing*, and *Conflict, Action, Suspense*, containing step-by-step instructions. The resulting discussions are fruitful. The students also read and analyse half a dozen novels. We can then discuss to what degree we absorb an understanding of the novel and of writing a novel through reading novels themselves and through the guides and advice. This reading, along with their own writing experience, helps students to engage in debate about writing and writing theory.

#### **JD. I would like to see that our students of writing are in touch with the conversations writers have been having with each other over the centuries.**

GA. That is an important part of the learning for students, to hear writers talk about their work. There are surprising similarities when eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers talk about their novels, such things as 'Not sure what I'm doing here', to paraphrase Sterne, Shelley, and Maupassant, or 'Keep the language simple and concrete', to paraphrase Keats. Those *Yacker* interviews compiled by Candida Baker provided an excellent forum for Australian writers to talk about their work. But in the past several decades there hasn't been much talk by writers

about the writing itself or perhaps it has been overshadowed by some of the more contentious and conspicuous debates about critical theory.

**JD. What is your understanding of literary theory and the role it plays in the teaching of writing?**

GA. I've mentioned the difference between literary and critical theory and writing theory. It makes me uneasy to think of a writer taking any kind of theory and writing to it. Now it could work for some writers, it absolutely could. But it is more likely to lead to dull creative work written to an idea or ideology, in short propaganda, in that the outcome or the journey is known at the outset. I fear I might be somewhat alone in this view. As I've said, studying critical and literary theory and doing the writing are different endeavours. I've also said that writing students should embrace a broad education, beyond writing, and that could well include critical and literary theory. And that's fine, splendid.

Many Masters programs in Australia require a theoretical component for the creative work. Some divide the Masters thesis equally into creative and critical components. That's OK if it makes sense to those programs. And if we agree that there is a strength in allowing the various programs to develop in their various ways with their various strengths and approaches to offer, then students can seek the program that seems to provide for their own particular development. But most writing students are not trained in theory. They are studying writing and when they veer into theory for the thesis requirement, the thesis risks being weak both critically and creatively. I have read gorgeous fiction writing, Masters theses, beautifully written and structured, works of art, and then I've read the accompanying critical essays, analysing the fiction and so often slipping into the catchphrases of our day, degenerating into a solipsistic tract which, in my view, ultimately has the effect of diminishing the creative work. It is difficult to write a novel or a collection of stories, just as difficult as writing an academic Masters thesis or a PhD dissertation, and it takes time. In my experience every day of the year or two allocated in Masters programs is needed for the creative work-and when you remember that creative Masters theses can sometimes run to 90,000 words for a fully-realised novel, even two full years seems too little time.

It is important, however, to remember that when the creative work is fully realised, it looks effortless, easy. The labour that has gone into it is utterly invisible. This is a measure of the accomplishment. But I think it is what makes the university and some academics uneasy. It appears that the student has just tossed off this piece of work in a month or two.

At UTS the Masters thesis is accompanied by a 3,000-word essay written at the completion of the course and reflecting on the work. It can provide a context for the creative work and also incidentally help the examiner to approach the work, since we often call on examiners who have not had experience with creative theses. The student is free to shape this essay in any way that seems appropriate. It might, for example, give the writer the opportunity to assess the process and evolution of the creative work; it might explicate in more depth the research carried out for the creative work, or investigate other work in the genre. I don't think it is proper for writers to analyse and explain their work - it is up to others, critics, to do that. The theory the creative work contains is right there, in the work. The writer, however, can certainly reflect productively on the work and try to understand its origins and evolution and influences.

**JD. How are we going to get the universities to accept the intellectual rigour of writing as a research project and how is it going to be assessed?**

GA. We don't have refereed journals as the academic disciplines do. [*Clearly the existence of TEXT slipped Glenda's mind – Eds.*] And this worries the university and the funding bodies - where is the assessment? But we have journals appropriate to our field, the literary journals, and there are the book publishers. To get published in these quality journals your work has to get through an editorial committee consisting of your peers. You also have to get through that tough editorial judgment to have a book accepted for publication, and then there's the very public critical assessment after publication. Writers are always being reviewed and assessed by their peers. The work is always under scrutiny as it is submitted to editors and to the bodies that award grants, fellowships, prizes. If writing belongs in the university then those who are in the field must be accepted as having the qualifications to set standards for the creative project. I don't see it as a problem.

**JD. Practice can inform theory?**

GA. I would assume that the creative work, the text, is always informing literary and critical theory.

**JD. We teach with the certainty that there is mystery and we teach the students to be uncertain.**

GA. In writing, along with craft, you are teaching a journey toward uncertainty, which becomes more rather than less pronounced during the creation of the work. You know there is a story or a poem in here somewhere, and you are going to find it, but you are not certain where you will end up. Why is Anna Karenina still with us, but the criticism of the mid-nineteenth century is not? Why is Dickens still with us, and *The Divine Comedy*? I don't know, but they are. There is the mystery. And we should honour this mystery. It is connected to the profound pleasure we find in reading literature, although in the university we don't often use the words 'pleasure' or even 'literature' these days.

**JD. Assessment?**

GA. When I first came back to Australia briefly in 1980, after sixteen years in New York, I was writer-in-residence at Adelaide University. The idea of a writing workshop was quite new back then, and there was no writing in the curriculum. I ran a workshop in the lunch hour for anyone interested - students, staff, community. It was great fun, and everyone took it seriously, writing heaps. But I remember one staff member in the tea room saying that surely English departments should teach only Chaucer to Joyce, and not look at contemporary writing, because we didn't know yet whether it would be great, and we should certainly never teach creative writing because there was no way to assess it. This was astonishing to me, especially when I remembered the way essays were marked when I was a student and the vagaries and inconsistencies there. But I should add that Adelaide appointed a full professor of creative writing a few years ago and now offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs, a concrete demonstration of the blossoming of tertiary writing programs in Australia in the past fifteen years.

The difficulty of assessment has often been cited in the arguments about writing courses. In the US writing classes are usually graded, A, B, C, D, F, and it is up to you as the teacher to work out your grading system. You have to be able to justify it, and while I found the most unpleasant part of a writing class was the grading - since you tend to develop a close relationship with the group through their work and the approach in class is usually to encourage the creative attempts. But it is possible to give grades. You let the students know what you expect, regarding attendance, assignments, doing the writing and getting it in on time, contributing to class discussion, making class presentations, and so on. Because the learning that takes place in a writing class happens gradually, students must write regularly and not just cobble all the assignments together at the end of the semester. Important learning also takes place between classes as the student writes and reads and reflects, and just as important the student must give close attention to the work of the others in the class and learn to put the criticisms into words. You let all those requirements be known and you grade the work. At UTS we have Pass/Fail for writing classes, which works well.

**JD. With the A mark, do you often find that spark of originality that makes the difference?**

GA. Yes, yes, something special, along with contributing to the class. For me, an A grade is special, rare; B plus, B, B minus mean promising and satisfactory; C means you haven't given your full effort and taken the work seriously. But you make your scheme, you let them know what it is, and you can explain your grades if you are called on to do so. My grades might be a bit different from yours, but that is the case with all subjects, isn't it? Also, I don't grade or assess individual assignments and exercises, because I don't want students to get into the right/wrong mode, asking 'Is this what you wanted?' The students should feel free to take risks with their writing, and not every assignment is going to work well. It is important not to say you get a B for characterisation and an A for dramatisation. But you have to indicate to students throughout the semester how they are doing, where their weaknesses and strengths are. You can do this by talking to them or writing comments in response to their work.

**JD. So you don't use publication standards as your criteria?**

GA. No, certainly not. How can a student in a workshop be expected to do work that is ready for publication? Even at the postgraduate level, I see the thesis as open-ended, one stage in the development of the work for publication. Work that satisfies the examiners of a university thesis may be brilliant, exceptional, but it is not necessarily ready for publication. There will be variations in the quality of writing theses just as there are in the academic disciplines. Not all theses will find publishers, some because they are not good enough, some because they are too good and publishers are unwilling to risk something too different.

**JD. Let us look now at teaching methods: the formal lecture, various methods of workshopping, general classroom discussion. There is also the critical appraisal of text.**

GA. I see the workshop as the foundation of the writing class. Lectures, guest lectures, discussion of the readings also play a part. The writing class is one of the few places these days where you get a close rhetorical study of text, both of the writing done by the students themselves and of the exemplary works used in class. It is also important for writing students to read widely, and this includes reading literature, 'classics' as well as contemporary writing. I wouldn't mind assembling a reading list of, say, two hundred works that postgraduates could be expected to have read by the time they finish their course, but I don't suppose this would have much support.

In my classes I find that I usually talk for a while, lecture on an aspect of writing that I want to cover - voice, dialogue, structure, modes of discourse and so on. I bring in some handouts, examples drawn from everywhere. I like to teach that our sources are all around us - in books, newspapers, what we see on the bus, on television, at the cinema, or an overheard conversation or a memory, and of course in our reading. This week I might have found an exciting piece of writing by an early nineteenth-century Prussian that demonstrates something of importance to us, say synoptic writing. I'll bring it in and we'll look at how the writer achieves the effect. Sometimes it may be simply a piece of work that has given me pleasure or moved me and I want to pass that on, reminding us of that mystery. Sometimes students bring in writing they want us to discuss. You never know what will come up in class and you have to grab it when it does. Maybe it's something on indirect speech within a passage of dialogue. I might not have been intending to speak about indirect speech until next week, but I'll deal with it now because the students' writing has brought it up. You have to be that flexible.

I like the students to read aloud in class. Listening to a work, a privilege provided by the workshop, is different from reading the work on the page. Through listening you can develop an acute editorial ear. You can hear the clumsy phrases, the unclear thought. You acquire an aural awareness, an awareness of language - images, rhythms, sounds - which is often seen as the province only of poetry but which is fundamental for all writing. Also, by reading aloud the author has the gift of an audience and can sense in the listening the effect of the work, or lack of it.

It is exhausting work, listening. If you put your head around the door and saw us sitting there listening to a story you would come away thinking it was easy work, a bunch of people just sitting there, but the whole time we are concentrating intently and thinking hard. In an introductory class you are considering shorter pieces. In an advanced class, you are looking at more sustained work, and making copies of the work in advance of the class might be more appropriate, especially when questions of structure are being considered. Concerning the set readings, we read as writers, looking at how the writer has put the work together; these are not book reports. Studying writers from a writer's perspective can give new insight into the work. So we can add that as one of the benefits of the writing workshop: it produces better readers.

#### **JD. Writing exercises?**

GA. Regular exercises and writing from the first day, with the introductory classes.

#### **JD. Do you have one you will share with us?**

GA. I've developed a lot of exercises for my classes, but I can't cite them in brief here. The exercises come out of the work the class is doing and out of a discussion of the concepts embodied in the exercise. It's not just a matter of do that, do that. Sometimes there is twenty minutes of discussion before the exercise is given out.

#### **JD. Writing classes should not be directed to some aesthetic notion of talent residing in the student?**

GA. As a teaching writer you have to learn to talk about all kinds of writing. Some of the work is going to be fabulous, some not. I guess I would be of the encouraging school. I think most teaching writers, but certainly not all, encourage their students. I knew one writer in New York with a different approach. He had students read their story out loud, and as soon as it faltered - it might be after only one sentence - he would call a halt, call the story rubbish, and send the student off to begin again. Next time, the student might get through three sentences. This writer had a certain following - and very good contacts in publishing. But if I were a student, I couldn't write for someone like that. Every time students bring work to class and make it public, they are taking a risk, and it is a risk that has to be honoured. You have to find a way to criticise honestly and constructively without demolishing the author. Not everything that is brought in is going to be great; not everyone is going to be a great writer. But with every piece of writing there is something to be learned.

#### **JD. It is perhaps not our place to discourage?**

GA. I am saying that everyone who wants to write should try it. I, as the writer who is teaching, am there to help this process, this exploration. And we, as teachers, should be both encouraging and honest. Giving criticism doesn't mean speaking cruelly, although some students mistakenly think so. You can talk in a soft voice and point to the clichés, the dead writing. You might have to let the students know explicitly that this is indeed criticism, even though you're not speaking harshly or heaping scorn and disparagement.

I have heard Grace Paley say, 'Everyone in the world should write.' She meant that words and language are terribly important and telling a story is important. Any activity that makes you deal with words and language is surely good. The outside world will take care of whether it is published or not, whether it is wonderful or not. There is an aesthetic to writing. Not every text is equal.

**JD. You have a reputation for pointing out the qualities of a piece of work that is working well and of showing why another is not. This was in an article in *Island*. Tony Mitchell has also written that you have that ability.**

GA. That was generous. His was a positive article, about approaches to teaching writing.

**JD. It seems to me that universities, mainly for financial reasons, need to find a place for creative writing within the curriculum. In doing so there is an attempt to distort the natural shape of the teaching of writing, or for that matter shapelessness, in order to fit it into established areas of study. Do you find that?**

GA. I see writing as having its own necessities, just as with any area of study. The writing area itself should define those necessities. We wouldn't dream of telling some other department to fit in with some established scheme we writers think is right. We are serious about our work, and we understand what we are teaching.

**JD. One of the things we see as a problem is, as Yeats says, 'the stitching and unstitching to make our writing appear but a moment's thought,' which creates a sense that anybody can write. Does this play a role in the questioning or intellectual rigour?**

GA. I think so. As I've said, there is a sense on the part of non-writers that writing is easy. In fact, it is this 'ease' that is the measure of a work. It appears seamless. It appears effortless. And no one who hasn't tried to write has any idea how hard it is to get to that apparent ease, how much work is involved. Sometimes I imagine curating an exhibition showing the creation of, say, a novel. Each writer would have a table, to pile all the notes, the drafts, the discs, the books read and referred to, and the triggering items that helped in the process, along with the loads of work discarded in waste paper baskets.

**JD. Can that explain in some way that novels are not equally recognised as research points within the university?**

GA. Creative work has not created many points for the research quantum, although I know our research office at UTS has tried to get creative work acknowledged appropriately. A novel that takes years to write may not rate as much as a refereed article. And yet my friends in various academic disciplines tell me that it is in fact quite easy to get a refereed article into one of the academic journals - they write up a minor finding and publish it, and there's a point for the quantum. There is brilliant work and mediocre work; both get published in refereed academic journals; both earn the same points. I'm not disparaging work in the other disciplines. In writing, there is also brilliant and mediocre work. But as writers know, it is hard to get a novel accepted for publication or a story in a reputable journal. Since writing has been accepted in the university, it is discouraging to see that the work we do is not valued in the same way as work in other areas. The universities and the government funding bodies have to trust us. As teachers and supervisors, we know what we're doing.

**JD. Any advice to a writer new to the teaching of writing?**

GA. No one gave me any advice and I was terrified. It's probably useful to sit down with a writer new to teaching and just talk through some of your experiences and the experiences of others. This is how so and so has done it. This is how I have done it. This is what we cover in this class. The new teacher should take anything that is useful. Emphasise that they can shape their own class, and that it's a good idea to get the students writing right away. Part of learning to teach writing is figuring it out for yourself, constructing your own way to make available what you understand about it all. As with the writing itself, there are no formulas. And for a teaching writer, the learning

continues. Each class, each group is different, and as you develop your own craft and understanding and practice, your teaching develops, too.

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