

*Jeri Kroll****Honouring Students: What can a successful creative writing honours program offer?*****1 Introduction**

This paper explores the turf of creative writing honours students. Do they live just around the corner from the ordinary undergraduate or have they packed up and left the old neighbourhood? Have they strayed across the divide between undergraduate and postgraduate, rubbing shoulders with those who seem to be blessed with a vocation and perhaps even a scholarship to pursue it? When they begin, do honours students have a clear idea of what they want? For example, how ready are they to be independent and to be judged by professional standards? Do they no longer need intensive literary study? How connected is their work with possible career pathways once they graduate?

This paper investigates these questions within the context of the mercurial nature of undergraduate and postgraduate programs of creative writing around Australia and the concomitant debates about the vexed relationship between literary criticism and creative writing as well as the nature of research. It acknowledges the diversity of approaches and highlights some that this writer has found useful.

Finally, it examines how the creative writing honours thesis can be a culmination of the honours year. It suggests that to be successful, a program must offer more than the chance to concentrate on an extended project or to experience intensive editing, although it certainly must provide support as students become self-reflexive and independent. The honours year must allow students to synthesise the critical and creative aspects of study so that they can orient themselves in the contemporary culture of writing. In addition, a program must be practical, confronting the hard truths of the writing world, which is affected by marketing as well as literary considerations.

2 Background

From the first creative writing was an institutional arrangement for treating literature as if it were a continuous experience and not a mere corpus of knowledge - as if it were a living thing, as if people intended to write more of it.

- D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, 4

Honours and postgraduate creative higher degrees have proliferated in Australia over the past two decades. According to Nigel Krauth, who recently surveyed the daunting array of possibilities, 'there [are] thirty-seven universities offering a total of 142 named awards....' and '18 [are] at honours' level (Krauth). Some of the institutions that offer the honours year have an undergraduate creative writing or creative arts degree; others do not. Some offer the equivalent of the honours year without the title.

Let me focus for the moment on the possibilities in South Australia. Flinders University allows students to take two topics in honours creative writing, and this is a requirement if they also want to write a creative thesis with exegesis as part of the normal English honours program. The University of Adelaide has just instituted a named honours degree (making it the 19th institution?) by incorporating their students into the Graduate Certificate/Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing topics, which are the gateways to their Master of Arts in Creative Writing. The University of South Australia has an honours year in their Professional Writing major (BA Communication Studies). Students can focus on 'multimedia, journalism, information management, public relations, marketing or drama' (AAWP state seminar 2000). Some honours theses demand vocational as well as more traditional literary skills. For example, students can organise a commissioned piece (report, journal article) that they will present as part of a thesis.

The Adelaide Institute of TAFE offers an Advanced Diploma of the Arts (Professional Writing), which does not aim to function as a bridging degree to higher study, but focuses much more on 'training' [see Endnote], and so it will not be discussed further here.

Whether consciously or not, many institutions, especially those that were not formerly Colleges of Advanced Education or Institutes of Technology, have followed the American lead in letting creative writing develop 'as a means of unifying the two main functions of English departments - the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature' (Myers xiv). Nowadays students pursue their creative work under the auspices of departments with titles as diverse as English, Cultural Studies, Communications Studies or Professional Writing. No matter what the organisational framework, writing students still sit side by side often enough with their literature-oriented peers - and in the latter group I intend to include those who are primarily interested in theory and cultural studies. The distinction is between those who primarily want to write about texts and those who want to produce their own original creative work as a result of reading texts. The creative and critical hybrid thesis - creative product and exegesis - which is common now in Australia (although not in the US) keeps these two strands to the fore. It also keeps us in mind of a tradition of writer-critics/philosophers that began in classical times (Dibble), developed in the eighteenth century and set the groundwork in the nineteenth century for modern twentieth-century literary criticism.

Kevin Brophy in his study, *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing*, suggests reasons why this association between literature and writing should remain the case, although he appeals not to the origins of the teaching of writing at universities, but to the necessity for creative artists to remain flexible: '...I argue that if creative writing students are to maintain a level of sophistication and insecurity important to resisting rigidity in their approaches to writing they should be integrated with departments and courses focusing on literature and cultural studies. They share too much with these disciplines to be usefully divided from them' (Brophy 203).

Whatever their entry path, whether students come from a more traditional or more flexible literary and communications background, with access to the new technologies, by the time they enter honours topics they expect to be creating original fiction, poetry and non-fiction as well as theorising their practice, whether on paper or not. But how focused are they really at this point, how confident of what they are about to undertake? Despite the myriad approaches on offer, are there common goals towards which honours students should be moving? Should this year truly be a transitional one either to postgraduate study or some type of writing career?

3 Student Profiles

Really and truly, basically what was useful for me, in terms of my parents and the world [was that WAIT] gave me four years to write when I would have perhaps just been on the dole trying to learn how to do it.

- Tim Winton, Interview with Jeri Kroll, 1990

Although Tim Winton completed an undergraduate BA (major in Creative Writing), his comments about his training raise the question of how focused writing students are by the time they reach an honours year. Winton seems to have had little doubt about his vocation - it was a matter of time, he implies, not of focus or ability. By rehearsing a personal anecdote about his schooling, Kevin Brophy also suggests that for some students, the decision to choose the alternate pathway, the non-traditional, isn't fraught: 'Perhaps one lesson here is that education works best when we are asked to do what we would choose to do anyway' (Brophy 1998 6). I had experiences similar to Brophy's in primary school. Sometimes I was allowed to write creative work - poems in my case - instead of standard compositions on one of those stirring subjects such as 'Book Week' or 'Spring'. And yes, my retrospective enjoyment of my output was influenced by the grades I received and, as I grew older, whether I was eager to attempt those creative exercises again. Since I was rewarded, I wrote poems all through high school. But those experiences didn't make it easier to decide what to study at university or at a postgraduate level. I find when I talk to students today many are plagued by the same questions I found bubbling to the surface years ago.

It does take a certain amount of confidence in one's talent to bolster the enthusiasm that makes someone decide to do an undergraduate degree in writing, but what about the student who majors in English or a related field and has only taken a few writing topics, or completed a stream? As Krauth has said, there are a bewildering number of pathways at present in the "gumtree" (Krauth) and sandstone universities, whose histories testify to radically different origins for writing topics; and we still do not possess a huge amount of knowledge about what our colleagues are doing.

For many students, especially those who do not begin as writing majors, the decision to freefall into creative territory is only possible if they have an academic parachute strapped on. And I do not think at this level that this state of affairs is necessarily a bad thing. It might prevent some uncomfortable bumps, let alone serious accidents. I will return to this loaded statement later, because I can feel some of the hard-line research fiction adherents squirming in their seats. For the moment, let me say that as I have been thinking about these issues over the past months, I have come to realise that safety is not primarily why I have thrown my crash helmet into the ring on the side of the critical exegesis to accompany the creative product. More on this admission later when I look closely at what we might want our students to achieve in our discipline.

Before proceeding it is worth mentioning the reasons why students take creative writing topics at any level, because as teachers we hope that there is some match between their expectations and ours. I have surveyed students at the beginning of writing topics by questionnaire and then subsequent class discussion, and reported some of the responses in an early paper about assessment published in *TEXT* (1997).

More recently, Steve Evans and Kate Deller-Evans have published 'True Lies? 1997 Survey of Creative Writing Students' (*TEXT* 1998), which canvasses both undergraduate and postgraduate students at Flinders and Adelaide Universities. Although the sample was small, the range of responses supports anecdotal evidence from conferences and discussion with colleagues. They cluster under the headings of personal and artistic growth, educational development, practical skills acquisition and vocational training. In other words, some do it for pleasure ('love of writing' Evans & Deller-Evans), some want to acquire and/or enhance literary and editing skills, and some actually think that one day they might make a living out of their passion. 'A need for discipline, structure, pressure, motivation' and 'wanting the culture and company of other writers' (Evans & Deller-Evans) can apply to more than one category: the pleasure, educational and vocational principles all at once. To take this range of needs and desires, to make them sufficient to pursue a particular course of study, can still be a significant leap for an undergraduate.

At Flinders University, we are now in our third year of allowing students to specialise in creative writing under the umbrella of the English Honours degree. At the beginning of their first year of tertiary education, many could not have predicted they would one day be embarking on this course of study. Some tasted the opportunity to write creatively in a lone assignment in a traditionally-structured literature topic, and then progressed to creative writing topics in their own right. Others knew immediately that they wanted to flex their wings in that direction. Yet despite the variations in background, the most frequently asked question when students contemplate taking what many perceive as a bold step into honours is: 'Am I good enough?' Then they follow up with: 'How will I be assessed?'

By the time postgraduates have completed a PhD, and perhaps published creatively along the way, most will have developed a reasonable amount of confidence, but students at honours level are at times painfully dependent on their lecturers' evaluations. If they have fulfilled the requirements for English Honours, they know that they can write a standard critical essay to a distinction level, but a creative thesis? It's all uncertain territory. For many, deciding to pursue this course of study is as threatening as moving out of home. It signifies a level of responsibility where there are no guarantees; they are juggling a new set of variables. How to structure a longer work? How to commit to one genre rather than another? Why commit at all - to mix or not to mix? Then how much research to do; how much background and primary reading? How to structure the exegesis? How far to explain oneself if at all?

If students have come primarily from a literary background and have taken additional writing topics, the transition to honours can indeed be a bridging year, leading to the confidence of the postgraduate. As the quotation that began this paper points out, historically creative writing was meant to marry - or reconcile - alternate but complementary ways of understanding literature at traditional universities. More specifically, 'Under the heading of creative writing, literature was conceived (in Michael Oakeshott's phrase) as both an achievement and a promise, an inheritance of texts and a flexible set of methods and standards for generating new texts' (Myers 4).

'*Reading as a writer*,' Dorothea Brande's term (as reported in Myers 158) is one of the primary ways of studying literature if the object is to generate new texts. Another pertinent term is 'vocational criticism' (Myers 158), learning how genres work in order to decide how one wants to make them work oneself, especially if the object is publication. The writers of the old canon are not excluded as material necessary for this process - they might simply be looked at in innovative ways. And of course they are not the sole touchstones any more; they are one of a number of possible texts to be examined so that apprentices can learn about structure and pattern, about what they might want to reject, accept or expand.

Of course, this is not a new idea, but in the early twentieth century, when universities were not interested in teaching writing, literary men and women were responsible for educating themselves, no matter whether their orientation was conservative or radical. Brophy recounts the wonderful incident at the 1920 Festival Dada in Paris, where 'André Breton wore a sandwich-board which advertised Francis Picabia's Far-Sighted Manifesto: "In order for you to like something it is necessary for you to have seen and understood it a long time ago, you bunch of idiots"' (Brophy 11, quoted from Altshuler). Substitute 'to create' for 'to like,' or add it on. Aesthetic appreciation can usefully precede artistic creation.

On the conservative side, T. S. Eliot saw this knowledge of his antecedents as a duty for any writer who wanted to make a significant contribution. Being aware, as he wrote in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (Eliot 22-23), can be interpreted now to mean taking from the past what one needs. We can appreciate without feeling strangled by precedent when we "'teach the writers of the past from the writer's point of view'" (Myers 8, quoting Paul Engle of the Iowa Writers' Workshop).

What I am suggesting is not that this type of approach to literature might have been absent from earlier studies, but that in the honours year it will be foregrounded. 'Reading as a writer' will now not only be a method of enhancing aesthetic appreciation, so that students can understand literature in a fuller way, it will also have both a craft and vocational aspect. At the honours level all writing students should know how diverse their discipline is, but they will

have to make the choice to specialise. They will, then, be building on previous experience, but also looking beyond the honours year to the future.

4 One Model

Australian honours programs will be as diverse as the institutions' pathways allow. For the moment, I will concentrate on one model that flows from a more traditionally-oriented English Department, one which, however, has expanded to offer ten topics in professional and creative writing of various kinds. But the honours year is the one that requires commitment, a decision on the part of the student that announces to the world, 'This is where my real interest lies.' At present we are talking at Flinders about an interdisciplinary honours program, part of a creative arts degree, but until new structures are in place this is the world in which I currently teach. Although the creative writing honours students still have the security blanket of the title, 'English Honours,' their theses, more than the special honours topics, are what set them apart.

The Flinders University Creative Writing Handbook describes the honours year in this way:

...the Flinders Creative Writing Honours program...emphasises both the theoretical and practical to support you in your major creative project.

Honours students will take Special Topic in Creative Writing A...and B...Theory and Practice of Writing. These topics aim to introduce you to a range of issues that affect the creative, professional and economic well-being of the writer. Consequently, both topics are divided into two parts.

The first, supported by funds from ArtSA (Writers and their Worlds Seminar Series), presents writers and those involved in the production and marketing of books. The second comprises workshop sessions, where students discuss the aesthetics and craft of selected writers as well as receive critical feedback on their own material. Short-term placements at appropriate organisations (such as publishers, libraries, etc.) and flexible and negotiable assignments allow you to extend your skills. (Handbook 4)

Students also take twelve additional units of regular honours topics to complement their studies and further deepen their reading experience. It is the hybrid thesis that presents the most significant challenge, however.

The creative thesis is in effect a combination thesis: a creative product and an exegesis... The creative component gives you the opportunity to work closely with a member of staff on an extended creative piece (a selection of poems or short stories, a novella, or creative non-fiction, for example)...

The critical component, or exegesis, might investigate the origins of the creative product, set the work in a contemporary context and explain its strengths and weaknesses. It will clearly identify its relationship to the creative product and offer a coherent conceptual framework, demonstrating how the student has incorporated theory into practice. (Handbook 5)

Take note that the handbook says 'might' when describing possible approaches to the exegesis. Even the lack of direction inherent in 'might' instead of 'should' worries some, who seek stronger direction. A journal might form part, if not all, of an exegesis, for example. Honours students are asked to keep one as part of the Theory and Practice of Writing requirements, but by the second semester it might become a more integral part of their project.

5 The Exegesis Under Siege

There are important differences between undergraduate and postgraduate theses, although some of the following discussion can apply to either level. I will begin by demarcating briefly some of the differences. Most obviously, honours candidates produce less words than postgraduates. For example, the creative product can be a few short stories, rather than a collection; a chapbook-length selection of poems; a novella; or part of a novel. The exegeses are also shorter, requiring less comprehensive research - less reading and perhaps a less original exploitation of theory. Most significantly, honours students still present most often as probationers who are finding their way; they show flashes of brilliance perhaps, but are less likely to be consistently good both technically and imaginatively.

At this point it would be pertinent to reply to some of the reservations that Tess Brady raised about my article, 'Uneasy Bedfellows: Assessing the Creative Thesis and its Exegesis' (*TEXT* 1999) in her recent piece, 'A Question of Genre: De-mystifying the exegesis' (*TEXT* 2000). Brady remarks after quoting my outline of possible exegetical approaches:

Why would a student want to set out any or all of these beliefs if not to reinforce what the reader might have missed in a reading of their creative product? The exegesis here functions as a kind of insurance policy against a poorly received product. (Brady)

I would hate to think that the only reason a person might want to look critically at his or her own work was because they thought it incompetent or inferior. Again and again writers have explained themselves in a variety of ways: forewords, afterwords, essays, interviews, journal entries, not to mention stories or poems that rework old themes. Any or all of these ways might be useful to both the writer and the audience. As a reader I enjoy an afterword - I have a habit of reading the foreword or introduction afterwards, too, if it has been written by the author, just as I read the critical comments when examining a thesis: the creative piece comes first and then the exegesis.

There is another point that needs reinforcing here. Honours students are novices; they are being tested while testing themselves. Can I stay the distance and complete a longer work? Can I polish to a certain standard? How good will my editing skills be? Will I graduate thinking I might one day in fact be a writer, or will I become an expert reader? Even at the MFA level in the United States, most students who graduate will never go on to 'make it' in any meaningful way and the staff do not feel that they have failed because of this fact. As Myers states: 'Estimates peg the professional success rate for graduates in creative writing at about one percent (as compared with 90 percent for graduates of medical school)' (Myers 2). Some of the expert readers go out into the world and become 'professors, or administrators' (Myers 2).

I agree with Paul Dawson who says, when speaking of the postgraduate thesis, that 'Publishable quality does not mean it might be accepted by Allen & Unwin, but that it can sustain the same sort of critical scrutiny deployed in the study of exemplary texts, that it can contribute to knowledge in the same fashion' (Dawson). Perhaps that comment about scrutiny is a useful qualification to the phrase 'current arts industry standards,' which seems to imply as well some knowledge of how one's genre is being practised at present in our culture. By publishable, I never meant marketable by a mainstream publisher. Some university's guidelines do in fact use the term publishable and that is why I interrogated the term in my paper. For example, the University of Adelaide's guidelines on assessment suggest a similar range of possibilities for creative work:

High Distinction: (85-100) is awarded for work that is assessed as being of publishable standard;

Distinction: (75-84) is awarded for work of high merit that could, with further development, be considered to be of publishable standard.

(University of Adelaide handout for Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing/Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing 2000)

On another sheet 'High Distinction' is qualified as well by the phrase: 'that demonstrates individual originality and craft skills of a high order.'

I am uncomfortable with applying these rubrics in a wholesale fashion to the work of honours students. I have examined theses externally as well as directed them internally and in many cases the exegeses, which took in some instances radically different forms, from the fairly traditional essay to the creative non-fiction anecdote, were more interesting and successful, on their own terms, than the creative products. Brady says that the kind of exegesis I have proposed 'play[s] safe.' I think that we should follow a more cautious line with honours students, many of whom feel tentative, who have not, to use the old cliché, found their voice yet or their own proper material. In other words, their creative work might not be of a high order, merely competent, and their intentions not clear without an exegesis. There might be a notable discrepancy between what they think they are doing and what they actually accomplish. Writing the hybrid thesis can function as a learning experience and the examiners' reports as well as the supervisors' comments provide important critical feedback that could lead them to a significant creative breakthrough.

It might be true that for the more mature writer 'timidity is not the key to substantial work' (Brady), but even with the Masters and PhDs I have examined, I have never felt that the exegeses were dull. The depth and range of reading, the enthusiasm for the topic, came through and often made me discover new things about the product.

I ended my earlier paper by suggesting that the best outcome would be that a successful creative work would send readers to the exegesis, and I still think that might be the case. If one finds a novel or book of poems satisfying, one often wants to know more, and searches for that author's letters, diaries, interviews, in fact their own critical work on other writers for an insight into how their mind works. What I have come round to realising is that the exegesis in a compact (if self-conscious) way might collect the kinds of information that a literary scholar will uncover on their own when they commit themselves to researching a text.

What will be useful to the honours student negotiating their way through a host of literary forms and styles, critical theory, primary and secondary material? I agree with Brady that both undergraduates and postgraduates need to be 'bowerbirds,' selecting what they need and discarding the rest. Their exegesis can provide a record of that selecting and refining process. The audience need not be only the 'three or four examiners,' (Brady) who will formally assess their work, but the students themselves as they are in the process of creating - working one day, one week, on the

creative piece, then critiquing it or doing further reading, then revisiting earlier comments and moving ahead. The exegesis will take whatever form that the student finds illuminates it best for her and her audience, but it, too, will be edited, since it is a conscious creation, just as published journals are.

As I have suggested, when the creative product is finally out in the public arena, then the audience for the exegesis might expand to include the future readers of the original creative piece. I can't recall the name from my scribbled notes, but at the South Australian AAWP seminar, someone mentioned a PhD in Creative Writing written in the United States in the 1980s where the exegesis was published as well as the novel and the former became much more popular. The ideal might be a double-barrelled bestseller.

6 The Quagmire of Research

I am only going to dip my toe into the quagmire of research (I refuse total body immersion) - What is it? What should it be?

I will begin by commenting briefly on the term 'research fiction.' Although my colleagues have glanced at other genres, the majority talk about the creative product as a novel. I wonder how many other forms the creative product has taken? Although I am sympathetic to all the arguments, both for research equivalence and for a special category of creative research on its own (Brady, Dawson, Perry, Sallis, Taylor, et al). many of those arguments seem to apply either to historical fiction or to fiction at the least that depends on some knowledge of other areas of experience than the personal.

Yet research can apply to all creative genres and so we should develop a more inclusive term. As creative artists as well as literary scholars we are aware of the manifold ways in which research underpins poetry, drama, creative nonfiction, and so forth. Adapting Eva Sallis' definition, perhaps we should say that all creative products incorporate 'the outcome of a body of research' (Sallis).

Let me describe an honours project that might explain more clearly my problem with wholesale criticisms of an exegesis that depends on a discussion of other writers in a traditional way and that demonstrates how research can stimulate original poetry. Three years ago a student of mine wrote a collection of poems, in what might still be termed the confessional mode, at least stylistically. But she was also interested in Jungian psychology. Her research partly consisted of reading Jung and his critics, but the bulk of her investigations were of other confessional poets - Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Sharon Olds - and what she perceived as their Jungian aspects. Her exegesis spent time looking at poems from each writer and then working out what she herself wanted to accept, reject or expand from their approaches. The actual process of writing this critical work affected not only new poems but the revision of poems. This is one way in which I think an exegesis can be useful. If critical as well as creative writing is to some extent a process of discovery (the 'I don't know what I mean until I say it' old chestnut), this student could not have moved on until she had done the reading and worked out what she thought on paper. I cannot see why encouraging this type of treatment is a 'chickening out,' as it were, from purely creative work.

Sallis defines research fiction as 'fiction which, to a significant degree, expresses the outcomes of a body of research and which is the culminating point of an investigation which could have been written up, at least in part, in academic prose' (Sallis). Why is an outcome that includes, besides a collection of poems, academic prose a lesser or compromised project? The ideal might be to have a writer able to manipulate in fiction, poetry or drama a 'range of purposes from the didactic to the entertaining...' having 'its critical elements...subordinate to its engagement with the emotions and the imagination of its readership' (Sallis). One would think that a laudable goal for any artist, even those not contemplating a university degree.

Whereas that might be possible, however (although not necessarily likely), for a postgraduate - after all, how many have their standard PhD theses published as books - it is fairly unlikely for an honours student. We are talking about varying skill levels and what a sympathetic reader could glean simply from reading an unaccompanied text, or one that daringly tried to incorporate a critical position into its imaginative framework. The degree of leeway, of freedom, might need to be negotiated very carefully with the supervisor. In fact, as a discipline we must keep talking about what we require from our students if we want, as Brophy notes, to be 'an activity' which 'insists on a freedom to set its own criteria for success' (Brophy 15).

7 Out of the Comfort Zone and into the Public Arena

I have already said that I believe that the disciplines of creative writing and literature should not be divorced, in fact need not be. Honours students still can benefit from a grounding in literature; that is, wide reading and critical discussion, which allows the interaction between praxis and theory.

These elements can then be amplified by a knowledge of writing as a profession, even for those who will not eventually pursue it. Unfortunately, universities today seem to be rabidly committed to the idea that all study must lead to work. As Krauth has noted in his survey of creative writing program websites, the language of many underlines this shift: 'Some universities have gone for the employability and generic skills slant, others for the new technologies future slant, yet others for the hobby slant, the self-employed practitioner slant...' (Krauth). There are a number of reasons why students should know about the culture of the book, the state of writing and publishing in Australia. Only one of these has to do with the possibility of work.

In the first place, to write intelligently and sensitively students need to understand something about the culture of the writer and how what they create might be received. This is crucial, as I have argued, for anyone writing for young people in Australia today (Kroll 1997). But even adult writers, as we know, are mediated by a number of other factors, as Foucault suggests. Discussions of these interrelated forces within the context of an honours program will heighten a student's consciousness of the possibilities and restrictions facing them as both creators and evaluators. Brophy acknowledges this situation on a general level: '...the author is always a complex social, commercial, linguistic and literary construct often not under the control of the person writing (or in some cases not writing). For this reason it is important that creative writing students remain informed and engaged with social-theoretical analyses of literature' (Brophy 203).

On a more particular level, consider the situation of a contemporary writer for young people, who must realise what kind of language might cause consternation among the 'gatekeepers' of children's literature. Or take the example of someone creating an Aboriginal character, who must know how sensitively the research for that character must be carried out. Sallis has suggested similar limitations on the research fiction practitioner in general, but especially for those attempting cross-cultural subjects: 'At present, readers and critics of fiction question authenticity, the writer's right to speak, the bases of all expressions' (Sallis).

One of the central questions, then, an honours student should ask themselves, even if they have not answered it by the end of the year, is: What does it mean for me to define myself as both a writer and a critic (of myself and of others) at this point in space and time?

I would like to see as many answers as possible to that question, and collaborative projects with honours students in our Screen Studies and Drama Departments would certainly open out the field for our undergraduates. Perhaps giving them the time to experiment with other genres, other subject matter, is part of what we need to be allowing in this transitional year. For Flinders students, a short-term placement at a publisher's, literary agent or library is another way of introducing them to what the literary culture means on a practical level. Of course students finally concentrate on one extended creative project, but I am always surprised at how many still want, especially in their first semester, some new challenges packaged in the old familiar form of a set exercise.

Perhaps as writers, however, the first rung on the professional ladder for them has been taking themselves seriously enough as writers to risk the honours year, for finally their creative work will be submitted, not to a publisher, but to outside assessors and it must bear up under critical scrutiny. This is the culmination of all the flexing of their verbal muscles. Now it all comes down to the thesis, which will be examined externally as well as internally. The external assessor cannot put faces to names, doesn't know how much they have contributed in class, but will look at their work dispassionately.

This is an appropriate progression for the honours year - from workshop feedback, interim tutor marking, perhaps end-of-term assessment, to external examination of a thesis. Students will be compared not with other undergraduates in a one-semester topic, but with other honours students outside the university. The comparative pool is different and one hopes that the standards, if they do not already, will reflect an Australia-wide concept of excellence. In some cases, this might be the first occasion for a knockback of sorts. A student used to high distinctions might receive only a distinction. This kind of toughening up could prove salutary for anyone contemplating the cut-throat world of the professional writer.

There is a related point to be made about the thesis that underlines another critical difference between the creative writing honours student and their colleagues in literature, one that has to do with audience. The creative product is the precursor of the published work and so a student's ideal intended audience, in future, will not only be other teachers and students, but the public at large along with critics. If they think at all about becoming writers, they must think about this concept of audience. Even at the honours level, they must aim to produce something coherent and interesting enough to warrant someone's attention.

Creative writing honours students undergo a transition during their intense year of study, committing themselves in a formal way to the enterprise of writing, contemplating possible futures. Like undergraduates, they still seek guidance and structure, and like postgraduates, they need independence and support as they define exactly what *they* want to do, taking the consequences of success as well as failure. They are risk-takers compared to their peers in standard honours programs because they are partners in developing a new field that is still trying to define itself. Myers' comments about the development of this discipline in America shed light on our enterprise in Australia:

Although creative writing leads to the production of texts, it is not rhetoric. Although some of its graduates go on to get jobs, and some of these jobs are even in creative writing, its primary function is not economic. Although it is a form of literary study, it is not a form of literary scholarship. Creative writing is the concrete representation of an idea about the best way to teach literature. (And, of course, writing.) (Myers 12)

Given the present demanding political climate in Australia, we seem to be trying to do all of the above as well as everything the website advertisements for creative writing topics promise. What other discipline can claim to be so multifaceted?

Coda

As I read articles about these issues in *TEXT*, in other publications in Australia and overseas, I realise that my ideas about research and criticism and its relationship to creative writing have become mutable and that even if they solidify, they are likely to liquefy again under the intense heat of debate. As I supervise new students, explain myself to colleagues, examine more degrees for outside institutions, defend our discipline and plan strategies to advance it, I can see one thing clearly. We, as writers ourselves, let alone teachers of creative writing, have little in common with ivory-tower poets. And we are certainly not in the position of ivory-tower tenured academics, who, for much of the twentieth century, breathed the pure air of the traditional university. In the latter case, they have been protected by the fact that all of their work has fit the research quantum profile.

Our theories are not developed in any ivory tower. They are hammered out on paper, in debate, from the cut, thrust and slash of the popular front. Some of us might be genteel, others bodice-rippers. We are tolerant of mixed metaphors, probably because we have been forced to worry about the proverbial filthy lucre and to explain ourselves to a diverse clientele. Many of our adventurous students have prepped us because they flow easily from one genre to another, sliding down the scale of culture from high to low.

As I suggested at the beginning of this wild metaphorical passage (no, I am not on drugs yet), we deal not only with other critics in our field, but with administrators who have to answer to the government for the university's bread and butter. And much more than any traditional literary critic, our theorisation is affected by praxis. We live in interesting times. At least we are not yet in danger of boring ourselves into retirement.

Endnote: The Adelaide Institute of TAFE offers 'training in the styles, techniques and conventions appropriate to the variety of writing types; it assists students to develop knowledge of markets relevant to particular types of writing; it educates students in the preparation and submission of manuscripts for publication and it provides them with knowledge of small business management' (Adelaide TAFE brochure, Jan 2000). This program emphasises outcomes, such as publication of a manuscript or a freelance career. TAFE's focus varies, thus, from the university honours program. [return to text](#)

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