

Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus

## Nigel Krauth

### *Literary Awards and Creative Writing Schools*

During a recent three-year stint as judge for the *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award, I was prompted to consider the relationship between literary competitions and the products flowing from creative writing schools around Australia.

While wading through hundreds of unpublished novel manuscripts by young writers, I became aware of the fact that some of the entries had been written by individuals who had persisted without any kind of outside assistance, while others had received the benefits of manuscript assessment services and the support of tertiary-level writing school environments.

Thus there were manuscripts which came raw from young writers' desks, but there were also attempts at novels which had been subject to advice and editorial assistance from professionals in various parts of the industry and also academics.

This made me wonder about the 'fairness' of the unpublished-manuscript awards situation.

Is it acceptable that an impoverished young writer, one who cannot afford to pay for the feedback from an assessment service, should be pitted against someone who may have incorporated into her/his manuscript the advice from one or a number of the several private enterprise or government-assisted assessment services?

Similarly, is it fair that a manuscript produced solely by a struggling young writer working in isolation who cannot afford the HECS payment for a university education should be judged in competition with manuscripts which may have gone through extensive writing school processes where keen academics have provided inputs and made interventions of (possibly) significant proportions?

The production of any published novel, these days, whether written by an established or a novice writer, can be subject to a variety of inputs from assessment services, other professional advice such as that from literary agents, and the help of publishers' readers and editors. The publishing industry is based on a variety of checks and balances and interventions intended to ensure a strong product.

The Vogel Award, like most national competitions, has no mechanism which monitors external influences on the submitted manuscript. The brilliance of one manuscript entry may in fact be the result of brilliant input from professional and academic advisors; while the brilliance of another entry may be entirely the work of the author.

Whatever the case regarding input in these situations, the copyright remains in the name of the writer. Of course, the writer needs to possess the talent to incorporate successfully the advice from others, but the situation persists where literary award judges have no idea as to the significance of outside influences on the entrant's manuscript.

Amongst past Vogel Award winners there are a number which might be categorised "possibly creative writing school assisted", as opposed to "sole author", efforts. (Further to this, of course, there is the "possibly professional assessment service assisted" category.) Those winning manuscripts which were products of a writing school might be seen to have had an advantage, but there were many more school-assisted and assessment service-assisted novels which did not win. Also there have been plenty of winners who did not emerge from a writing school. It appears that there is no particular advantage, in terms of winning the Vogel Award, for an entrant to have been associated with a tertiary-level writing school. An individual slaving away in isolation can come up with a manuscript as good as that produced through all the resources of a tertiary writing school.

Some famous Vogel winners, such as Winton and Grenville, were products of writing schools here and overseas. Others were products of "reading schools" - various English Departments around the country - but some of these were successful students (like Demidenko) and others were supposed failures (like McGahan). Still others "came out of nowhere", laying no claim to assistance from tertiary education.

Does this suggest that "learning" creative writing may be no more useful than not 'learning' it? And is studying writing in the form of reaction to published creative texts and analysis of critiques of published creative texts just as useful as studying creative production processes for the making of publishable texts?

The context for my discussion here is the viewpoint of creative writing schools around the country. It seems that every tertiary-level school wants to produce a Vogel winner. If a school can say, "We produced the Vogel winner of such-and-such a year", then that school can lay claim to a particular expertise and superiority.

The apparent leader, so far, in this stakes is the Curtin University writing school, arguably the best-established writing school in Australia. *Shallows* and *The Mule's Foal* are acknowledged as products of that school's writing program. No other writing school program, as far as I know, can lay direct claim to two Vogel winners.

But several English departments might contest this claim. The University of Queensland's English department, for example, can say that at least three Vogel winners and several runners-up studied in their literature courses.

So, which is more valuable? Learning about how to write, or learning about what has already been written?

Eva Sallis's recent pinpointing of the difficulties entailed for a writer in admitting to a university education is pertinent here. If a Vogel winner happens to hold a PhD in Persian studies, that will not necessarily be advertised by the publishers when publicising the winning Vogel novel. Australian publishers may perceive that a university education is "offputting" to the potential readership.

It seems that we live in a culture where readerships cringe at the thought that the writer has learnt his or her abilities. This culture requires that the writer be somehow autonomous, be not the product of a teaching process, be rather "a gifted natural". Writers in this culture are born, not made (so the argument goes). They write because they need to, not because they have learnt how to. The intervention of a learning process is seen as a suspicious element in the development of the writer.

So where does that leave creative writing schools and other tertiary departments? Their input into award-winning novel manuscripts is at present problematic, and their contribution to marketplace advertising for published novels is a matter of compromise. American novels I have read proudly display the writing school from which the author emerged. In the Australian context, it seems, the tertiary education of a writer is something of an embarrassment.

Australian tertiary writing schools still need to gain greater acceptance with publishers, critics and the general readership. The writing schools need to publicise their aims and practices. Recent acceptance of student writers to the programs of several national writers festivals has boosted writing schools' images.

The Australian culture is willing to grant significant status to creative writers. Creative writing is one of the nation's artfully-hidden prime endeavours - an activity seen to contribute massively, though almost secretly, to society's wellbeing. Even politicians support national and state literary awards as part of the continued building of the nation. But the culture has not heard much about tertiary writing schools' pedagogies - especially in the context of teaching "aimed at" national literary awards.

I doubt that any school is going to miss the opportunity to take great credit if one of its students cracks the Vogel! But how is the involvement of the school to be judged?

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## TEXT

Vol 3 No 1 April 1999

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au