Deakin University

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Some Things About Creative Writing: Three Stories

What does it mean for creative writing to become part of an undergraduate syllabus for university students, or for suites of poems and novellas to become the stuff of postgraduate theses? How ambitious and experimental can student-writers afford to be, and how absurdly Surrealist, when tutors and lecturers will be marking their work? How uncertain can these students or their teachers allow themselves to be?

At the beginning of 1997 I stood before nearly a hundred first year literary studies students at Deakin University to deliver a lecture entitled Introduction to Creative Writing. I resorted to storytelling and fragments of narrative to tackle the reasons these mostly young students were being asked to do creative writing exercises as part of their study of literature. I knew that some of these students wanted more than anything else to write creatively and then have their efforts assessed, while some others could find no meaningful structure, no inspiration and no real challenge in creative-writing exercises. I had not much interest in trying to win over the doubters so I put aside logic and argument. Instead I spoke from my desire as a writer to see this sort of writing accomplished in both a deeply personal and a rigorously writerly manner. I was not sure whether I was speaking as a writer out-of-place in a university or as a writer who had found the right kind of sanctuary in a university.

Following is a slightly expanded version of the talk I gave:

I am a Creative Writer. I do it, but I cannot easily talk about it or analyse it. More accurately, perhaps, I *think* I do it - though I might have borrowed some vain emperor's non-existent new clothes - and who could I trust to tell me if I have? I have a recurring dream that I am naked in the most ordinary situations and must act as if I am not naked. For me this exposure (Freud would call it 'exhibitionism') has to do with writing. My helplessness and my exposed state as a naked man in my own dreams comes back to me when I call myself a poet, a writer - a creative writer.

America's often crabby and provocative essayist, William H. Gass, is openly annoyed at the many who want to call themselves creative writers:

People call themselves poets and painters, and seek help for their failures, as I might come to a psychiatrist to discover the causes of my vaulter's block or to find out why I can't get anywhere in nuclear physics. Indeed, regularly people push through the turnstiles of the critic's day who feel very strongly the need to pass as poets, to be called 'creative', to fit themselves into a certain social niche, acquire an identity the way one acquires plants there's no time to tend or goldfish that can't be kept alive, and their problems are important and interesting and genuine enough; but they are not the problems of poets as poets, any more than the child who tiptoes to school on the tops of fences has the steelworker's nerves or nervousness or rightly deserves his wage. (*Habitations of the Word*, 1985:119)

Gass goes on in this essay to make a plea for those truly creative writers whose sentences are 'fists' and have 'souls'. He wants to read sentences with energy, perception, passion, thought, music, movement, and imagination. For him, what is creative must have in some measure a sublime style. It must dazzle. All ideas, he writes, have been 'fucked over'; no writer can have an original one, so all that's left is style: sentences with muscles that move.

I want to stay with my recurring dream of enduring my public nakedness, and tell three stories which might be too modest in Gass's terms to be called creative; but they are stories that I think say something about what creative writing might be for those of us who are not sublime, not full of soul, not at all sure enough of ourselves to send sentences out as fists. The first story is one I have told many times to friends and family but I have not written it down until now. I am not sure why I could not write it down before now:

In 1982 I was a young man greedy for experience, heady with ideals, in love and in poverty. I was working as a Teacher's Aid in a school for multiply-disabled children. On weekends I went with another writer to Melbourne's Pentridge Prison to run creative writing workshops with prisoners. There was one prisoner there, a bank robber and once an escapee from Pentridge itself, who wrote intense, powerful, carefully constructed poems. (By the time he was released from prison in the early 1990s he was writing poems in strict rectangular blocks - every space and every letter contained by this geometry.) He was the real thing. A poet. He was in the high security section of D Division. This was a prison within the prison, a modern concrete bunker costing millions of dollars to build. It was a temple of worship to the eighteenth century ideal of the panoptikon. Guards were caged in a central glass-walled office from

which they could view a circle of rooms where the prisoners, I suppose, counted down their time and imagined breaking out of circles and rectangles. To enter this area visitors had to negotiate a corridor of seven locked and armour-plated barriers, each one closing by remote control before the next would open.

The prisoner who was also a poet told me that he needed a typewriter if he was going to work on finishing his drafts and submitting them to publishers. I remembered that I had an old typewriter at home, one I no longer used. So I arranged with the prison authorities the necessary permissions to bring this man a typewriter.

On the next day for visiting the prison a friend ferried me there with the old, long-neglected typewriter under its dusty cover placed in the back of her station wagon. Myron, the other poet running workshops with me, met us at the prison and held the door open as I carted the heavy contraption up to the officer on duty. I handed over the permission papers and the officer took the cover from typewriter. Lying across the typewriter was a branch of marihuana. I had put it there to dry several months before.

'What's this?' the officer asked.

'I don't know,' I said. ' It's probably a weed. You can throw it away.'

'I think I know what this is,' he said. 'You two stand over there while I get these visitors out of the way. You've been trying to smuggle drugs into this prison.'

He put the dried branch on a table behind the counter and Myron and I stood there beside the table, waiting for - what? Waiting for the full implications of this discovery to become obvious?

I became conscious of the dyed purple army-surplus greatcoat I wore, my long hair and patched jeans, sandals - the full uniform of a refugee from the 1970s hippy days, anti-Vietnam marches, anti-Springbok demonstrations where marbles were thrown under the hooves of police horses. The Thing, the worst Thing, was about to happen. I did not know what to do about it, but I had to do something about it. All my education to then had been about doing something about it, whatever it was.

I stepped across to the table and picked up the branch, stuffing it into my pocket. With my hand in there I crumbled it as best I could and then walked across the visitors' waiting area to an open window and threw as much of it as I could out into the wind and onto a scrubby patch of prison ground outside. Then I walked back to Myron and we waited.

Soon there was a kind of pandemonium. Myron and I kept saying we did not know what had happened to whatever it was that was on the table there. Myron really did not know what had happened. They locked us in a room and brought Alsatians to search the area. They said the Alsatians would sniff it out if it was hidden on us. In fact the Alsatians would know if we had been near marihuana at all in the last few weeks. I imagined the dogs ripping at my coat when they smelled the crumbled leaf fragments in the pocket lining. There was an ashtray in the room so we emptied the ashtray into my pocket and rubbed my hands in the ash until we were sure the stink of old cigarettes was enough to put off the smartest dog they might set on us.

The officer who had first uncovered the branch on the typewriter came into the room, red-faced, suddenly articulate with anger.

'You people,' he shouted, 'you bring drugs in here and the prisoners go crazy and attack us. We have families. We could get killed by crazy prisoners. You don't know what you're doing.'

I told him I respected his family. I did not want to see him or his family hurt. I did not want anyone to be hurt.

Then two detectives arrived. They called off the dogs and took us to the local police station where we were questioned in separate rooms. They made it clear that I faced at least five years in prison if I was convicted of attempting to smuggle contraband into one of Her Majesty's Prisons. There would be a court case. I should tell the truth now. So I did. I told them the story I have just recounted to you, and signed it. My signed statement is now lying in a cardboard box somewhere among my old notes for stories underneath the stairs at home.

There was a court case. I had my hair cut short for it and borrowed a suit from one of my brothers. Character witnesses told ludicrous but true stories of my forgetfulness to show that after all it was not remarkable that I could hide away the green vegetable matter (as the police called it) and forget it. I explained to the court that, as a writer, I thought it was important for me to experiment with altered states of consciousness. I was not an addict, I was an artist. As it turned out the magistrate had a disabled child so it went in my favour that I worked with disabled children. After much talk by the prosecution about a branch discovered on the typewriter the magistrate asked to see the branch. The police handed to him a small envelope. Within it were some fragments recovered from the table at the visitors' reception room. He snorted. He might have smirked. The charge of smuggling was dismissed and I was given a twelve-month good behaviour bond for possession of those fragments, barely enough to fit on a finger nail.

That is the story. It is really one part of a longer story about my reasons for putting the branch under the typewriter cover in the first place, and then about that prisoner and our difficult friendship. The part I have told you has become, of course, a family legend. The absent-minded Kevin. In his childhood he could turn up at football matches dozens of miles from home without his boots.

Why am I telling this now? One reason is that I like stories, and this has become a story I find now I can't resist. But is it true? Did it happen? If it did happen, did it happen in this way? Have I been making this up? Perhaps. I know that Myron's version of the episode is different to mine with many other details I might have forgotten or repressed. But the point I want to make about it here is that this kind of writing involves exposure. It is the recurring dream of being naked in public. It is an uncovering of what might normally not be paraded before strangers. It is personal. It is about the personal.

I have read that it has not always been the case that stories are about exposing the hidden, personal, embarassing lives of individuals. Michel Foucault has made the point that nearly three hundred years ago Western literature turned from its social function of telling legendary, mythic, heroic and fabulous tales for the edification of readers or listeners, and sought to speak instead of what is most difficult to perceive, what is most discomforting, most forbidden and most scandalous. He calls this 'the ethic immanent to the literary discourse of the West' (Michel Foucault *Power, Truth, Strategy*, 1979:90-1). Fiction, we might say, is on a quest (to borrow a term from more heroic ages). The quest is to speak of the personal, the inconsequential, the embarrassing, the normally hidden - to break the rules of any code constraining any discourse, to find a way to tell the story of the typewriter, of an unreliable memory, of that guard who broke into such a heartfelt plea in front of two smugglers, and the story of the prisoner-poet who might never be known as a poet by more than a few others; the quest is to give disorder and confusion a voice.

Is it only O.J. Simpson's celebrity status that provoked public fascination with his murder trials in the mid 1990s? His act, if it was his act, was monstrous - as monstrous as Jimmie Blacksmith's at the turn of the century: black men murdering white women. But what is it that Thomas Keneally attempts to do in his novelised version of such an event, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*? He brings the monster home, introduces him to us intimately, shows us his private dignity, his uncertainties, his provocations and confusions - his fellow black countryman sodomised and left to hang to death in a prison cell by a country-town Constable; and the treatment of black women by white men. The fictional Jimmie Blacksmith might be pressured into action by Keneally's humane, slightly intellectualised abhorrence of the history of white treatment of blacks, but the portrait of the black man also comes to life through Keneally's willingness to get close-in to his subject and listen to the creakings of his psyche. In a passage that moves strangely between a weighing-up of historical injustices and a simple cry of rage, Keneally writes in this novel:

Now Jimmie himself knew that Newby was not what he wanted. He was in a fever for some definite release. Killing Newby, however, was not it. When he put his rifle against Newby's gut, he knew that he wished to kill that honey-smooth Miss Graf. His desire for her blood, he understood, came as a climax to his earlier indecencies... He wished to scare the schoolmistress apart with his authority, to hear her whimper. (78)

Keneally writes to make Jimmie Blacksmith's act our own act. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* looks back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as as a model for its project in domesticating the public's convenient monster. It looks forward, weirdly, to the O.J. Simpson news-story of a black man who, at least one jury decided, murdered a white woman. Simpson became the public monster, shambling across our television news. There are differences, of course, for now the black man is wealthy, powerful, and was acquitted at one of his trials. He will not have the certainty of execution, as Jimmie Blacksmith had, but can continue to live uncertain of how his story will end and how it will be read. It is in a sense the absence of a story that fascinated us in O.J. Simpson's case. And we will only ever be tantalised by this absence in newspaper and television reports. It will be left to some writer, perhaps, to bring us close enough to this event to find its source within ourselves. It seems unlikely Simpson will find a way to speak as intimately and as transgressively as Pierre Rivière did in the remarkable document he wrote from prison in 1835 which began, 'I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother, and wishing to make known the motives which led me to this deed, have written down the whole of the life which my father and my mother led together since their marriage' (*I,* Pierre Rivière, 54). Even when the acts seem brutally mythic we have come to desire a view of them which is most personal, difficult to articulate, intimate, and unhurried by events.

This then is the first point I have been making about literature and that writing we call creative: it is risky, it involves exposing oneself as a writer to what is emotional and personal - even when it is not strictly autobiographical (and perhaps especially when it is not autobiographical).

I want to approach another aspect of creative writing by saying, along with Jacques Lacan that creative writing is about the object being transformed into the Thing (What is the object in my first story? It is perhaps the typewriter, that dangerous, outdated instrument, that smuggler of words onto our pages. I have always been a little shocked and interested that the letters of the alphabet on a typewriter become *keys*- a surreally writerly and Papal image).

The second story is called 'Four Years' and it is hardly a story; it is a series of episodes in four parts:

1

Walking with Nerida, a four-year-old girl. She tells me she must go to the toilet now. I ask her to hold on while we hurry back home. As we pass a small tree she stops by it. She drops her pants to her ankles; she grips the trunk and squats, facing it. As she passes two surprisingly discrete objects, she says, 'Girls can use trees too.'

2

Collecting has to do with what is important and it demonstrates how almost anything can become important. I use matches to light small gestures towards the gas stove and as the matchboxes empty, I line them up across the top of the kitchen dresser. When Brett, who is four years old, see this, he looks at them carefully and asks me for the one he likes best. We discuss the labels. I can see how anxious he is to begin a collection of his own, and how important it is to him that he should begin with this particular box.

3

Brett's father damaged his eye. He took Brett with him on one of his visits to the rooms of an eye specialist. While his father was with the specialist Brett found a shed in the yard at the back. In the shed he discovered a collection of old horse shoes, radio valves, gaskets, coils of wire, Milo tins, fish hooks and other treasures. He showed his father what he'd found. Later, Brett told me that his father called everything in that shed 'rubbish', and not one thing in there was rubbish.

4

I am with Nerida while she eats a banana. She comes to the end of it, the part that tucks into a black dot on the flesh. She says, 'I don't eat the bum of the banana.'

More than fifteen years after writing this I came across an anecdote about the poet Jacques Prévert, told by Jacques Lacan in a lecture on 'the object and the Thing'. Being a collector, like Freud, Lacan was drawn to the anecdote. He recalled:

I once went to visit my friend Jacques Prévert in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. And I saw there a collection of match boxes. Why the image has suddenly resurfaced in my memory, I cannot tell.

It was the kind of collection that it was easy to afford at the time; it was perhaps the only kind of collection possible. Only the match boxes appeared as follows: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the next to it that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result, they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantlepiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to a door. I don't say that it went on to infinity, but it was extremely satisfying from an ornamental point of view...

This arrangement demonstrated that a match box isn't simply something that has a certain utility, that it isn't even a type in the Platonic sense, an abstract match box, but that the match box all by itself is a thing with all its coherence of being. The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi-absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box. Thus the collector found his motive in this form of apprehension that concerns less the match box than the Thing that subsists in a match box (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1992:113-4).

There is a mystery here. The collecting, preserving, shelving and displaying of an object suggests we should take another look at it. To what purpose? Every word a writer puts down is placed before us on the preserving-shelves of lines of type on a page. We read the word-by-word collections of writers (who often confess the compulsive nature of their collecting/writing). There is more than a hint of the mysteries of religion when Lacan gives his Thing a capital T, then suggests that this Thing 'subsists' in an object just as, we might say, Christ subsists in the consecrated Catholic Host.

This is what, I think, creative writing seeks to do - to look right into objects and find there some significance no matter how well it has been veiled or how mysterious it is. I am a writer committed to the task of rewriting - as if the discarding of certain words is as important the preserving of certain collections of them. And isn't collecting about

discarding as much as it is about preserving? Perhaps it is not surprising that I am drawn to this slightly mystical way of thinking about writing for I was raised in a Catholic family who recited the rosary aloud together; I was educated by Jesuits and after leaving school I spent two years in a Jesuit seminary praying, writing and studying to be a priest. But that is another story: the story of the Hair Shirt in the Tower, the Thirty-Day Retreat, the Stolen Altar Wine and the Body of a Priest whose sacred host-holding fingers could not be prised apart in death. A story of other objects, other Things.

The Thing is of course more complicated than this. It is, for instance, sensual too. Nabokov referred to this when he urged his students of literature to take time to caress the details.

The Thing is always compromised by issues of gender, race, class, colonialism, the oppression of children - power in all its manifestations. We might say that it is not only the personal that's political, it's the Thing that's political as well. In November 1996 the *Australian* newspaper reprinted an essay by one of America's most well known professional literary theorists, Frank Lentricchia. It was a confession. As a professor in a university English department he felt he should be teaching his students the critical theory that, after all, had made his academic reputation, and was the body of knowledge the students were expected to receive. Instead, he confessed, when he was in a room with a group of students he would shut the door 'tight' and take out a novel or a poem and read it aloud, enthusing with the students over the pleasures of the line, the sentence, the voice, the story. A simple pleasure made more subtle and complex by avoiding the crude touch of politicised theory. They were caressing the details of literature.

But Frank Lentricchia was only half right, offering no more than a helpful reminder, because literature and story-telling can't be sealed away by a shut door from social history, from social change, from all those hazy discourses of journalism, speech-making, letter-writing, creative writing... I think Helen Garner's sometimes mischievous *The First Stone* was composed in that disorienting landscape that lies between novel and reportage, fiction and history. In this place simple questions can seem to be severe arguments. In any case, any story worth reading, like any fashion worth wearing, has attitude.

It is a confronting experience to write creatively, for I write down what is significant to me and then wonder: will others laugh or shrug at my Thing, my match boxes so carefully and courageously set apart? Whether the story is fantastic or mundane, the writer reads it out to others with trepidation. Have I transformed my object into a Thing? Will people listen? Will they feel anything when they hear this?

Perhaps what makes this exchange more likely to be pleasurable than shaming is the curiosity we all have about each other. And our capacity to delight in each other. Last week I stood outside the bathroom and listened to my children talking together in the bath. I was eavesdropping on them. Raph, my four year old son, said in his most boastful voice, 'I've been here for a million and fifty years!' Sophie, my seven year old daughter who loves to hear stories, replied indulgently, 'That's a long time for a four-year-old.' What I liked was Raph's creative appropriation of numbers, especially those numbers we reel off about prehistoric dinosaurs; after that I liked Sophie's utterly open and yet sharply observed response. She was at that moment the audience his little story needed.

My third story, like the others, is a simple one. In 1996 I treated myself to a day at the Melbourne Writers Festival. I attended some morning sessions where dutiful speakers made suitably daring and controversial statements. One poetry editor scoffed at the idea that *rea* creative writing could be a healing or therapeutic act. He said he was sick of receiving poems from writers who wrote poems as therapy. There were big crowds at the Festival, and during the lunch break I wanted to get away by myself for a while. I walked from the Malthouse to Southbank and found an open space at the front of an office block where I could sit alone and read. A man approached me. He was wearing a shiny black suit with a T-shirt under the coat. He had long hair tied back and something like a goatee beard not well cared for. He asked me for fifteen dollars and eighty cents. I stared at him, amazed at the amount of money he wanted and at the exactness of his request. He told me that he needed the money to get himself and his family (a wife and a baby) back to Geelong. He had lost his wallet at Flinders Street Station and the police had sent him to a St Vincent de Paul office near Southgate. The office had been closed.

'I haven't asked a stranger for money before,' he said. He told me he was embarrassed to have to do this, but he would take my name and address and send me back the money soon. He said, 'Don't give it to me if you don't want to, but I'm telling you, I'm embarrased to have to do this.'

'And I'm annoyed,' I said, 'that every time I sit down in this city now I'm asked for money.'

'Fair enough, fair enough.' He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and stepped back from me but he didn't go away. He waited while I tried to think through what fifteen dollars and eighty cents meant to me, whether I believed his story, whether this was, on a more abstract level, a test of my generosity towards those who have fallen on hard times, how I might feel immediately after giving him the money if I did give it to him. Would I know from the way he looks at me that I had fallen for a scam, or would he maintain his act for the benefit of my feelings? Would he pretend gratitude? Should I give a stranger my name and address? What kind of man walks around in a shiny black

suitcoat over a T-shirt, with the pants legs stopping well before the tops of his socks? A beggar? A family man from Geelong? A con man? Should I go with him to the railway station and inspect his wife and child - and even if there was a 'wife and child' would I be convinced of his story? Why doesn't he suggest that I go with him to buy his ticket for him? Is this the point of bad faith in his act - the clue to the inauthenticity of his story? How much does it cost to go to Geelong? Fifteen dollars and eighty cents sounds about right.

He stood away from me, not catching my eye, waiting for something to happen within me.

I want to stop this story here, for now. It is a fragment really. It is an incident working its way into a novel that's in its messy early stages. I want this fragment to illustrate a third point about creative writing: that it is about those sometimes vivid moments of confusion, uncertainty, dilemma, confrontation. And it works best when the writer, it seems, does not know yet how to find a way out of the dilemma so foolishly entered into - and is willing to let the writing go where it will. This is the secret joy of writing, one that few writers will talk about, perhaps because it is so different every time.

Finally I am always drawn to the question of reading when I think about writing. Why write? Why attempt creative writing? There are of course many possible reasons, and many ways to fail at it, as William H. Gass has reminded us. One reason for doing it is that by writing creatively each of us might come to books as a changed reader. The exchange between reader and writer is unbalanced. A writer might spend ten years writing a book. It takes me five to seven years to complete a novel. Joseph Heller took ten years to write *Catch-22* and an avid, intelligent, gifted reader I know looked at the blurb on the copy I gave her and said, 'No, I won't read it, I'm not interested in books about war.' The writer might worry, fret, dream and puzzle over commas, prepositions, paragraphs, a tense moment in a sentence where it could fall on a false note or take flight. But then the writer must give up the written book and a reader literally takes it in her hands and makes of it what she will. The reader can skim through it, skipping whole pages (Samuel Johnson apparently made an art of this sort of reading), argue bitterly with it, read it carelessly or even savour it. Who knows what the reader will do with it! The reader is, strangely enough, the one who has the last word. Those readers reduced to reviewing have, at times, dismissed five years of my writing life in 250 words or less.

What would happen, though, if we approached reading with the same trepidation, the same care over nuances, the same anxieties as we approach the task of writing? Writers cannot, of course, depend on readers to appreciate their work as they do. They cannot even assume anyone will want to read what they write, despite the common curiosity people have about each other. (We seem to be creatures both hugely curious and easily bored with each other.) The writer might spend days over a word or an image in the hope that a too-easily distracted reader will be compelled or charmed enough to go forward into a story.

As a writer then it is useful to come to some understanding of how tricky is the writer's part of the bargain struck between writer and reader. Perhaps too by spending some time writing creatively we can be moved towards a greater awareness of what we are as readers. Maurice Blanchot has made a similar point with characteristically vivid poetic force:

Reading: in the writer's logbook we are not surprised to come upon confessions of this sort: 'always this anguish when I go to write...' And when Lomazzo tells us of the fright that seized Leonardo every time he wished to paint, we understand this too, or we feel that we could understand.

But were someone to confide in us, 'Always anxious when I go to read,' or were a person unable to read except at rare, privileged moments, or were he to overturn his whole life, renounce the world with its activities and all its happiness just to make his way towards a few minutes of reading - doubtless we would assign him a spot beside that patient of Pierre Janet's who did not like to read because, she said, 'a book one reads becomes dirty' (*The Space of Literature* 1982:191).

Or would we? People do throw over whole lives in order to read books and talk about books. Blanchot is not merely making jokes at the expense of readers, but I think reminding us that slow readers, creatively anxious readers, need sanctuaries just as writers do.

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Debate

Jeri Kroll, *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*

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