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A Better Class of Writing? Some Reflections on the MFA Program in North America

In 1997 I spent two months in the United States on a Churchill Fellowship, where I visited Iowa City, San Francisco, Boston and New York, researching commercial publishing opportunities for mid-career Australian writers and the opportunities provided by university creative writing programs. In the latter case, I was interested not only in the teaching methods and student profile but also in the degree of career and industry advice offered to postgraduate students. I assumed that while undergraduate students might well take units in creative writing as an interest peripheral to their major stream of study, postgraduates were actively considering writing as a means of making a living. The results of my USA research reinforce considerably the links between inspiration, talent and production I am called upon to examine each day in my role of State Literature Officer for Western Australia.

It is useful to start with a brief overview of the publishing industry as I saw it in the United States last year and the adjustments it was being forced to make, in order to work within changing corporate structures. One by one, publishing houses and their imprints are becoming the property of the multinational media groups whose main interest is in the bottom line and who, as one Random House editor said despairingly, can see no difference between selling books and selling beer. In-house editors in these larger houses complained of punishing cuts to their advertising and promotion budgets, to enable them to meet unrealistic levels of profit, and a steady decrease in their lists of 'literary' writers in favour of popular, fast-selling titles. The by now infamous Anthea Disney, with a background in women's magazines and commercial television, had been brought in as Chief Executive of Harper Collins in New York and has ridden rough-shod through their list of authors, cancelling contracts and cutting new authors and literary titles wherever legally possible. While Harper Collins did make a financial settlement to these authors, this did nothing to assuage the feelings of rejection, personal humiliation and career insecurity. More recently, in 1998 the huge German multimedia group Bertelsmann (trading in Australia through Transworld) completed its takeover of Random House. While the new company insists that the merger will not lead to the closure of Random imprints, this remains to be seen, particularly in the light of exceptionally poor trading figures for the majority of publishers during the first six months of this year.

Back in the USA, at the other end of the market and caught up in an overall slump in the retail trade, the book 'Superstores' promote the more profitable pulp fiction and the lifestyle book in a way that can only disadvantage literary titles. Shelves to the front of the stores are purchased for anything up to US$20,000 a year by the larger publishers and orders for the entire range of books are usually placed with publishers, large or small, with the expectation of a shelf-life of eight weeks before the book is discounted. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, these stores 'are largely responsible for the book industry's current plight…sales of adult hardcover books fell 4.4% last year and revenues from adult paperbacks grew a meagre 1.8% in 1996, though the actual number of paperback books sold declined…. According to the American Association of Publishers, in 1995 32% of adult hard-covers were returned to publishers; in 1996 this figure rose to 35%. Publishers will pulp most of the returns' (*Wall Street Journal*).

Therefore, with little money available from their publishers for promotion or author tours, new writers have approximately two months to make a name for themselves with the reading public and achieve the level of sales needed to make a living. To quote Kirsten Holm in *1997 Writers Markets*, the US Bible of publishing outlets and opportunities:

> The trend in publishing in general is toward consolidation. More books sold 100,000 copies and 11 books sold over one million copies (seven of those were fiction), but the seven largest conglomerate publishers produced 85 percent of the year's bestsellers. This doesn't leave a lot of room at the top for midsize and smaller publishers. Most authors on last year's bestseller list were already well-established. Of the top 15 novels, 11 were penned by a previously best-selling author. This doesn't leave a lot of room for newer writers. (Garvey)

From my own observations in bookstores across America, the majority of these bestselling titles will not fall within the category generally referred to as 'literary' - the area in which the majority of university creative writing students are encouraged to write.

In the course of an interview with one of New York's leading journal editors, I commented that the literary books I had seen prominently displayed in the stores were nearly all by authors aged in their fifties or over; writers like John Updike, Gore Vidal and Margaret Atwood, who had a long-standing reputation with the reading public. I wondered what the chances were for a new writer, seeking to make a name for her or himself in the current market. We both

agreed that without a major prize, such as the Booker or Pulitzer, or the advantage of a movie or television production, it would be extremely difficult for this to happen.

My object in applying for the Churchill Fellowship had been to acquire some basic knowledge which I could then pass on to my clientele. I had anticipated that the two sides to my project, the commercial and the academic, would be completely separate and had mapped out my itinerary accordingly, planning to concentrate on the universities in Iowa and in Boston and to look at the commercial markets in San Francisco and New York. However, almost from the first day it became obvious that there were connections to be made between these two areas of research and that a more integrated approach to American writing and publishing as a whole would provide a better understanding of the marketplace I had come to study.

Creative writing courses at postgraduate level have been taught in universities in the United States of America for more than fifty years. There is now a network of almost a hundred campuses across the continent offering Master of Fine Arts programs and an ever-increasing number of graduates. In two months I was only able to visit a handful of these programs; but I was led to believe that they do not vary greatly from State to State.

The MFA is a graduate program. Admission is not confined to English graduates (many enrolled students are lawyers, computer programmers, engineers etc.) and mature-age entry is encouraged. Some universities provide classes in the late afternoon or evening to accommodate students who work. Applications usually exceed the number of places available and students are selected by a Faculty committee by means of a submitted portfolio of work, usually accompanied by letters of recommendation. Of the institutions I visited, most said that the student's academic record took the last place in terms of criteria for entry. Understandably, some universities are more prestigious than others. The University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, generally considered to be one of the most high-profile MFAs in the USA, takes 100 students each year: 50 for fiction and 50 for poetry. These will be selected from more than a thousand applications. Equally prestigious, Boston University has a similarly high level of application but takes, on average, only 30 students per year, spread across fiction, poetry and play-writing. I gained the impression from one of Boston's Professors, that this university aims to produce prize-winners and high-profile writers and that students who do not meet up to expectations may well fall by the wayside during the course of the degree. San Francisco State University has a highly-regarded poetry program, backed up by the National Poetry Centre and Archive situated on campus.

In all the universities I visited, graduate teaching combines coursework and the supervision of one major piece of work, centred around the 'Writers' Workshop' model, where one or two students will present work-in-progress for comment and assessment by the class, led by a member of Faculty. The object of the MFA is for each student to produce a publishable manuscript by the end of the course. In addition to the writing workshops, most universities encourage students to enrol for seminars in literature and/or theory and at some universities these additional courses are a requirement of the course. Depending on the institution, such seminars may be given by members of the Creative Writing Faculty or by arrangement with the University's Department of English. However, at the universities I visited, theory was more likely to be defined as a study of structure and form in well-known writers, rather than the more abstracted teaching of literary theory we recognise in Australian universities. At Iowa, text-based courses are offered but not obligatory and students may choose just to write; but I discovered that unofficially students were encouraged to take seminars completely distinct from their discipline - anything from Dance to Chemistry.

The male:female ratio in enrolments at the universities I visited was roughly 40:60. Students were aged between 25 and 35, with a few older men and women. Robert Polito at The New School in New York, reflected that different writers mature at different ages and that he himself would not have been ready for graduate school in creative writing until he was in his thirties. It may well be that younger students develop skills during their MFA that they will not immediately utilise.

At first glance this amazing network of creative writing programs and the opportunities they provide for new writers to work at their craft seems enviable to a country where we are still struggling to establish doctoral programs in this discipline. However, there are a number of drawbacks and I would like to discuss; not as a means of pointing a critical finger at our overseas colleagues but because we, in our infancy, are in a position to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of the American experience.

A frequent criticism of the MFA programs is that they encourage a certain homogeneity of writing in their students. In *Poets and Writers* magazine (Neubauer) Alexander Neubauer, who teaches at The New School in New York opens his article with a well-aired quotation from a talk Flannery O'Connor gave to college students:

> Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them …. In the last twenty years the colleges have been emphasizing creative writing to such an extent that you almost feel that any idiot with a nickel's worth of talent can emerge from a writing class able to write a competent story. In fact, so many people can now write competent stories that the short story as a medium is in danger of dying of competence.

> We want competence, but competence itself is deadly. What you want is the vision to go with it, and you do not get this from a writing class.

Editors and agents I interviewed generally agreed that the MFA programs are churning out writers who are all writing in a certain style. For example, 'The Iowa School' of writing was frequently mentioned. A journal editor told me that she can recognise an 'Iowa Short Story' without having to read the writer's biographical notes. I personally viewed these comments with a certain amount of scepticism. John Irving, Gail Godwin and Jane Smiley are all Iowa graduates and seem to me to have quite distinctive styles. San Francisco State University has an international reputation for encouraging 'experimental' forms of poetry (though this, of course, my inhibit students who wish to write in more conventional styles). On the other hand, a session I attended at the Harvard Square Book Fair featured readings from the recently-published novels of three young women writers who had all, at different times, attended the same university writers' workshop. They were well-written, entertaining books and I would happily have read all three of them as they happened to be in the genre of feminist fiction I enjoy. Nevertheless, despite obvious differences in plot and setting, there were distinct similarities in style and tone.

Unsurprisingly, MFA Program Directors were quick to refute these criticisms. They pointed to the difference in writing styles among Faculty teaching staff and to the fact that students are not confined to one tutor throughout their degree. Most universities encourage and generously fund visits from established authors and I found the majority of students I interviewed impressively well-read.

It may well be that the homogeneity creeps in during the selection process; and I'm talking here about both staff and student selection. I met with two frightening examples of the God-Professor, both of whom had some very fixed ideas about 'good' writing and both of whom would have considerable power in their own departments. I sat in on a session where one of the short stories being workshopped was written in an epistolary form. As the students took it in turn to evaluate their colleague's work, nearly all of them had problems with the form; though they claimed to like the story and to admire the writing. When it came to the professor's turn to speak, he viciously demolished the story. He spoke scathingly about the 'kind of theory crap they dish out in the English Department' made no comments on the use of this particular form and recommended his students to read Georges Simenon if they wanted to know how to write a good story. When he had finished, the student writer, holding back tears, threw her manuscript into the waste paper bin. This professor was held in a high degree of veneration by most of his staff. With this level of influence at play, it would seem to me to be quite possible for individual MFA programs to recruit both staff and students with a bias towards a particular style of writing and, as a result, produce a stream of graduates with similar manuscripts.

Closely connected to the problems of homogeneity is the accusation that university creative writing programs, rather than encourage their students, end up by diminishing their sense of authority over their own writing. Thaisa Frank, writing in the *San Francisco Review* (Frank) chose to modify Flannery O'Connor's statement as follows:

> I think American writing programs often encourage the wrong kind of talent and overlook writers who are radical and highly imaginative. A number of talented students leave feeling less empowered because the feedback they get attempts to shape their rough first drafts into the forms of American fiction that writing programs find acceptable.

The students I spoke to were divided roughly fifty-fifty in response to my questions about authority. One writer, with a strong record of publication in literary journals and currently working on his first novel, claimed that he had become so obsessed by where he should put his commas and semi-colons that he hadn't written anything worthwhile for the past six months. A young poet had stopped writing completely after his first semester as he felt he had lost his 'voice'. A group of half a dozen workshop students confessed that they couldn't write a sentence without worrying what their professor would think of it.

Equally, a number of students spoke glowingly of what they saw as the privilege of being enrolled in an MFA program. At wealthy Stanford University, where there is an enviable stipendiary, not-for-degree Fellowship program for young writers with a strong record of publication, Jason Brown told me that he had found the workshop style of teaching extremely beneficial. He said that he was able to take the criticism and sort out what was valuable and what was not. He described the process as the ability to develop 'an internal editor' and felt that his writing had greatly improved.

From the teacher's point of view, Maxine Chernoff, teaching at San Francisco State University emphasised that staff were discouraged from being too narrow in their teaching and students were encouraged to be 'true to their own vision'. Robert Polito, quoted in *Poets and Writers*, summarised as follows:

> …much sentimentality is attached to the subject of writing as purely inspiration. But it's not just inspiration, it's revision, it's knowing your strengths and weaknesses, it's possessing an historical knowledge of what other writers have done, and it's learning how to put yourself in circumstances where inspiration is possible. All those things can be taught. And subtler things that are harder to talk about, such as the whole mentoring process, of discovering yourself in

> other people - in teachers, in friends, in older writers, in peers. We're trying to build into the New School program a realistic sense of what the writer's life is like. (Neubauer)

The issue of the 'real writer's life' was, of course, the main thrust of my research for the Churchill Fellowship and I was interested to find out what practical preparation writers were given for a career in literature.

In the first place, none of the Faculty members I interviewed seriously considered that more than a handful of students would become full-time writers. Approximately three percent of MFA manuscripts find a publisher and teachers thought it much more likely that a second or third attempt by their top students would be successful. In the programs I visited (and I should reiterate that this was a very small sample of the programs offered throughout the USA) professional guidance was not a formal part of the workshop program, though it was generally agreed that individual students could seek advice from their supervisor or from a senior member of Faculty. Some universities invite publishers and agents to visit the university towards the end of the academic year to meet graduating students, either as a group or individually, and one university boasted that all graduating students would by the end of the year have found themselves an agent.

Leslie Epstein at Boston University and Holly Carver at the University of Iowa Press referred me to national writing competitions and awards specifically aimed at MFA students. Students who win these prizes are most likely to be given preferential reading by potential publishers and are very actively encouraged to submit their work.

Publishing and journalism are seen as possible alternative careers for graduates and to this end the system of internships employed by most universities is a strategy I found particularly useful. Students may apply to substitute one of their workshop units with an unpaid period of work experience with a publishing house, newspaper, magazine or other arts-oriented organisation. At the end of the internship the student is assessed through written or verbal reports from the employer and their own brief written account of the experience. The advantages of this scheme are threefold: the student has the opportunity to find an entree into a career position; the university department saves on its teaching time; and the employer organisation has the benefit of an unpaid, but committed staff member.

The most likely destination for the MFA graduate, however, is as a teacher in their own or an affiliated writers' workshop program and it was this aspect of the MFA philosophy that troubled me most of all. Administrators and teachers claimed that it was advantageous for new writers to be able to work in an academic environment where they could consult with their peers and be exposed to the latest developments in American literature; but they were ready to admit that there are significant disadvantages to this particular path. In the first place, it is widely accepted that universities will only give tenure-track positions to published writers and, as previously stated, only three percent of graduates will be in this enviable position. Tenure-track professors and assistant professors have paid leave and pension benefits. They are eligible to apply for time off for writing and some universities will make a financial contribution to publishing costs for young academics to get themselves on the first rung of the publications ladder. Unfortunately, the majority of graduates are only eligible for employment as sessional tutors and in America, as in Australia, these positions are underpaid and exploitative. In order to make a living, some sessional tutors will travel across state to take classes in two or three different institutions, leaving very little time for their own writing. Vacation time will mean enrolment to teach at Summer School in order to breach the salary gap.

Poet Katha Pollitt believes that MFA programs in the USA have reached saturation point and that 'writing and publishing should be goals in themselves, rather than the means to the end of teaching'. In an interview published in *Poets and Writers* earlier this year she goes on to say that 'Working within the universities was meant to rescue poets from poverty…yet the end result of it is the writing becomes subordinated: it's just the way to lead a safe life in academia'. She wishes more writers could join the general intelligentsia, working in film, journalism or publishing. (Stephenson)

In a nutshell, the USA now has a system where more and more universities are producing graduates who, in turn, will teach more and more MFA students to write manuscripts for a rapidly shrinking publishing market. In Western Australia there has been a great deal of public controversy over the fact that three universities now have Law Schools, at a time when fewer law firms have openings for articled clerks. So far there has been no comment on the increase in graduate programs for creative writers; yet in WA there are most certainly more opportunities for new lawyers than there are for new authors.

I am not for one moment suggesting that literature should be driven by market forces - the opportunity for inexperienced writers to work with a mentor on the development of their craft is a valuable experience in itself and the commercial value of the work-in-progress should not be open to discussion. However, when tertiary creative writing programs form themselves into a self-serving industry, as now appears to be the case in the United States, questions must and will be asked by those of us who work in what we uncertainly call 'the real world'.

The publishing industry in the United States has reached crisis point and I see no signs that this will not happen in Australia. In any consideration of the extension of existing graduate programs or the establishment of new schools of creative writing, I believe that universities must take a responsible look at the career options available to their postgraduate students. Not to do so is to diminish even further the status of writing and writers in our community.

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Notes

1. *Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones, New York, 29 May 1997, p 1. Return to article
2. Garvey, Mark (ed). *1997 Writer's Market.* F&W Publications, Cincinnati, 1996, p 22. Return to article
3. Neubauer, Alexander. *Poets and Writers.* Spring Street, New York. March/April, 1996, p 42. Return to article
4. Frank, Thaisa. *San Francisco Review.* Santa Fe Ventures, San Francisco, Jan/Feb 1997, pp 42-43. Return to article
5. Neubauer, Alexander. *Poets and Writers.* Spring Street, New York, March/April, 1996, p 51. Return to article
6. Stephenson, Heather. 'Katha Pollitt'. In *Poets and Writers.* Spring Street, New York. March/April 1997, p 35. Return to article

Notes and Debate

Nike Bourke and Philip Nielsen *The Problem of the Exegesis in Creative Writing Higher Degrees*

TEXT
Vol 2 No 2 October 1998
http://www.griffith.edu.au:81/uls/text/journal.htm
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