

Curtin University

**Brian Dibble*****Caring for and Feeding a Creative Writing Department***

I came to Perth in November of 1972 to be Foundation Head of the Department of English and Language Studies at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. I resigned that Headship at the end of 1988, staying on as a Professor of Comparative Literature, teaching in the Literature and the Creative Writing areas. However, for the past few years I have also been Director of Research and Graduate Studies in our Division of Humanities - so, much of my career in Australia has been spent on administrative matters. Some personal history and some institutional experience will inflect the comments here, comments whose main thrust is meant to moot some questions and to raise some concerns about creative writing courses in Australian tertiary institutions.

To begin with a bit of personal history... Several things motivated me to introduce a creative writing course. I can probably summarise them as ignorance, arrogance, and two self-cancelling accomplishments related to one great accident.

My ignorance was that I knew little about founding and running a department; and although I had taught in one, I knew nothing about setting up a Creative Writing program, much less one that was entirely foreign to the institutional environment in which I found myself. That is, I knew little about hiring staff, developing a degree structure, recruiting students, and so on. Above all, I knew little about the institutional politics played out at levels above the departmental one - if I had known more, I possibly would have hesitated before suggesting a Creative Writing course. Now I know why academic politics are so vicious: there is so little at stake.

But arrogance can be a facilitator. I had taught Creative Writing and Literature in Illinois and in Wisconsin for eight years. And, like most people who studied with the Chicago's Aristotelian Critics, I was encouraged to think I was a pretty good scholar and teacher. Moreover, I had written and published several poems of the woe-is-me sort in a few now-defunct little magazines. Thus I confidently made the inductive leap: since I was a hot-shot teacher, a great (if unacknowledged) writer, *argal* I was qualified to set up a Creative Writing course. And the last motivation I had, as I see it now, derived from the fact that at the second institution at which I taught I was privileged to work as an editor of the Beloit Poetry Journal: I suspect that this editorial experience was counterbalancing strength, in the minds of those in Perth who hired me as Head, to the weakness of my also being a poet.

To explain the accident, I point again to the Beloit Poetry Journal. It was connected with Beloit College for only an issue or so from its launch in 1950. But in that first year, in one of our otherwise forgotten poems, God committed a p tomanical indiscretion, one which immediately came to the attention of the usually somnolent trustees, and so that Christian college withdrew its financial support. Undefeated, the original founders went on to subsidize it themselves, and the journal went from strength to strength, becoming what the New Yorker once called one of the ten most influential poetry magazines in the US. It prides itself on being open to the work of new or young poets, and it has many "discoveries" to its credit - reading and winnowing the 30,000 poems it receives per year in order to publish between 100 and 200 of them is as exciting for me today as it was when I started almost thirty years ago. But I digress...

According, therefore, to my personal cosmology, in the beginning God farted, and the rest, as they say, is history... This literary Big Bang accounts for the independence of the Beloit Poetry Journal, for my long-standing yet non-institutional involvement with poetry, and for some of the unblinking, unknowing confidence that motivated me to put in place (one of) Australia's first tertiary Creative Writing course(s).

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Now for some institutional experience - leading on, more directly, to the several generalizations about the care and feeding of a Creative Writing course that I would like to emphasize today. In 1973 ours was what was called a service department, that is, one primarily established to provide "English" skills - essay-writing, lab report-writing, meeting-management skills, and so on - to students in the various other departments of our institution. It was tuition that most students did not want and that some departments valorised by scheduling for 5 pm on Friday. In short, it was sometimes soul-destroying work.

We also offered a three-year Associate Diploma for major study in English, Japanese or Indonesian, but no one quite knew what might be done with those courses. WAIT had but one pseudo-constitutional imperative, namely to be "different" from traditional Australian (read "British") universities - its offerings were to be "practical." I was prepared for that - they were fairly practical at Beloit, and I had already imagined and planned many of the things we could do at WAIT. But I was conscious, too, that our department was what literally was left after WAIT's original

Department of General Studies had been carved up into Home Economics, Library Studies, Psychology, Social Sciences, and Social Work. And so during my job interview I took a punt: when asked what I thought was needed to make our department a "viable" academic unit, I said that was a question better put to the other candidates for the position, since I was interested in excellence rather than viability. I had learned my first and possibly most important lesson.

By 1974 we were offering undergraduate degrees and graduate and postgraduate diplomas in seven areas: Australian Studies, Creative Writing, Film and Television, Journalism, Literature, and Theatre Arts. Each of these (save our work in Literature) was something like an Australian first: the Australian Film and Television School had not been created, NIDA offered sub-BA work, and RMIT's journalism course was only available to people who were already cadets with the Melbourne Herald. (For historical accuracy, I should note that the UWA had a journalism course which it disbanded in 1933. And I take on board David Swain's claim that the Canberra CAE started the first such course in the early 1970s: I shall research that claim and report on it at a later date.)

In one sense, ours was the only game in town: there were half a dozen as-yet-unamalgamated teachers' colleges, Murdoch University (founded in 1973) was not yet a force to be reckoned with, and colleagues at the University of Western Australia disparaged our non-traditional "English" program. In any event, our course became - and still it remains a success - with Social Sciences and Asian Languages, it is one of Curtin's two most sought-after courses in terms of the number of applicants it attracts (1100) versus the number it can accept (200) per annum. Its entry cut-off point is also higher than that of the other comparable courses in Perth. Dozens of students from the four other Perth institutions annually seek to transfer to it. And the number of interstate applicants has risen greatly since we have started to advertise our graduate work in creative writing, offerings that now include an MCA.

The success of our graduates is well known, for example, by Phil Salom's twice winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, or Tim Winton with his Vogel and Miles Franklin Prizes and his Booker shortlisting. The Vogel is a good touchstone of the relationship between our course and the early successes of such students because its criteria so closely match our students' situations - under 35 and without a published book. Tim Winton wrote his first book, *An Open Swimmer* (1981), as part of his Graduate Diploma work with Graeme Turner and me, and Fotini Epanomitis wrote her 1994 Vogel-winner, *The Mule's Foal*, as part of her Honours work with me. We track student success informally, and so far we have a list of nearly one hundred books they have published, scores of prizes they have won, and many significant near-hits, like Ed Miles being shortlisted for the Vogel this year.

In 1976 our departmental Annual Report (written by someone other than I) could piously say that "[i]t may be that the [WAIT] B.A. (English) programme is blazing a trail which other tertiary institutions may follow in the future." Now we are but one player on a crowded field, for a majority of Australia's three dozen universities have courses in Creative Writing. Some - like the UTS program - are rightly much admired. And there is much to be said of other initiatives, like the MCA and DCA at Wollongong, and some of the proposals that Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady of Griffith University (Gold Coast) have in mind.

But, even as I appreciate the growth of Creative Writing programs and admire particular initiatives, I worry that the impetus to establishing some might be pertain to wrong reasons. I do not mean the sort of "wrongness" which my own history so abundantly illustrates: rather, I think of motivations generated by current politics and policies.

From the perspective I have in mind, the first wrong reason says "Numbers are falling, and, if we don't do something quick, we'll go the way of the Classics Department." The second says "I started out as a lit teacher and am also a writer, but the never-ending demand of keeping up with Lit Theory is too much, so I'll just default into the CW stream." (A common analogue to this second wrong reason is for a department with some writer/s in its midst to conclude that it is, therefore, right and proper, fitting and just to found a CW major or minor.) The third wrong reason is the curricular counterpart of keeping up with the Joneses, and feeds right back into the first wrong reason: "Unlike Classics, we won't go out of business if we keep up with the Joneses." Of course, to be more logical, that last one should say "We won't go out of business until the Jones go out of business," a point I shall return to.

Though it is too late for the Classics Department, we still might profitably quote from its literature, saying *Principiis obsta* or "Resist the beginnings" of doing the right thing for the wrong reason. Since our courses are always under review, I would like to talk about some of the principles which I feel might profitably inform the procedures and maintenance of our Creative Writing courses. These thoughts are personal and context-specific - and hardly exhaustive.

My first point is that it is vital that our superiors support our efforts, in fact champion them; and it is better (although not necessary) that they support them for the right reasons. One needs a Dean or a DVC who strongly represents the cause and, preferably, who believes in it too. We were fortunate at Curtin (then WAIT) to have a Director, Haydn Williams, who actively had faith in our work: I believe he genuinely regarded art as a techne in the same sense that Aeschylus elaborates in *Prometheus Bound*. The fact that his second-in-command, Howard Peters, was a closet poet (a vice I shamelessly approved) was an added bonus: he provided substantial material support to us. Our foundation Dean/DVC, Norm Dufty, perhaps was agnostic in this regard, a numbers-man who backed quantity before quality, but that did not matter so much in the 1970s and early 1980s when the tertiary sector was an expanding universe.

Now we are fortunate in having Ian Reid as DVC, a poet and critic who in the early 1980s started at Deakin a course in sympathy with the philosophy of our own course. Do not think that my exhortation here is comparable a geneticist's advising you to choose your parents wisely: although most of our programs are up and running - already "parented" - nothing stops us from holding our superiors accountable. And we have new options for bringing pressure to bear as more and more senior appointments are made on a fixed-term basis.

The third point invokes the perennial question of the relationship between Creative Writing and other units on offer. Originally, in Curtin's situation there was no problem, for two related reasons: all of our majors were subsets of a BA degree, and the Creative Writing major was defined as complementary to our Literature major, the opposite side of the coin, so to speak. If you wanted to do second-year Creative Writing, you also had to do the counterpart second-year Literature unit. More provocatively, Literary Criticism was also required of Creative Writing students. Generally, this latter requirement was accepted, sometime enthusiastically, sometimes grudgingly, and once not at all when some students fell under the sway of teacher-in-passing who persuaded them that "analysis equals paralysis." To my disappointment both requirements, the collateral Literature units and the Theory unit, now have been dropped officially, although in practice some students still take them. I look on Creative Writing as a praxis which, therefore, should be conducted in the context of the assumptions, theory and principles of some discipline: my analogy is to making anatomy optional for surgeons.

The fourth point relates to staff. What are the desiderata when hiring staff in order to implement it? For full-timers we originally sought people able to teach in more than one area - e.g., Tony Nicholls (our current Head) in 1977 in CW and Theatre Arts, Ross Bennett in 1980 and Anne Brewster in 1985, both in Literature and Creative Writing. And our very first appointment was Elizabeth Jolley, as a part-timer in 1976 and then as a permanent fractional (half) staff member - she remains a most valued teacher to this day, not teaching literature but teaching out of a knowledge and judgement of it which is as profound as anyone's.

I could go on to discuss the importance of part-timers, staff exchanges, and so on, but there is not time. Besides, I want to return to discussion more on the macro level of the institution, as I make one final point. I will merely say that we consciously do not fill all of our establishment vacancies, leaving much room to hire the equivalent of two or three full-timers - we use the money to hire part-timers, Visiting Specialists, Writers in Residence, and such. This gives the students access to a greater range of opinion, experience and expertise, especially in the area/s of new developments and enthusiasms of the younger writers. But there is a tension or a trade-off: on the one hand there is the usual push by the Academic Staff Association to make all appointments full-time ones, preferably tenured. And, on the other hand, there is our concern for students. This whole discussion, please note, also invokes the role of the university in the patronage system, one we cannot go into here.

To conclude, I am concerned to make one final point. I am concerned about changes to the weightings used in success-driven university research funding programs. One of the reasons I am concerned is that last year DEET reduced by one-sixth the value given to a book. This was effectively an anti-humanities gesture which said "Previously, six 50-point science journal articles and one book were considered equivalent, but now we are downgrading books by 16%, to the equivalent of only five journal articles." And now pressure is on, at Curtin and elsewhere, to make further amendments. So, this year my (non-humanities) colleagues originally proposed accepting DEETYA's figures which would make literary books two-fifths the value of academic books, such that Homer (a mere two-book man or woman) would have received \$1000 from Curtin for the *Odyssey* and \$1000 for *The Iliad*, but each and every monograph on his work would attract \$2500 for the authors. The situation is even worse for people in the visual arts.

I raise the issue by way of conclusion not as a rhetorical device which for one reason or another flourishes the latest injustice or indignity to the arts. Rather I raise it here as a way of emphasizing some of the points I made earlier. To invoke just my first one: the AVCC is made up of our own Vice-Chancellors, and no-one else - it is they who must agree or not with such proposals; and, if they do not, then they should work - or be made to work - to do something about them. In our Division of Humanities we are preparing a submission we hope Curtin will endorse and send as its own to the AVCC and/or DEETYA.

In absolute terms, the sums I refer to are very small - at Curtin, for example, moving less than \$50,000 of several million dollars from the Humanities toward other areas. In relative terms, they are somewhat more palpable - your book on Homer, previously worth \$3000 would be worth \$2500 this year, but your novel would only be worth \$1000 or less. The differences are not life-and-death ones in the first year, and it could be argued that the change is largely symbolic. But in these days of Vanstone and Costello (a near-homonym on Abbott and Costello) the attitude behind the change in practice might well presage the day when the Joneses must follow their Classics neighbours who used to be down the hallway. The final words from Classics might well be *Finem respice*, "first know the end," as in the sense that the beginning is best understood when seen as prelude to the end. The Classicists acted out the drama right the way through, and so now we know the end. It is imperative that that knowledge should guide us as we set up and run creative writing courses in our various arts and humanities and other settings.

## LETTERS AND DEBATE

Letter from Moira McAuliffe

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