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Introduction

Creative writing

This is not a book primarily about works of literature, film, theatre or otherwise. These are terms most often used in relation to the *completed* works of creative writers, works that are publicly the result of the activities of creative writing. These completed works (and the experiences they bring to readers and audiences) are absolutely worth celebrating. However, creative writing does not begin with these works: creative writing does not begin where it ends.

Creative writing does not begin when a creative writer has released one work or another into the public sphere, if ever these works are released into the public sphere. Creative writing begins, and is largely undertaken, in the realm of the individual, even if that individual is collaborating with other individuals. Creative writing begins with ideas, emotions, understandings and a *desire to do it*, that is located in the someone, or in 'someones', who have that desire. Creative writing is, in this sense, a decidedly human event, an activity that is driven by our urge to create.

This book is about that human activity of creative writing – the act of doing it, and the knowledge that underpins the acts and actions of creative writers who are, or have been, doing it. The reason for this is straightforward. Have you ever encountered one of those books in which someone who has read a creative writer's work asks them a range of questions about that work? Something along these lines:

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‘So, in XXXX you explore the nature of what it is to be YYYY?’ And the creative writer replies something along the lines of ‘Yes, I wanted to explore YYYY. It’s something I’ve been interested in for quite some time.’ Or, alternatively they reply: ‘I’m not sure I do explore YYYY, actually. I think of XXXX as more of an exploration of AAAA.’

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this kind of information, or this approach to discussing works of creative writing. Equally, it might not matter, and critics of literature might well suggest that it *does* not matter, whether the creative writer is incorporated into the interpretative loop of all this or not. It’s possible and laudable to approach a work of creative writing and respond to it. Read into and through it and even in some sense *write* it. And to do this by a response that occurs *post-event* (that is after the originating events of creative writing). A creative writer – whether fiction writer, poet, screenwriter, new media writer, playwright or otherwise – often has many very interesting things to say about their complete, public works and sometimes, in exactly the kinds of books that explore those works, they can provide some wonderful recollections of how those works were made, harking back to the *event* of creative writing while themselves engaging in some post-event considerations, memories, thoughts, even new speculations.

But, of course, the greatest amount of time a creative writer spends is that concerned with beginning their work, developing their work, considering and re-considering incomplete work. Along with this, thinking or speculating on future work, re-considering work-in-progress. This includes wondering what idea or emotion or intention might produce a new piece of creative writing, or develop one already in motion. While most of these activities are in pursuit of finishing something, some time, they are not finished in themselves, or even all so plainly connected with a ‘macro’ result (such as the completion of a novel or the completion of a poem) that the ‘micro’ elements (singular choices of technique, individual thoughts, emotional sparks) have a direct or obvious connection with finished work. Creative writers spend much of their time in moments, and in modes of perception, memory, and (sometimes wild!) speculation. Without such activities creative writing wouldn’t occur. Yet the ability to

approach these moments, *post-event*, or to discuss these through the evidence available in the public realm, is relatively low.

How, then, do we come to understand creative writing? How do we improve our own understanding and knowledge of it, as creative writers? How, also, do we share knowledge about creative writing between those who do it, and with those who enjoy the public results of doing it, even if they don't do it themselves? We can, and we surely will, go on celebrating and exploring and enjoying the publicly distributed works of creative writers. Creative writing as an art form and as a form of communication brings us so much, as individuals and as groups, cultures and societies. Completed works have a role in our societies in extending the ways in which human beings relate to each other and enjoy the world. *Undertaking* creative writing equally brings us so very much. What we seek through further consideration of creative writing is what lies within our undertaking of it, and how we might further engage with what is undoubtedly a significant human activity.

Fifteen questions, fourteen writers

The fifteen questions that are the focus of this book came from a personal consideration of some of the creative writing ideas and actions that felt pressing to me. These are the writers I asked to answer these questions:

- Iain Banks
- Andy Brown
- Charles Baxter
- Maggie Butt
- Jack Epps Jr.
- Nadine Gordimer
- Kate Grenville
- Nessa O'Mahony
- Ruth Padel
- Philip Pullman
- Robert Pinsky
- Tom Shapcott
- William Tremblay
- Xu Xi

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Short biographies of these creative writers are included at the end of this book. More than one of these writers will be very well known to readers – indeed, these are creative writers who have published widely, won some of the world’s most important literary prizes, taught creative writing to many students, had famous films made of their books, written a famous film or two as well, and generally been publicly visible.

However, it was decided at the outset not to work on the premise that I would *only* interview those creative writers who were extremely well known to the majority of people in the English-speaking world. This is not intended to be a book about levels of fame, just as it is not a book about the reception of finished works of creative writing. These things are intriguing, often very exciting, and in a great many ways supportive of our celebration of creative writing generally. But these things are not what *Inside Creative Writing* is about.

It was decided, however, to include creative writers who have completed some work that has been publicly distributed. The reason for doing this is to acknowledge that creative writing is both art *and* communication between people. So the creative writers included here have all seen their work publicly exchanged, between creative writer and reader, between creative writer and audience. The circumstances differ, the personal circumstances differ, but all these writers have all had some external involvement in their final works, some publishing or producing involvement. This is what holds these creative writers together as a ‘set’ for the purposes of exploration. In other words, this is a cross-section of creative writers who have had some external distribution of their final works, and who write in English. They can be considered, in that sense, a selection, or a sample, or a case study.

The fifteen questions asked of these writers aim to take our explorations beyond an investigation of finished works. This is not to reject those kinds of books – those books that ask mostly about ‘the novel’, ‘the play’, ‘the collection of poetry’, ‘the film’. Those kinds of books will be well known to readers here. But the aim of *Inside Creative Writing* is to ask more about particular *doing* aspects of creative writing itself, particular ways of thinking and acting. The purpose here is to extend how we investigate creative writing and, through a comparative study, explore whether

creative writers offer us significant clues to important aspects of creative writing, simply in the way they think about it.

The questions were asked over a period of just over two and a half years. In every case, these questions were presented to the writers in the same manner. You'll notice I have been informal and personal in tone. I felt I was intruding into a personal space, and I wanted to acknowledge that in the tone of my questions. I was also aiming to keep consistency in the manner and method of asking – so I did not vary this tone. As a 'control' approach I presented each question in the same manner: fifteen questions, in the same order, and in the same words. Logistically – after enquiring with each of the creative writers, in turn, asking if I could ask some questions for this book, the questions were sent individually to the writers, via email, and their answers were received the same way.

All the writers except one received the questions this way – that is, via email. Nadine Gordimer received the questions via fax, and returned them the same way. William (Bill) Tremblay received the questions by email and returned them the same way – however, he reworded the questions, or summarised them, no doubt endeavouring to pick up what he felt was the essential core of the question. In his responses I've thus included his rewordings beneath each question.

What follows in each of the chapters of this book is an exploration of the answers given to these questions, a comparative consideration of how these creative writers approached these questions, and an exploratory discussion of what these answers might point us towards.

Nature, nurture and creative writing

Because creative writing is acts and actions¹ it is mobile and fluid. It can be no other way than this – otherwise, it simply would not happen. Alternatively, doesn't our day-to-day use of words, our general use of words, endeavour to be fixed? That is, don't we aim to convey a meaning in words, in our general writing (or, indeed, speaking), that can be exchanged with a high degree of immediate understanding and certainty – between speakers, writers, listeners, readers? Alternatively, doesn't any particular act of creative writing embrace the aim of doing something lively and appealing with

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words? Might that be an aim that can sometimes unsettle meaning or challenge our immediate understanding?

Absolutely! Acts or actions of creative writing can set out to purposely challenge the role of particular words or expressions as widely agreed signifiers² and by doing so works of creative writing can ask the reader, or audience, to re-consider established human meaning or revisit what is shared, in terms of understanding. It is easy to see how attractive this might be, though not necessarily that it might always be comfortable. There's great potential here for new human knowledge – if something is looked at anew there is a chance, perhaps even a very good chance, that something will be discovered, some new insight will be explored and enjoyed. However, that word 'appealing' might also refer to something perhaps slightly less challenging, but just as important.

Activities of creative writing, an arts' practice that uses words as its primary tools, might strengthen how a word, phrase or expression encapsulates an agreed human principle or a human ideal, and it might be that what is sometimes interesting about creative writing – more so than in other modes of written expression – is that creative writing takes a widely agreed word or collection of words and delves further into what these signify for us, so that what is an everyday thought a common feeling, expressed in words, a common place thing, becomes renewed and our interest in it, and knowledge of it, is revitalised.

These are possibilities. In fact, one way of thinking about the tools, the words, that creative writing uses is to think about creative writing as *exploring possibilities with, and through, words*. During creative writing itself, before any public document is realised or released, it is this notion of possibility that harks back in various ways to the perception, memory and speculation in which the creative writer is consciously and subconsciously engaged. Perception, memory and speculation relate directly to how creative writers approach the actions of creative writing.

Words are one site of these actions, one focus of the activities of making that is creative writing; and words are key tools, as well as key components, in the explorations that are undertaken. Therefore, in the event of creative writing the relationship of a creative writer to words is incredibly significant, and we might wonder what it is that draws certain humans to use, or even to

want to use, words this way. Not everyone wants to be a creative writer or to engage in using words in a way that might highlight or prioritise the kinds of usages for which creative writing is renowned. This includes both challenges to everyday use and delving deeper into what these words might point towards, what they might notate. But, of course, words and exploring the uses of words, is only one element in creative writing, significant though it might be.

Simply put, where do creative writers come from? Does the interest in doing creative writing result from some kind of environmental condition, an exchange of a specific kind, in which a creative writer emerges because of what, where, how or who they encounter? Is it primarily about being drawn to telling stories, using images, constructing intriguing juxtapositions of ideas and expressions, relating observations so that others might share that thing or occurrence with the writer (even though those others may not have observed the same thing or the same occurrence)? Creative writers, distinctive users of words, undertake other acts and actions too; but, indeed, where *does* the creative writer emerge from?

We might well ask: can a creative writer ever emerge from a place in which there are no final pieces of creative writing, completed or otherwise – for example, a home without novels, a place without books of poetry? Not to forget, of course, that creative writing can contribute to all manner of creative results, from books to films, from computer games to plays, from children's picture books to websites, from radio plays to works of design, fine art or music. We might ask, also, does a creative writer only emerge if someone, somewhere, at some time, encourages them to engage in creative writing? Or does this occur from an internal observation, a motivation produced inside ourselves, so that regardless of outside influences something has been triggered that ensures we will at least attempt creative writing, at very least show some interest in doing it. Is this emergence of the creative writer any different to the circumstances that encourage the emergence of other artists, other creative individuals?

Scott Barry Kaufman and James C. Kaufman, in their edited book, *The Psychology of Creative Writing*, bring together a variety

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of experts, mostly psychologists and educationalists, to offer some fascinating explorations of such things as 'process', 'flow', 'genius', 'physiology', creativity'. In that book, the opening chapter, Jane Piirto's 'The Personalities of Creative Writers', offers a current answer to the above questions:

Creative people are those who do creative acts. The creativity occurs in the becoming, the making. In the struggle to be creative, personality attributes are extremely important.³

Then the editors of *The Psychology of Creative Writing* quite rightly declare that 'we eagerly look forward to future research and debate'.⁴ So it is: a need for us to find out more, to explore and discuss and consider creativity more! There are further explorations for us to undertake in order to get closer to some answers, to assist us in understanding how creative writing comes about, and why those of us who do it choose to do it.

We might inquire too: 'Would anyone be prevented from being a creative writer by someone else's assessment that certain attributes of their personality didn't suit them becoming a creative writer? It is hard to imagine this would happen, not least because one element of being engaged in creative writing is human passion, that strong personal yearning to do it. However, there are considerations here related to the nature or nurture of creative writers, whether it is possible to be nurtured as an artist, or whether, indeed, artists are born.

The wonderfully named C.E. Seashore, writing in *The Musical Quarterly* almost one hundred years ago, and speaking about another art form, declared:

Musical talent probably lends itself better than any other talent to the laws of mental inheritance, for the reason that it does not represent merely a general heightening of the mental powers but it specifically recognised as a gift which can be analysed into its constituent elements, many of which can be isolated and measured with reasonable precision. The inheritance of musical talent may, therefore, be studied, not only for itself, but also for the bearing it has on the inheritance of mental traits in general.⁵

Could the same be said of creative writing – that the ability to undertake it is inherited; that it is mostly, if not simply, a matter of nature? Similarly, writing in the first half of the 20th century, this time in the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Edwin Flemming joined the personal with the cultural and suggested that ‘for artists and art to survive, our milieu must provide sustenance and encouragement for the development of the artistic personality’.⁶ According to this view, it is a case of either having an artistic personality or not having one. Following this view to its conclusion, if you don’t have an ‘artistic personality’ you are unlikely to produce any art of any kind. But even if you do have an ‘artistic personality’ this is not enough because you require society to support it.

Moving into our 21st Century, but keeping with the music analogy, we find Michael Pickering and Keith Negus, in an article entitled *Rethinking Creative Genius*, offering a slightly different view:

...we argue for the reconceptualisation of creativity as at once ordinary *and* exceptional, involving the links people make between an everyday conception of creative acts and an apprehension of exceptional creative acts. Genius may often be narrated in terms of exceptional moments of musical insight or breakthrough, but these are always firmly embedded in an extended process of arduous toil and preparation before a musician is able to become at one with their art and synthesize from a range of existing cultural elements.⁷

Here creativity is ordinary, something we all possess. Exceptional creative ability is located in genius, but genius can only come about – at least, they say, in the field of music – by embedding in a process of hard work and preparation. In other words, everyone can engage in creative acts, everyone is born with the ability to be creative, but to be exceptional as an artist, to be regarded as having a heightened ability, this involves something more.

In these discussions words like talent, creativity, toil, gift, preparation point us towards questions that are not entirely answered, might never be answered, or might even be unanswerable. These are questions about where the artist – the creative writer in our

case – emerges, and how artists (for our purposes, creative writers) might best be supported. Undoubtedly we might then be drawn to ask about the education of creative writers.

It has always been the case that creative writers have combined types of formal education with types of informal education. That is, creative writers have engaged with schools and universities, have entered ‘apprenticeships’ or mentoring relationships with other writers, editors, publishers, producers; and creative writers have always learnt a great deal of what they know by continuously *doing* creative writing, by the general undertaking of it. In the learning of creative writing a multitude of things can evolve. Such things as ways of viewing the world, ways of expressing a view, ways of moving from thoughts or observations to words, ways of marshalling ideas, ways of engaging with emotions, ways of using the forms and structures of creative writing, ways of working from start to finish of a piece of creative writing, ways of continuing as well as ways of starting a work. In relatively recent years, creative writing has become more widely taught in schools, colleges and universities. In being more frequently taught in these places this way some might say that creative writing has now become *formally* part of education – even if it had been *informally* part of educational environments for many, many centuries. Where we draw the line between the informal and the formal in education is a big question, and one that is somewhat beyond the scope of this book.

But should you take a creative writing class or not; and, if you do take a creative writing class, and are encouraged or discouraged at points during this class, how should you react? What is the relationship between formal avenues of education and informal education in creative writing, and is this relationship evolving somehow, so that what we are seeing in the early 21st Century are potentially distinctive developments in the history of creative writing as a human practice? Developments such as those involving forms of e-learning, or informal learning via social media, or even new ways of distributing works of creative writing, finished or unfinished.

These are important questions as creative writing grows more popular, and more widespread, more accessible through new technologies that have delivered activities of creative writing, as well as *works* of creative writing (sometimes called the ‘artefacts’

of creative writing, meaning *objects* that emerge from doing it: books, typescripts and so forth), more directly to people's homes. By works of creative writing I mean, of course, not only those finished works of creative writers that might well have been released to the public, but now also the works of creative writers that emerge during creative writing itself – drafts, communications about those works (emails, for example), complementary works (works that may or may not be creative writing, but that emerge during your creative writing – notes, annotations, suggestions to yourself for future works).

When considering the creative writers interviewed in this book, and their answers to the questions posed here, we can ask ourselves whether their creative writing seems to be contained in their natures, or whether they reveal that it is primarily the result of various types of nurture. Generally speaking, no one has yet fully comprehended such a relationship between nature and nurture. That is the case across all the arts, of course, as well as specifically in relation to creative writing. We can compare the answers of the creative writers in this book and consider how nature and nurture appear to be contributing – say, for example, in different ways for Andy Brown and Kate Grenville, or for Jack Epps Jr. compared to Robert Pinsky, or for Nessa O'Mahony compared to Philip Pullman. Some of the questions in *Inside Creative Writing* also aim to draw out this nature-nurture discussion – Question 2, for example, which..., and Question 8, which is about the places these writers undertaking their creative writing.

Creativity, process, environment

What is creativity? Is creativity primarily located in the *results* of our actions? Is it located in the *actions* themselves? Or is it mostly located in our ways of thinking? In our ways of perceiving? And is this the case regardless of the actions or results that come about? Perhaps it is located all three of these. In *The Courage to Create* Rollo May neatly describes creativity as 'the process of bringing something new into being'.⁸ This may be a good place to start some thinking, but two complex ideas appear in this definition: firstly, the idea of a *process* and, secondly, the idea of something *new*.

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If a process involves a 'series' of actions, as its general definition suggests, then much in creative writing cannot be considered a process; that is, one thing coming after another, a certain kind of chronology, a series. A great deal in creative writing doesn't work that way. Actions and ideas, perceptions and memories, crafting and critical understanding, all intersect in any event of creative writing. This can happen in very individual and project specific ways. To suggest that such activities might always be placed in a series would be to underplay almost every aspect of the unique events with which creative writers are involved. Instead, the kind of thoughts and actions with which creative writers are involved is better considered as syntheses, the coherence of which is contained in the creative writer themselves – as a creative writer, this synthesis is your own way of approaching the acts and actions of creative writing. A creative writer brings about this synthesis, declares the *individual* while, undoubtedly, is in so many ways also representative of the *cultural*.

May's word 'new' is complex, and important enough to us to warrant our consideration. If May means new, as in 'only now discovered' or as in 'only recently found out', then it would be difficult to argue that this is the case for every act of creative writing. Some creative writing is not new, in that sense, even though your own undertaking of it, and the results of that undertaking, might contain elements that are new. However, the themes, the subjects, even some of the ways in which you approach creative writing might be already established. So your undertaking might be considered, more accurately, a *renewal* rather than the bringing into being of something *entirely* new. We could well ask, would this kind of creative writing be any less creative, any less representative of human creativity?

This question is one concerning value and it might not be the value of the actions themselves that is the focus of this valuing of creative writing; rather, it could be the value of the creative writing artefacts emerging, any of which may be valued in a certain way because of prevailing historical conditions at the time of their valuing. Or it could be the value associated with certain ideas about 'originality', a concept that also attaches itself to ideas

about creativity. Some commentators have said that 'it is impossible to give a simple definition of creativity'⁹; but, equally, deliberations concerning originality do very little to simplify how we can approach an understanding of exactly what being 'original' might mean. George Bailey offers us this:

It may be that in concerning ourselves with works of art we engage in a long-standing practice that counts as a genuine achievement someone's being the first person to accomplish anything whatsoever (where 'achievement' imputes virtue to the person whose achievement it is). An account of why this practice exists might attempt to track our development as highly competitive creatures, and might explain our valuing originality in art and artists as a consequence of the value we find in the ability of someone or something to dominate any situation. This value...may well be the basis of the value that originality in art has to people in certain art-making cultures (just those cultures that place special value on a work of art's originality).¹⁰

So originality, in Bailey's view, is possibly associated with the competitive nature of human kind, involves some kind of 'ability' and some kind of dominance, and in terms of artistic value is related to 'certain art-making cultures' and the idea of what is 'special'.

For those of us interested in where the arts (including creative writing) might originate, all of this is interesting, and certainly alerts us to how discussions of creativity, art making, developing artistic ability, and valuing the public works of artists, is complex and full of many possible interpretations. But, of course, all this doesn't practically get us a great deal closer to what creative writing might involve and, most particularly, just how its undertaking combines human actions and understandings, certain activities and kinds of human knowledge.

Coming to understand more about creative writing, involves exactly that: considering both our actions and the knowledge that informs our actions. Without considering both of these we are unlikely to get much closer to increasing our abilities to engage in

creative writing. We are unlikely to get closer to an understanding of how creative writing happens. By concentrating primarily on the actions, but investigating very little about the knowledge behind them we don't get closer to that understanding. By spending almost all of our time investigating the knowledge behind creative writing but very little time exploring the practicalities of the actions we don't get closer to that understanding either. Only by approaching *both* our actions and knowledge behind our actions are we unlikely to get closer to increasing our abilities to engage in creative writing. This includes our understanding of how creative writing happens, what creative writing is, and how creative writing has come to be part of our world, or part of the lives of individual creative writers – ourselves, or others.

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