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Introduction

Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper

I Exploring creative writing research methods

The development of creative writing as a research discipline in universities and colleges has not yet been well documented, even though many teachers and students pursue it and many degree programmes incorporate forms of creative writing research. Research Methods in Creative Writing aims to address this lack by offering a diverse account of conceptions of research in the discipline as well as a selection of models that readers can explore and on which they can build.

Contributors to this collection hail from around the globe – the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States and South Africa. These contributors demonstrate how creative writing research encourages and supports creative and critical work and can lead to ‘conventional’ as well as ‘experimental’ explorations. In addition, they each explore research definitions in an effort not only to provide insights into writing practice but also to illuminate how creative writing can provide new knowledge.

Here in the twenty-first century, creative writing is one of the most vibrant and alert of university disciplines, creating and critiquing itself as it moves the field forward. Indeed, the vitality of creative writing as a research field is never more obvious than when we observe the great numbers of teachers and learners engaged in the subject, and consider the ways in which their creative writing research draws concepts and inspiration from so many sources. While focused on practice, on producing that individual work that distills their vision, these researchers situate themselves within a cultural context and articulate what they contribute to their aesthetic domain.
These efforts demonstrate the synergy between the creative, the practical and the critical. Richard Sennett calls attention to the false divides between the artist, the craftsman, the critic and the audience in this way: ‘History has drawn fault lines dividing practice and theory, technique and expression, craftsman and artist, maker and user; modern society suffers from this historical inheritance.’ Creative writing research can be said, in many ways, to be occupied with healing these rifts.

Creative writing research is, therefore, concerned with actions as well as outcomes, with the individual as well as the culture and, furthermore, with concepts and theories that illuminate these complex interrelationships. Other disciplines engaged in expanding research possibilities share similar objectives and creative writing research often adapts or responds to these. For example, advocates of action research, educational research, and arts-based research in education and the social sciences have championed new methodologies that can uncover knowledge inaccessible to quantitative methods alone, often by a flexible working method that combines research processes. Those who practise these variations of arts-based and action research and who train others in their methods form networks that enrich discipline-specific vocabularies, map appropriate epistemological frameworks and hence make possible collaboration with other disciplines as well as the mixed genre or hybrid projects that might result.

In the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences, methods related to creative writing research can be found, therefore, and in many cases in this collection you will notice how contributors draw on a range of resources that can be found in these other disciplines. Creative writing research, however, is distinct in being primarily focused on the production of new works, and in the understanding of the processes as well as the ideas and actions that inform a project. In this respect, creative writing research is fundamentally ‘practice-led’; or, to put it another way, it always has practice at its conceptual core, even when it is dealing with issues of critical understanding or with theoretical speculation. As craftspeople, therefore, writers attend to technique, but not in isolation, each establishing their own version of the practice-led research loop that drives any creative project forward. It is one of the essential premises demonstrated in
this book that any creative writing involves imagination, practice and critical engagement, working together, questioning and supporting each other. Creative writing research simply builds upon this important premise.

Other arts – drama, music, dance, film-making, painting, design, for example – are also actively engaged in practice-led research, informed by a variety of critical and theoretical positions, and these fields have similarly seen considerable growth in and around universities and colleges in recent years. For example, Smith and Dean⁶ consider research approaches in a range of art forms while Balkema and Slager⁷ survey research developments in European visual arts in particular. Balkema and Slager’s introduction suggests the bold sweep of current creative research of all types: ‘One could claim that the artistic field comprises the hermeneutic question of the humanities, the experimental method of the sciences, and the societal commitment of the social sciences.’⁸ This scope indicates why creative writing research readily draws concepts and inspiration from so many intellectual as well as artistic sources. As several contributors argue, writers from past centuries, whether inside or outside academia, have been doing just that – whether we call their research approaches ‘poetics,’ ‘narratology’ or, indeed, creative writing research.

Being one of the arts, creative writing of course has a connection with these other artistic fields as well as with literary ancestors who have interrogated how and why they practice and, in effect, how and why they research in order to develop. In comparison with other art forms, however, creative writing chooses words as the principal tools and words are the primary outcome. Other art forms may use words, but they are creative writing’s substance, its essence.

As an art using words and producing artefacts made up primarily of words, the methods of creative writing research sometimes draw directly, and quite naturally, on notions surrounding written expression or text; for example, considerations of how certain imaginative arrangements of words can be used to unlock emotions or establish a relationship between the writer and a potential reader. At other times, research methods in creative writing refer to concepts that could be encountered in any form of human communication, written or otherwise – so, for example, investigations of meaning, inference
or attitude. In that regard, a creative writer might explore the inference of a particular viewpoint or voice or the situating of a particular cultural or political attitude. Still further, research methods in creative writing can be located in systems of personal or cultural exchange. In this instance, the researcher might consider context or the relationship between their individual understanding and societal understanding, or they might locate a personal history in the realm of local, national or international histories.

What the examples above primarily point towards is research relating to expression or approach. Creative writing research can be located in a number of sub-sets of these broadly defined interests, and the research questions posed and explored can be situated according to definitions of type or end result. So, to take one instance, a creative writer seeking to explore a result that related to the form of art defined as ‘expressionist’, or to a mode of expression defined as ‘postmodern’, would be working within the realm of aesthetic or cultural definition and would most likely either be confirming or challenging notions associated with those established definitions of type or result.

A creative writing researcher, however, might equally be undertaking their investigations with their individual project as the initiator and definer of their progression and success. Such individualism will involve synthesising aspects of knowledge; however, ideas and terms already in place, and related mostly to the end results of creative practice, might be felt to serve the creative writer in undertaking and perceiving their work only partially. It might help your perception of the evolving structure of your novel to read another, already published novel, but your perception might also be helped by engaging with other creative arts or conventional disciplines. For example, you might watch a dancer perform or a chemist conduct an experiment or mix a solution. Viewing these actions might stimulate a sense of form in motion, a relationship with evolutionary human activity. That is not to say that a creative writer can work entirely without textual context. Far from it, given the textual nature of much of our practice. But we suggest here that a focus on individualism and the idea of creating something new are frequently reasons why someone undertakes creative writing. This individualism manifests
itself in current, individual human action as well as in texts. We see this situation in the many human fields that create new things. The creative writer can therefore also be aiming to establish as well as respond to elements; they are evolving from their own creative engagements notions that might or might not have well-established definitions, even though they will have imaginative origins. In many ways, creative writing research continues to define itself as well as to respond to modes, methods and philosophies of knowledge that are already available.

What follows is a collection of approaches to researching in and through creative writing. In no sense would we suggest these are the only approaches that might be taken. In fact, if anything, these approaches suggest rather than define, they explore rather than discover, and they point towards rather than stand atop of our destination. Faculty and students continue to develop their research, and we certainly aim here in Research Methods in Creative Writing to provide further support and encouragement for what is, we believe, an enormously dynamic field. All the authors in this book provide potential pathways of investigation – pathways that can be followed by advanced creative writing undergraduates at university, as well as postgraduates and faculty. Using the book as a collection of signposts pointing to such exciting pathways is the suggested method of engaging with individual chapters. In fact, with this ideal in mind, the book has the potential to be of use to all writers who show an interest in what they create. Finally our joint, personal objective is to encourage the readers of this book to engage on a deeper level with their creative writing practice; to explore it in order to further understand it for the benefit of their own work and for the discipline generally.

2 The writers

Kim Lasky

This opening chapter nicely situates the present condition of research. Lasky speaks about ancient ‘principles and forms of literary composition’ in order to explicate some challenges to contemporary
writers. That general sense of how we might construct a bridge from what has gone before to what might appear in the future could be the theme for Research Methods in Creative Writing overall. That is, research is always in essence about finding out ‘what has been’ and ‘what is’ in order to move forward. Here, the writer considers the history and background of poetics, but also its contemporary applications to creative writing research. She looks at some examples of creative writers speaking about being at practice – Henry James, John Fowles and Doris Lessing – and explores practice-led research in relation to what is indeed a considerable ‘range of inputs’. Lasky’s chapter concludes with a discussion of some innovative creative-critical work and, as with all the chapters you will find in this book, she offers some exploratory exercises.

**Donna Lee Brien**

In ‘Non-Fiction Writing Research,’ Donna Lee Brien investigates a complex field comprising a range of subgenres, such as life writing, journalism, and essays that can themselves be broken down into smaller units with their associated methodologies and ‘procedural and ethical challenges’. Given the scandals in recent years about the degree of falsification in some high-profile non-fiction titles, this timely chapter considers how and why non-fiction writing needs to be clear about its purpose and techniques, since it depends on trust between author and audience. Brien offers a brief history of the contemporary non-fiction genre in order to ground her analysis of the types of research it entails (including process, archival and experiential research), explaining step by step how a ‘research enquiry cycle’ proceeds by tracking a project based around a birthday lunch. Significantly for those in higher education, Brien demonstrates how certain types of non-fiction writing can make original contributions to knowledge.

**Marguerite MacRobert**

What methods might we use for exploring creative writing as a process as well as a product? In each chapter in this book the author
asks this question. In Marguerite MacRobert’s chapter we find a timely reminder that no matter what answers we might have, we cannot forget that creative writing involves people and people can offer direct insights into the actions they undertake. Based in South Africa, MacRobert employs a qualitative research method, using interviews to investigate creative writing process among some South African writers. Questions of a writer’s ‘goal-setting’ in the initiating and then re-visiting of a work-in-progress suggest to her additional investigations concerning how drafting of a work takes place, and what motivations lie behind a writer editing their work-in-progress. Indeed, we could ask what lies behind deciding a work is complete? Considering the research of Linda Flower and John Hayes, and that of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, this chapter ventures into discussions of creativity and theories of creativity, looking at aspects of the writers’ ‘world-making’. The context-bound elements of both the writing process and the eventual publishing of work also feature, providing a backdrop. So does the writers’ sense of enjoyment.

Kerry Spencer

The wryly observant might say that it takes a very brave writer to approach a creative writing project through statistical analysis. Whether inclined to believe mathematics and creative writing exist in alternative worlds, or simply a little sceptical about the role of the numerical in approaching creative communication, on first glance readers might feel hesitant about the contents of Kerry Spencer’s chapter. But what if, as a creative writer, you are working in a genre that is extremely market conscious? What if those companies who publish books in this genre take sales figures, readership figures, book shop records, very seriously? And what if, in developing your novel, you want to know if there is any firm relationship between what is statistically declared to be successful and the style, subject and approach of those ‘successful’ books? Then, some numbers might be just what you are looking for. Kerry Spencer’s chapter draws directly from her PhD in Creative and Critical Writing, in which she produced both a young adult novel and a statistically informed consideration of the young adult fiction market. She makes a case for
this kind of approach, and also for the possibilities inherent in what she calls inter-disciplinary methods.

**Jeri Kroll**

The metaphor of the laboratory underpins this chapter, focussing on creative writing researchers within an institutional community whose goal is the production of new knowledge. This chapter analyses the *where, what, why* and *how* of creative writing research and how it might be shared with a variety of publics. In particular, it draws parallels between scientific and artistic research to explore the way in which conventional definitions of research can apply to creative knowledge generation. The terms ‘local’ and ‘global’ research are coined to distinguish between what enriches a project and what engenders transferable knowledge. Addressing the most innovative types of research – in particular rhizomatic research – the chapter explores the dynamic relationship between practice, methodology, theory and artefact. A discussion of W. H. Auden’s poem, ‘Musée des Beaux Arts,’ demonstrates how each artwork can have multiple entry points to aid teachers and students not only to ‘read like writers’ but to ‘research like writers.’ Especially at higher degree level, moreover, the twenty-first century writing workshop can function as an experimental site where members generate material, test hypotheses and contribute to the stock of knowledge and culture.

**Graeme Harper**

In the chapter ‘The Generations of Creative Writing Research’, it is suggested that when approaching research in and through creative writing we make a choice related to what might clumsily be called ‘knowledge acquisition’. That is, we consciously go in search of new knowledge. It could be said that all creative writing does this; and, certainly, one of the greatest contributions to the world of finished works is that contribution associated with the exchange of understanding, between writer and reader, between the individual and others. It is argued here that in undertaking creative writing
research we do it with the intention of discovering things about the action of creative writing itself. That is, we do it by concentrating on the actual process and work-in-progress, not only on the completed results. It is suggested that new knowledge found in creative writing research might not only be useful to ourselves, as individual writers, it might also be useful to others. If this is the case then creative writing research highlights the importance of writing as a widely undertaken human practice and it contributes to the sustainability of that practice by improving our knowledge about how it occurs. In that sense, research in and through creative writing contributes to ‘generativity’, the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. Four avenues of creative writing research are discussed:

1 Creative Writing Habitats
2 Creative Domains
3 Activities
4 Artefacts of Creative Writing

Kate Coles

All the chapters in Research Methods in Creative Writing relate in some way to university and college teaching. Each chapter can be read as a ‘case study’ of creative writing research methods that, even if not directly adopted, might suggest other approaches, informing project work at undergraduate as well as graduate level.

As a vibrant research discipline, methods of examining, developing and contributing new knowledge are not in any sense limited, and the excitement of defining new approaches is one of the joys we all experience. In Kate Coles’ chapter the idea of developing original thinking rings clear, as does the idea of reading and readerly exchange between writers. What are the texts that are out there, where might we best find them and how might we best use them? Questions worth asking, Coles suggests, because creative writing is an activity that involves effort, ‘discipline and sustained attention’, and reading is one of the key elements of that attentiveness. Likewise, creative writing contributes to ‘human and even to
academic knowledge’, she says, in which case there is every reason to support the funding of such research – and she thus offers some advice for creative writers approaching research grant proposals, particularly in the United States.

**Dominique Hecq**

Dominique Hecq grapples with one of the most contentious and yet potentially fruitful aspects of creative writing research – the role of theory. She poses the critical question – What is theory? – in light of its ‘apparent demise’ in the past decade. A brief history of theory’s influence in academia in the second half of the twentieth century grounds Hecq’s discussion of creative writing research now. She argues that writers adopt a variety of theoretical postures, but what they have in common is a dual focus on ‘process’ as well as ‘processor’. Using psychoanalysis as a case study, she recommends a ‘theory without credentials’, which embraces uncertainties as it focuses on new modes of understanding a subject that is ‘constantly in the making’. Innovative teaching methods arise from engaging with this theory driven by what Hecq calls ‘interactive narrative pedagogy’, a new conceptualization of the teacher–student relationship.

**Graham Mort**

Graham Mort’s chapter, ‘Transcultural Writing and Research’, looks at the role of creative practice-led research in ‘an increasingly internationalised academy’ where inflections of cultural identity colour the creative and critical work of staff and students. His institution, Lancaster University, offers a case study for the way in which twenty-first century technologies that facilitate distance education not only attract new student populations but also themselves change the academic and writing culture of those in the home country. In particular, Lancaster has established a Virtual Research Environment that provides research-training modules for on-campus and remote (including off-campus UK as well as overseas) students, blending modalities. In doing so, Lancaster has formed a virtual research
community that incorporates diverse cultures that span ‘geographical and political borders.’ At the online workshop and higher degree research level, English as the language of instruction and production highlights how significant not only reader–writer interaction is, but also culture in ‘understand[ing] and locat[ing] literary works as manifestations of new knowledge’.

3 What follows

As a vibrant field that continues to evolve, and that attracts a growing number of faculty and students, creative writing in universities and colleges takes a variety of forms and resounds with many voices. This collection, thus, aims to encourage the members of that polyphonic audience to articulate not only how and why they write, but also to expand their awareness of the possibilities of creating new knowledge. We believe that the following chapters will stimulate and provoke. But we also believe that how readers individually choose to approach, and to use, this book will equally be part of the evolving field of creative writing, where ideas around research methods and research topics are as interesting and as complex as creativity itself and informed critical understanding. Creative writing is a field that will continue to develop because it is not only related to human creativity and to the significance of words as tools of human communication, but because it celebrates individuals as well as cultures. What follows in Research Methods in Creative Writing are indeed case studies, a selection of creative writing research approaches and associated research methods. The chapters reveal, therefore, the voices of practitioners who themselves have undertaken this new species of research and who want to share the insights that they have gained. What follows is not meant to be an encyclopaedic gathering or an authoritative road map, therefore, instructing you how to proceed on your own individual research journey. Filling in the details of your progress and destination is up to you. It is hoped that in reading this book you are encouraged to make your own lively contributions to the field of creative writing.
Notes

1 The term ‘non-traditional’ outcomes is used by the Australian Government in their research auditing system (ERA 2010 Submission Guidelines: Excellence in Research for Australia, December 2009). It has, therefore, influenced the way in which writers in the academy speak about their creative research in funding or promotion applications, for example. Below are the Australian government’s definitions of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ research.

5.4.2. List of eligible research output types

There are four kinds of research outputs common to all disciplines, as detailed in section 5.4.9. These are referred to as ‘traditional’ types of research output:

Books—Authored Research;
Book—Chapters in Research Book;
Journal Articles—Refereed, Scholarly Journal; and
Conference Publications—Full Paper Refereed.

For some disciplines the following ‘non-traditional’ types of research output are also eligible, as detailed in section 5.4.10:

Original Creative Works;
Live Performance of Creative Works;
Recorded/Rendered Creative Works; and
Curated or Produced Substantial Public Exhibitions and Events.


8 Ibid., 9.
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