Introduction to Focus: Why Teach Creative Writing?

The question should be, “Why not teach creative writing?”

We don’t need to doubt, question, or defend ourselves.

Tom Grimes’s trenchant observation above was the first, almost immediate, response to the call for papers that went out on the subject “Why Teach Creative Writing?” Grimes, the director of the creative writing program at Texas State University, apologized for his prickliness but stood by his statement, as would any professor who senses someone, in asking why one teaches a given subject, might be dubious, to say the least, about said subject.

But if we offended anyone in posing that question and establishing this Focus for American Book Review, we’re sorry. Because the impetus behind the question was ABR’s recent attendance at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) annual conference, held this year in Chicago, during a not-too-chilly but flu-ridden long weekend in February. They were heady days, it should be said, as we were here at ABR to mingle with our peers from Fiction Collective Two, NewPages.com, Starcherone Books, and the many creative writing programs in the US, Canada, and UK. Surrounded by likeminded folk, no one ever wonders why creative writing is taught. The answer seems obvious when one steps into the book fair: Everywhere one looks, there are independent presses; journals small and large; writers’ colonies; and reading series and readers, readers, readers galore.

Yet if an AWP member stepped out of the book fair—a rather insular space—she or he might be asked by a security guard or other hotel guest, “What’s this convention about?” As soon as one mentions writers, the layperson expects to hear Stephen King or J. K. Rowling would be delivering the keynote address instead of Charles Baxter or Marilyne Robinson. Of course, anyone with a degree in creative writing, or anyone who ever completed a creative writing course, has put up with this kind of inquiry for some time now. Always it seems there are two worlds of writing: the popular and the literary, and everyone knows that Anne River Siddons and E. Lynn Harris or Elmer Kelton and Anne Rice didn’t have to go to school at Iowa or Hopkins or Houston to learn how to write a good book. And if James Alan McPherson or Ann Beattie are so good, why are her or his books out of print? In other words, why learn how to write when all it might get you is the approbation of the five thousand souls pressed together in the Hilton Hotel on Michigan Avenue?

Well, that’s what we wanted to talk about after AWP ended. The same kind of things that Richard Hugo dealt with in The Triggering Town (1979)—a much cited source in the forthcoming essays. About why creative writing teachers do what they do, knowing that many insist still that creativity of any kind cannot be taught. About what they do when clods like us ask such boneheaded questions. About what methods seem to work. About what joys result. Or what agonies. Whether what might be good for students might not be as good for instructors. And so we sent out the call for papers to a select number of creative writing teachers and program directors. And what we gathered is this rather remarkable number of short essays, far more than expected, from a range of people that demonstrates just how varied the world of creative writing in the university is. Poets and short story writers. Experimental wordsmiths and traditional evokers of scene. From snowy Utah to balmy Mississippi and many points in between. Furthermore, we like to think that this is only the beginning. We hope that those of you who visit ABR online will take this opportunity to add your voice— in absent or dissent—toward those arranged here. So let’s get the conversation started.

Responses

Delightful Jibber-Jabber

Lee K. Abbott

I am tempted, given the givens that are my character, to provide the flippant answer: Why not? More seriously, however, I’d like to quote the late John Updike, in particular from his introduction years ago to the summer fiction issue of Esquire: fiction (and by extension all creative writing) is the best instrument we have to show how it is “to live in the here and now” (which sentiment I’ve modified to note “no matter the where and no matter the when” in order to include, say, historical fiction as well as speculative and science fiction). At worst, I see little wrong in trying to understand the world by throwing some English at it (or Urdu or Tagalog, or whatever is your tongue of choice). At the very least, we make our students, the talented and not-so, better readers. We improve their ability to assess the work a sentence (or a line) does; we make them sensitive to the choices a writer makes with the “willed word”; and, yes, along the way, we reacquaint them with their own humanity, however indifferent over time they’ve become to it. For more able students, we provide them the skills to make their own magic, and we give them opportunity after opportunity, courtesy of the demands of the page, to make real those “things about to disappear.” The very best of our students, happily, contribute to the delightful jibber-jabber that is literature, whenever and wherever it is written.

Lee K. Abbott is the author of seven collections of short stories, most recently All Things, All at Once: New & Selected Stories (Norton). His fiction has appeared in nearly one hundred periodicals, including Harper’s, The Atlantic, the Georgia Review, Epoch, the Southern Review, and Boulevard. His work has been reprinted in The Best American Short Stories, The O. Henry Awards: The Prize Stories, and the Pushcart Prize series. Twice a winner of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, he has published essays and reviews in The New York Times Book Review, The Nation, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times Book Review. He is Arts & Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at The Ohio State University, where he teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing.

Benevolent Workshop Power

Angela Ball

Workshop on a good day is power become benevolent, become playful. The teacher’s and readers’ roles as judges are transformed to those of co-conspirators in a detective mystery. Where is the poem’s best self? How can it be ferreted out, down what passageway or out what window or across what dizzying rope bridge? My favorite time thing about Workshop is when I sit back and listen to my students being helpful, saying useful things, collaborating—having forgotten their egos and the petty prejudices that come with living, using their best and purest skills in service of poetry.

Lindsay Walker has been part of our graduate program for five years, both as an MA and PhD candidate, so I enlisted her help in describing what happens in class. Here is what she has to say:

The size of our workshops (usually between eight and twelve) is ideal, I find. We have the opportunity to introduce and receive feedback on our work almost every week. There’s a wide diversity of background, style, and taste, and I really enjoy the various perspectives through which I get to see my poems.

There’s something very diplomatic about the way our workshops are run here at Southern Miss. The work is the focus, not the personality of the author or the respondents, and it seems that by taking egos and competitiveness out of the equation, there’s a real generosity of spirit that surfaces in the class. The overall quality of the poems is taken into account, but the focus is always on how to improve regard- less of what stage a particular poem is at.

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authority, talent, privilege—any of those things one either brings or doesn’t bring to class—take a back seat to the poem on the table. Unlike other workshops I’ve participated in, there’s no drama or emotional fireworks. We let our guards down; we move forward.

After four years of poetry workshops at USM, I’ve noticed that those students who do the work, who show up every week and find something to contribute, who keep an open mind and listen to the rest of the class, improve without exception. In my own experience, workshop has given me both the guidance and freedom to develop my own taste and modes of expression. My instructors and peers have offered invaluable advice over the years, but they’ve also given me the space to do my own thing. The result is I have a much better sense of what I like and why in my own poetry and when reading others.

The point here is not to present our program as a paragon (though we’re mightily proud of our students and what they continue to accomplish) but to present some of the strengths of the workshop method, which has had its share of detractors but which continues to help writers hone both their editing skills and their capacity for generosity.

Angela Ball’s latest book of poems is Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds (2007), which received the Donald Hall Prize from the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. She lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she teaches in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi and is an associate editor of Mississippi Review.

Steal This Book
Leslee Becker

Maybe we teach creative writing for the bread. “We all hunger for the love of our fellow creatures, and when one is hungry, even a half-baked loaf tastes sweet” (Anton Chekhov). Raymond Carver “We all hunger for the love of our fellow creatures, and when one is hungry, even a half-baked loaf tastes sweet” (Anton Chekhov).

Leslee Becker is the Director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Iowa, and she has held a number of named chairs and distinguished professorships at the latter two places, and stealing from Richard Dillard, John L’Heureux, Nancy Packer, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Hilma Wolitzer. Now, as the Director of Colorado State University’s Creative Writing Program, I’m being asked to discuss pedagogy, and expecting to be hauled off to the Home for the Easily Bewildered, or to the penitentiary for committing fraud and theft.

My colleagues and I are unusually various in our approaches, probably satisfying current students, and frustrating prospective ones, who beg for statements of our teaching philosophy. We’re the products of writing programs, and we likely try to emulate our best mentors. I steal flagrantly, even that old adage about how words are a liability, but it can be learned. At CSU, the learning is done intimately and extensively, the students’ three-year stretch culminating in a thesis and portfolio of their writing, self-assessments about courses, workshops, internships, and a hefty list of annotated works, all the requirements showing that we honor studio work and close reading.

I never asked my teachers for their philosophy; I saw it in action, when Richard Dillard remarked that it’s exciting and titillating to watch a field of grass being mowed down, but isn’t there something eminently satisfying by waiting to watch it grow?

When I started writing and considering where I’d serve time, I read Richard Hugo’s The Trigger town, seeing him tackle the question—can creative writing be taught?—in 1979. “Yes it can and no it can’t, but a good teacher can save a good writer a lot of time.”

Next question: “What about the student who is not good? Is it possible for a good teacher to get from that student only one poem, then one story that far exceeds whatever hopes the student had? It may be of no importance to the world of high culture, but it may be very important to the student. It is a small thing, but it is also small and wrong to forget or ignore lives that can use a single microscopic moment of small triumph.”

Answer: “A creative-writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters.”

Call me an incorrigible thief. Call me a lifer.

Leslee Becker is the Director of the Creative Writing Program at Colorado State University. Her story collection, The Spider, won the 1996 Mid List Press Fiction Award. Her stories have appeared in The Atlantic, Ploughshares, Iowa Review, New England Review, Epoch, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of The Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society Award, the James Michener/Copernicus Society Award, and a Wallace Stegner Writing Fellowship at Stanford.

Writing Wrecks
Kelly Cherry

To have permission to write—it was a liberation, and it was life-saving. For me, that is no exaggeration. I lived for every word that dropped from each teacher’s lips. I attended a program that had zero interest in celebrity or star-studded events that teachers and students alike strove for was to add to the literature we held in highest esteem and embraced with whole-hearted passion. It was a long time ago; the publishing world, the literary world, and the world of creative writing programs have changed hugely, and perhaps neither teachers nor students are as innocent as they were, but novice writers still seek a writing program as a kind of salvation, a place where guidance, encouragement, companionship, and serious criticism support a creative life that can be lived to the full.

I’m less convinced that writing programs are good for the teacher. Teaching writing wrecks one’s spelling, even one’s grammar, and saps one’s energy. To teach and also write for years on end requires a lot of stamina. I’ve learned that a writing teacher can recover energy, find new energy, by teaching literature classes. More universities should allow their writing teachers to do this, especially as in many English departments literature professors are teaching literary theory rather than literature. Of course, writing teachers do have the gratification of seeing their students succeed as writers, and that is no small matter.

Speaking of which, I have heard some writing teachers say they choose to teach graduate students rather than undergraduates because graduate students are more likely eventually to write about them. This strikes me as bizarrely Machiavellian.

Kelly Cherry is the author of nineteen books (including Girl in a Library: On Women Writers and the Writing Life and The Retreats of Thought: Poems, both forthcoming in the fall), eight chapbooks, and two translations of classical drama. She is Eudora Welty Professor Emerita of English and Erijne-Bascom Professor Emerita in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in retirement has held a number of named chairs and distinguished writer positions.

The Crab Grass Question
Bret Anthony Johnston

The question, which comes up every so often like indigestion or crab grass, always offends, frustrates, and confuses me. Its implicit attack/insult is that creative writing isn’t worth teaching—seems not unrelated to the logic of those folks who, upon meeting a writer, say they plan to write a novel but just haven’t yet found the time. And there’s related charge in the question, the cryptic assertion that creative writing lacks value, which value can only be construed as commercial or fiscal, so “why” suck up students’ brains and semantics with fluff, time-wasting classes? Their time, the question suggests, would be better spent elsewhere, in, say, a business or hotel management course. And commercially speaking, such classes are sure bets, but when did educating students how to juggle or which students must jump just to land in a job? The notion—again, not too far removed from the crab grass question—that learning how to craft a narrative or write an elegant line of poetry is a liability rather than an asset seems like a very slippery slope toward an insular, egocentric life. The kind of life, in fact, to which I’ve always assumed education was the antithesis.

In my workshops, I ask the students not to write “about” characters but to write “as” the characters, to fully inhabit someone else’s senses and skin; that is, I ask them to empathize with characters, to render them without judgment in language that is clear, artful, and rewarding. I ask them to think of the reader first, to view the act of writing as one of humility and compassion, to take part in the profound act of witness. To write fiction or poetry in a meaningful and moving way, writers must forget themselves. They’re learning to think and learning how not to think, discovering how the structures of form (whether narrative or poetic) liberate rather than limit the imagination, and they’re participating in a tradition of honoring and shaping the human...
experience with language. The workshop—all workshops—awakens their curiosity as much as it awakens their talent; it teaches them to be more sophisticated and engaged and enthusiastic readers, and it requires them to sacrifice—their time, ego, ulterior motives, and agendas—for a power higher than themselves: the process of getting a soul on the page. The whole shebang is an act of faith, an act of love. The question isn’t why teach creative writing, the question is why the courses aren’t required.

Bret Anthony Johnston is the author of Corpus Christi: Stories and the editor of Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer. He directs the creative program at Harvard University and can be reached on the Web at http://www.bretjohnston.com.

Melding Form and Content
Anna Leahy

I’d like to think that American Book Review’s feature signals that we are finally beyond the question, “Can creative writing be taught?” The question is an accusation in disguise. A growing body of literature answers that charge by documenting how we really do teach this subject. So, let’s agree to put that old question out of its misery. But ABR forefronts a different, much better question: “Why teach creative writing?”

Purpose—why—is vital to creativity. Neurolinguist Alice W. Flaherty, in Melding Form and Content: An Introduction to Creative Writing (2008), Marjorie Garber states, “That makers of art, even in the university, even in the other educational settings? In teaching creative writing in colleges, universities, and other educational settings? In teaching creative writing, whatever “creative” writing (and hence its opposite) might mean—especially in light of the fact that most of our students won’t become what we think of when we say the word author, published or otherwise. Rather, I believe what we’re teaching (if by “teaching” we mean “re-learning,” and if by “we” we mean “I”) is a method of reading. I’m re-learning with my students various strategies for experiencing textuality from the inside out. Re-learning with them how to pay attention to narrative and how to notice narrative dynamics, to what makes a poem poe-moidal, a fiction fictional, and how, and why. Re-learning how to slow down one’s perceptions, deepen one’s contemplation, of what makes a text by attempting to generate universes of discourse that simultaneously refer and do not refer to what we imagine when “we” say the word world. I’m not running tutorials in pop psychology or holding therapy sessions. I’m not coaxing students to write the fiction I like. Rather, I’m asking them to theorize narrativity collectively, re-see it as a possibility space, an if space, where everything can and should be conceived, felt, thought, complicated, challenged, and made to fail. When we find ourselves speaking about Freytag’s Pyramid, we are, I urge them, speaking about how to undo it, redo it, ask why in some sense it exists and in another it doesn’t, why our culture structures certain narratives in certain ways so often that we begin to take them as truths about what we used to call the human condition. When we speak about characterization, we are speaking about how our culture constructs identity through us; about a mode of feelthinking that allows us to become not ourselves and not not ourselves;
Act Truly

Julie Shigekuni

Years ago, a therapist friend jokingly defended her style of handling interventions: “I decide what’s true, and I act accordingly.” I’d wondered how she could bear to hear people’s problems all day long, and I’ve continued through the years to reflect on her insight revealed to me in jest. I offer it here as her insight revealed to me in jest. I offer it here as her style of handling interventions: “I decide what’s true, and I act accordingly.” I’d wondered how she could bear to hear people’s problems all day long, and I’ve continued through the years to reflect on her insight revealed to me in jest. I offer it here as

Why creative writing?—the question answers itself: the fact that anyone would question the teaching of writing as an art (or painting, or film, for that matter), demonstrates an urgent need for creative writing (or painting, or film, for that matter). For the question proposes a world where all value is pegged to the dollar, and education is synonymous with job training. What the question really asks, then, is what’s the practical value of creative writing? So, okay, a story with, as we like to say in workshops, much at stake:

Near the end of The Two Towers (2002), one of the movies based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, the hobbit Frodo worries that their war against evil is not only wearing him down but also corrupting his character. Sam, his sidekick, urges him to keep fighting because there is “good in the world….and it’s worth fighting for!” Viewing this movie in the run up to war after 9/11, it was easy to understand why the patriotic Middle-American audience I was in burst into applause at that line: everyone wants to live in a world where great stories make it easy to draw a line between good and evil. Or as Peter Beinert put it in The New Republic, after 9/11 “ambiguity became impossible” and “dissent…impossible.”

A stable viewpoint is needed for citizens to see themselves, as Sam urges Frodo, as heroes in their own story. And this is true whether those citizens are members of the Coalition of the Willing off to disarm WMDs in Iraq, Palestinians martyring themselves, or Hitler’s brown-shirted youth smashing windows for the good of the Fatherland.

If the events since 9/11 have taught us anything, though, it’s that all sorts of entities create narratives for us to inhabit. Some come from those we would consider our generals at the UN, our bankers and financial advisors…Words create worlds, or so the Constitution would have us believe. So what better way to see how words can undo us than by undoing words? That is, given the multitude of worlds proposed by the many authors we are exposed to, what could be more valuable than acquiring the sophistication with language inherent in a course on how to write poetry? What better way to learn how language can be manipulated to create effects—get us to vote, buy, feel sympathy or anger—than to learn by doing in a creative writing classroom where manipulators and their audience meet face-to-face and feedback is immediate? What better way to learn how narrative is created than to create narrative?

The noblest raison d’être for creative writing lies among those reasons associated with the uselessness of art. But in a world where The Eternal Verities are so often turned against us, at a time (always) when we can only shape the narratives we inhabit out of the raw materials of narrative—melting mottoes, Dolley the Sheep, shape-shifting allies and enemies, wars on nouns and jihad—it is also easy to ask, what could be more pragmatic?

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