

JULIA CASTERTON

# Creative Writing

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

SECOND EDITION



# CREATIVE WRITING

**A Practical Guide**

Second Edition

Julia Casterton





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## Preface

I have written this book for people who want to write, who know there is a writer inside them, but who find the leap of taking themselves seriously, and so beginning to write every day, an all but impossible one to take. Equally, it is for those who have written but are now silent. If you are a writer (and if you are there is a kind of death in not writing) you have to make many new beginnings – because of all the things in your life that can make you, for a time, lose your tongue. I hope this book will encourage those who have been silenced to hear again their own writer's voice: to take the risk of beginning again.

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## Why Write?

I often wonder why I write. I've spent hours talking to friends, writers and non-writers about it. For the first 25 years of my life I was convinced that everybody was either writing or wanted to write a novel. Finally a woman I worked with told me in no uncertain terms that *she* had no such desire, which threw me utterly. I'd assumed she was writing in secret, as I was – pursuing a universal dirty habit that demanded solitude and a quiet place – when instead she was watching TV or out at the pub with friends: being social. Writing isn't usually a social activity, except when you're working on exercises together in a writers' group – and even then you'll find that you do most of your writing alone, in whatever space and time you can carve out for yourself.

One thing seems clear: it isn't as natural as breathing. The myth of the 'natural' writer, who spins vast, architectural webs of exalted verse or prose is a treacherous lie which many writers have done their best to rub out, only to watch it appear again, healthy as ever, in literary columns, popular films about literary 'giants', even in the biographies of writers. No matter how much writers protest, non-writers seem to like the idea that writing is easy, not the arduous manual, emotional and intellectual labour writers know it to be. Simone de Beauvoir expressed great irritation when someone implied that anyone could have written *The Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. If anyone could have written it, why was she the only one to have done so? Writers constantly have to deal with this prejudice, and it is well worth remembering this before discussing writing with casual acquaintances.

I think people write because they need to. Lawrence Durrell described it as a way of becoming more human.

This process can take the form of fly-fishing with some people, Japanese boxing or embroidery with others. With writers it takes the form of writing. It takes time to understand this need, but I believe that the more we write, the more fully we grasp why it is we want to, have to. In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf argues that even though a person's gift for writing may be small, it is nevertheless death to hide it. The writer, for whatever reasons, is compelled to write. She or he may be able to suppress the compulsion for months or even years, believing perhaps that there are more worthwhile, less selfish ways to spend one's time. But who can tell the damage we do to our writing voices when we roughly silence them for long stretches?

There is a magic in words. We wade around in so many glossy pointless circulars, so many yards of dubious newsprint, that it is easy to forget this primary fact: it is words, and our ability to speak and write, which make us human. Words give us power over every other creature and thing in the natural world. Those who cannot write have less power than those who can: their acts of naming are restricted to those who will listen to them, those in the immediate locality. They cannot easily communicate with other societies or with those who are not yet born, as people can who know how to write. Bertolt Brecht advises people who are hungry to learn the alphabet. Knowledge of the skills of literacy is an important step towards taking control of one's own life.

Many societies, our own included, have imposed severe penalties on those who have aspired to the power that writing can give. Ruling groups have found that their interests are best safeguarded if they are supported by a workforce which cannot think for itself in the coherent way writing affords. The agents of the Spanish Inquisition burned books, as did the Nazis. Books can be dangerous because the reading and writing of them involves us in an exercise of intellectual freedom.

Imaginative writings, whether poetry, fiction or plays, create another place for the reader to inhabit, offer an alternative world which may challenge the real one. They are, in the most fundamental sense, magical: they weave



spells, they conjure something out of nothing. William Shakespeare writes:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.i.*

and Margaret Atwood, in a poem called 'Spelling', writes:

My daughter plays on the floor  
with plastic letters,  
red, blue and hard yellow,  
learning how to spell,  
spelling,  
how to make spells.

And I wonder how many women  
denied themselves daughters,  
closed themselves in rooms,  
drew the curtains  
so they could mainline words.

A word after a word  
after a word is power.

Shakespeare and Atwood seem to have different attitudes towards this magic. Shakespeare's poet is in a frenzy, possessed by the spirit of artistic creation. No sooner has he imagined something than his pen transforms imagination into characters on the page. It all sounds spontaneous, unconscious and ... easy. Atwood's daughter, on the other hand, and the women poets she imagines are doing something different with words. The daughter is *playing* with letters and *learning* how to spell. The women are shutting themselves off, choosing the high that comes from writing instead of accepting their place as bearers and nurturers of children. They are in conflict with what is expected of them. They don't imagine they can have their cake and eat it too.

## **Women, men and writing**

Women and men stand in a different relationship to language and women writers should remember this fact both while they are writing and when they receive rejection slips from publishers. To begin with, young girls and women are frequently told that they talk too much, that they make facile use of words, that they chatter idly. Talking is something they do easily but not well, it is said. It is also said that girls are more verbally adept and can express complex concepts more readily than boys. I think it is the critical statements, rather than the words of praise, that are more often uttered in the hearing of girls. For a girl to take up her pen at all, then, is an act of great self-assertion. She is expressing herself against the popular wisdom concerning her sex.

Far fewer articles in magazines are written by women than men. Why is this? Did something terrible happen to those verbally adept young girls as they grew older? Did they lose the pleasure of saying what they wanted to say? Or are they grown up and still writing but to no avail? Does no one want to read their work? Are the subjects they write about simply not engaging to the editors of these magazines? How many of the editors are women? These are questions that women writers have to ask, questions we cannot escape from.

Things are changing though. In Britain, we now have three publishing houses committed to women's writing and at least two of the large publishing companies now carry a separate list for books of special interest to women. This is great news for the new generation of women writers, but for some it is already too late. They have lost heart, stashed away their manuscripts and told themselves they were never really writers anyway.

However, that isn't to say that male writers have it easy. Finding a publisher is hard for all writers and we know from the letters and diaries of writers as important as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Joseph Conrad and Hermann Melville how painful it is when the writing will not come. But I do believe that women experience another, relentless denial of their powers, which begins as soon as they can speak, if not before, and makes the act of writing for them primarily an act of rebellion.

## Writing and conflict

Conflict and rebellion can perform a creative part in the formation of the writer when we learn how to use them. It is through the written word that the writer asserts the *difference* between herself or himself and other people and other writers. Philip Larkin (in *Required Writing*) said that part of the reason he wrote was that no one else had written what he wanted to read, and W. B. Yeats claimed that rhetoric emerges out of one's quarrel with other people and poetry out of the quarrel with oneself. The quarrels and conflicts we have buried within us also possess a rich fecundating power for the writer.

Think of your own favourite writer, of all the books she or he has written. Do you find knots of conflict that the writer keeps trying to unravel and then tie up again? Do you find that, as Adrienne Rich wrote of Marie Curie, 'her wounds came from the same source as her power?'

Spilling the knots from one's entrails out on to paper isn't likely to make a poem or story that others will want to read, but many writers do have to go through the 'spilling' process in order to know just what it is they have to hammer into shape. Words come out differently on paper from how we imagine them in our heads. We discover ourselves through the form of the sentence. The act of transforming our knots into marks on the paper begins to give a discipline. Something inside says 'You can't say it that way, it doesn't work' and so we change it. Even as we start to write, we find ourselves making contact with feelings for rhythm and style. Later we will revise the writing more stringently: pruning, shifting the weight, reordering, until every part holds every other part and it *stands*: it means what we want it to mean.

## Getting ready to write

In his book *A Separate Reality*, Carlos Casteneda explores the importance of what he calls 'finding your spot' before you can begin to learn anything. Finding a place for one's writing work, both a practical place – a room in the house, a

desk, a table, a comfortable chair – and a place in one's imagination are crucial prerequisites for enabling the writing voice to grow and develop. The writing self has to be nurtured. Remember that your chair is important. Just as you cannot live easily under a leaking roof, so you cannot write easily on a chair that is not right for you. Think about the light that is cast on your paper. Is it bright enough? Does it illuminate what you are doing properly? Think too about your paper. Colette bought well-finished paper that her pen could flow across easily. These things are not trivial. They are the material conditions of a writer's life, and they affect your writing.

When we first experience the desire to write, our writing voice may well be timid, weak, needy and underfed, so we need to feed it, to let the writer-self know that it is significant for us. We need to purposefully put time aside to spend with it, listen to it. The writer in us has to know that we are making it a priority, that we are prepared to let other obligations go in order to play with it, nourish it, accord it a central place in our lives. If, when I describe the writer-self, it sounds as though I am describing a baby, that is entirely intentional.

When you are getting ready to write, think carefully about what you need, about what will nourish the starving child. Writing time is *your* time; you need to claim it for yourself, often against the demands of other people. Sometimes this may feel like a military strategy and it is quite in order to treat it this way: to plot and plan to take the fortress which is your imaginary castle, your silent, fertile abode, despite the background of your everyday tasks and obligations. When you begin to feel guilty, remind yourself that it's for the child's sake.

You may need to ask yourself questions like 'When am I likely to have some space to myself?', 'When is it likely to be quiet?', 'Do I need to leave the house or can I find time at home, when the others are out?', 'Can I work when there are other people around?'. I find it wise to let people know that I am writing, that I need solitude. Others *do* learn to respect your need to be alone, if you persist in maintaining it. Remember that if you take this need seriously, others will come to accept it.

## Opening the storehouse door

This is the first exercise in this book and in certain ways the most important. It constitutes your attempt to explore your writer-self, to find out its needs, its insecurities and its strengths. The aim of the exercise is to begin to discover why you relate to written language in the way you do and to trigger the first probings into your own, unique way of understanding yourself and your world. Ask yourself these questions:

What are my earliest memories of speaking and writing?

Whom do I remember talking to most as a child?

Was it primarily a relationship of conflict or harmony?

What do I remember about learning to write?

What were the words I was not allowed to say?

Do I have an early memory of *misunderstanding*, when something I said was misunderstood, perhaps with painful or embarrassing consequences, by a friend, a member of my family or a teacher?

With whom did I feel most open and confident about expressing myself in words?

Was there a difference between what I felt I could *say* and what I felt I could *write*?

These are hard questions to answer, so be prepared to take your time and dig deep. It's not a race or a competition, but a process of discovering, or uncovering, your own writing voice. Note down the first thoughts that come into your head and follow where they lead; but do try to answer all the questions.

When you've made the notes, structure them into two or three pages of narrative prose. Even if you want to make a poem in the end, write in prose first, just to make sure you're clear about the feelings and experiences that have come to the surface. Yeats wrote out his poems in prose first: it is a discipline which works. The whole exercise, from beginning to end, should take about two hours, with plenty of time at the start just for thinking. Be prepared to *centre* yourself in revery, to give yourself up to your memories just as your sleeping self gives itself up to a dream. Try to protect yourself from interruptions – but if an interruption is unavoidable, don't worry. Do what you

have to do, but keep the memories with you, let them take root in your conscious mind while you're away from your desk. Interruptions are not always a curse; I sometimes find that a lost association breaks the surface for air precisely when I've stopped actively thinking about the writing. When you've made a physical space – a table and a chair – for your writer-self, you will find that an inner space begins to open up in the imagination. You will learn to hold your work with you even when you are prevented from doing it. Alexander Solzhenitsyn held much of his work in his mind while he was in a labour camp. He stored it up – the mind's ability to store is inexhaustible – and wrote it down when he was finally released. If *that* is possible, then you can certainly get through interruptions without fear of losing your load.

When you've finished writing, put it away for two or three days: leave it, don't look at it for a while. You are of course free to write anything else while you leave your first piece fallow. But while you have separated yourself from your own autobiographical work, take a look at the following extracts:

She developed a method in her whippings: standing with her switch in her hand, she would order me to come before her. I would plead or cry or run away. But at last I had to come. Without taking hold of me, she forced me to stand in one spot of my own will, while she whipped me on all sides. Afterwards, when I continued to sob as children do, she would order me to stop or she would 'stomp me into the ground'. I remember once that I could not and with one swoop she was upon me – over the head, down the back, on my bare legs, until in agony and terror I ran for the house screaming for my father. Yet what could I say to my father – I was little and could not explain. And he would not believe.

My mother continued to say that I lied. But I did not know it. I was never clear. What was truth and what was fancy I could not know. To me, the wind in the tree tops really carried stories on its back; the red bird that came to our cherry tree told me things; the fat, velvety flowers in the forest laughed and I answered; the little calf in the field held long conversations with me.

But at last I learned to know what a lie was: to induce my mother to stop beating me I would lie – I would say, yes, I had lied and was sorry, and then she would whip me for having withheld the admission so long. As time went on, to avoid a whipping, I learned to tell her only the things I thought she wanted to hear.

‘I have but one child who is stubborn and a liar, and that is Marie,’ she would tell strangers or neighbours. At first I was humiliated to tears; later I became hardened; later still I accepted it as a fact and did not even try to deny it.

It has been one of the greatest struggles of my life to learn to tell the truth ...

Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth*.

Remind me how we loved our mother's body  
 our mouths drawing the first  
 thin sweetness from her nipples  
 our faces dreaming hour on hour  
 in the salt smell of her lap. Remind me  
 how her touch melted childgrief  
 how she floated great and tender in our dark  
 or stood guard over us  
 against our willing  
 and how we thought she loved  
 the strange male body first  
 that took, that took, whose taking seemed a law  
 and how she sent us weeping  
 into that law  
 how we remet her in our childbirth visions  
 erect, enthroned, above  
 a spiral stair  
 and crawled and panted toward her  
 I know, I remember, but  
 hold me, remind me  
 of how her woman's flesh was made taboo to us

Adrienne Rich, 'Sibling Mysteries' in  
*The Dream of a Common Language*.

Both writers explore an early relationship, the conflict and misunderstanding within it and the terrible sense of loss which arises when one is deprived, in one sense or another, of one's mother. Agnes Smedley's heroine, Marie, talks about having to shut her mother out, shut off from her, in order to protect herself against her mother's extraordinary cruelty – while Adrienne Rich works on the feeling of severance, of being deprived of her mother in a culture which insists that the daughters turn away from the mother toward the father.

Your early experiences form a rich vein – the mother lode perhaps – from which you can learn to dig your finest material. What you do with it once you've brought it to the surface is another matter: it is enough for now that you acknowledge it is there and begin to discover ways of getting at it.

### **Your notebook**

I think you will have found that this exercise produced more thoughts, images and ideas than you were able to use in what you finally wrote. Do not throw any of them away: writers make new garments out of castoffs all the time. Transfer all the thoughts and images you like into a notebook. The superflux will provide new material for you whenever ideas are not coming easily. Your notebook should be small enough to fit in your bag or pocket and have covers which are firm enough to prevent it from being damaged easily. Record in it anything you fancy: a new word, a new way of describing a colour, a particular action you saw performed which you'd like to describe in detail while it's fresh.

Your notebook is the tool which enables you to take any experience, any observation, any physical sensation and turn it into something which can be shared by others. In Anna Akhmatova's words, it forms a way of 'bearing witness to the common lot'. Every society requires its witnesses: those who are not afraid to render and preserve in words the range and scope of human experience for that time and that place. When Akhmatova stood in line for 17 months outside the gaol in Leningrad, waiting for news of her son, a woman, hearing her name, approached her and said, 'Can you



describe this?’ to which the poet returned: ‘I can.’ That woman *needed* the poet; a poem had to be written to ensure that her suffering, and that of numberless others, should not be dishonoured by silence. Writing is a way of honouring the world we live in, its living and its dead.

## Writing with the whole self

New writers often say ‘Well, I’m writing now. I’ve started. But when I look at what I’ve written, I feel it’s not all there. There’s a dimension missing, it has no depth.’ I believe that the reason for this being such a common problem is that we live, in the Western industrialised world, in such a disembodied way. Half the time we carry on as if we didn’t have a body: and we only think about our bodies if they trouble us – if we’re hungry or in pain. When we are writing we must unlearn this disembodiedness if our work is to achieve the depth and richness we desire: we must learn to speak with our whole body and not just through our mind’s eye. The eye is, after all, the most cerebral, least sensuous organ. If we wrote through our eyes alone, we would represent a silent world without smells, without tastes, without texture. I think you will find as you begin to write through *all* your senses, that your writing transforms itself into something more fully alive.

Do this next exercise and then try to *hold* all your senses in listening expectancy in your future writing. The exercise lasts for five days.

On the first day, concentrate only on your sense of touch. Think through your fingers, think through your skin. Be aware of every object, every texture, every current of air your body comes into contact with. Make the surface of your body alive to every stimulation, whether pleasant or not. Then, at the end of the day, write about five hundred words through your sense of touch. Hold on to all you have experienced in the day through your writing: write about everything you have touched.

On the second day, think through your sense of taste. As well as the obvious, known tastes of food and drink, stick your tongue out to discover what the air tastes like.