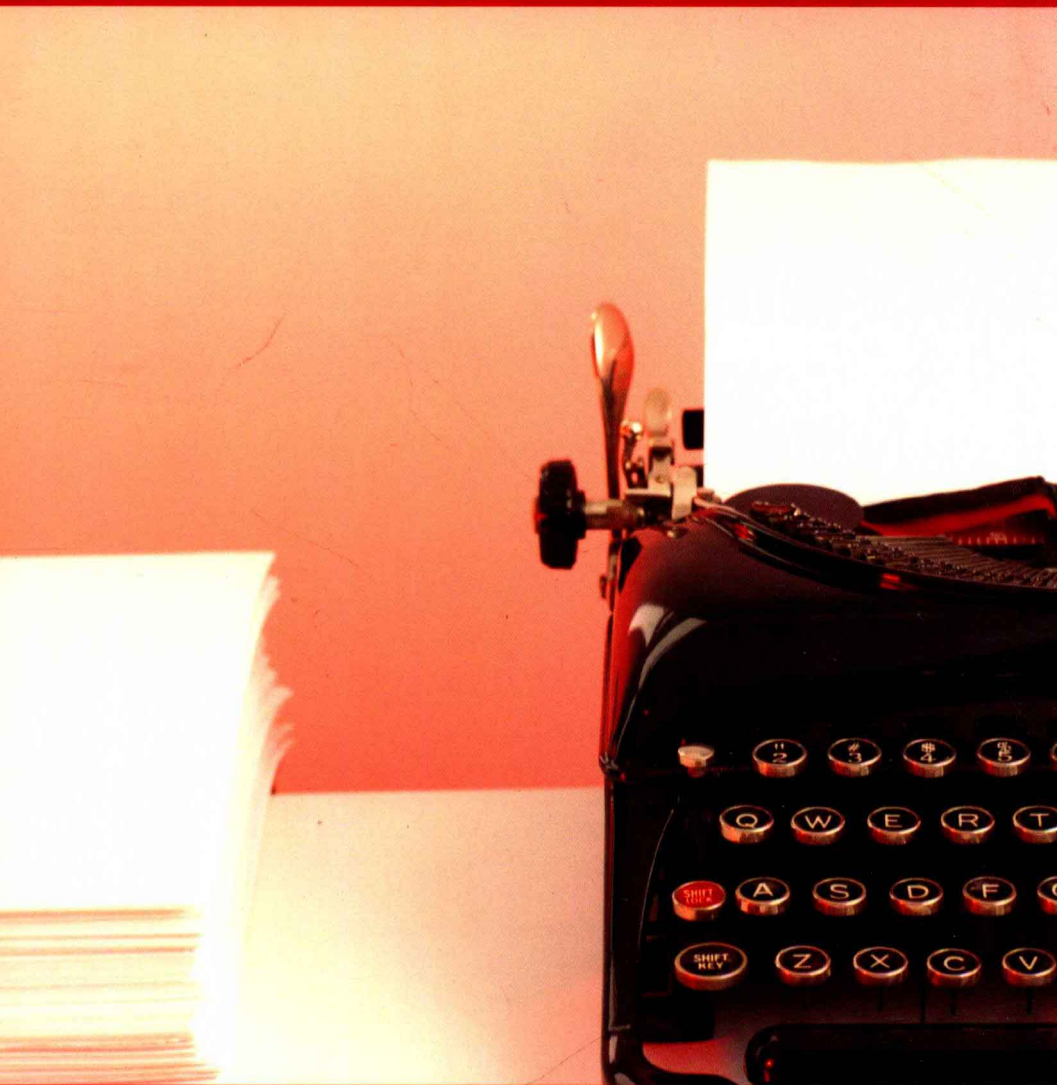
David Morley



The Cambridge **Introduction** to Creative Writing

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DAVID MORLEY

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The Cambridge Introduction to
Creative Writing

This pioneering book introduces students to the practice and art of creative writing and creative reading. It offers a fresh, distinctive and beautifully written synthesis of the discipline. David Morley discusses where creative writing comes from, the various forms and camouflages it has taken, and why we teach and learn the arts of fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction. He looks at creative writing in performance; as public art, as visual art, as e-literature and as an act of community. As a leading poet, critic and award-winning teacher of the subject, Morley finds new engagements for creative writing in the creative academy and within science. Accessible, entertaining and groundbreaking, *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* is not only a useful textbook for students and teachers of writing, but also an inspiring read in its own right. Aspiring authors and teachers of writing will find much to discover and enjoy.

DAVID MORLEY is Associate Professor in English and Director of the Warwick Writing Programme at the University of Warwick.

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To teachers

'several things dovetailed in my mind and at once it struck me, what quality went to form . . . Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

John Keats

'When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images.'

Niels Bohr

Preface

The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the practice of creative writing. Equally, the purpose of this book is to introduce writers to the practice of creative reading. Writing and reading share an interdependent orbit around the open space of language.

This double helix of reading and writing makes you more alert to your potential as a reader and writer of yourself, of other people and of other writers. It also creates a discipline in your life that makes these acts of attention a way of life. It is then vital you learn to work alone and beyond your potential – writers and readers alike work beyond their own intelligence.

As this is an introduction to a discipline, we discuss where creative writing comes from, the various forms and camouflages it has taken and why we teach and learn it. I do not present you with an anatomy of the various histories of creative writing in higher education; there are fine examples available in print (Dawson, 2005; Myers, 1995).

The first five chapters explore principles and procedures of creative writing that apply generally to the writing and techniques of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and, to some extent, drama. Guests to this party include reading, criticism, vocation, influence, reflection, experience, play, publishing, editing, language, translation, imitation, experiment, design, form, quality, discipline, notebooks, working habits, fieldwork, composition, incubation, planning, fluency, finishing, rewriting, deadlines, precision, confidence, practice, audience, voice and selves. We look at the meaning and sound of language; the different states of mind we use for writing; the workshop in its various guises and disguises; and the enemies and allies of creativity. I also explore the characteristics of mind by which we might develop writerly stamina.

The first five chapters concern the generics; Chapters Six to Nine introduce important genres. They present some of the techniques and practice for fiction, poetry and the international supergenre, creative nonfiction. However, not all creative writers write for the page. We look at creative writing as a verbal art in performance; as hybrid with public and visual art; and as electronic literature. I argue that none of these is at odds with the making of books; they are all

spaces open to creative literary practice. Chapter Ten looks at writing as an act of community; I then attempt to speculate modest engagements for creative writing in the creative academy, for example within science.

For experts in this field, all of what I have to say is rudimentary. This book is for creative writing students, beginning writers and new teachers of writing. The cast of this book is about the roots of creativity in writing, and the routes into the writing of fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry, rather than higher techniques. My reason for the book's architecture is to send you immediately into the action of writing, by offering a series of open spaces for discussion, reflection and practice. It has been argued that half the skills a writer needs to learn are skills of psychological sturdiness, and the other half are skills of literary craft (Bly, 2001: xix). I agree, and the book is designed to address these complementary phases of creative development.

This is an introduction, partial and selective. No book can, or should, cover everything. I think that you should be given open space to find your own way in these matters, and to argue back on points I take to extremes. Given its length, I centre on topics rather than texts, tempting though it was to select examples instead of moving forward single-handed. Guidance is offered through the lists of recommended reading, and by following up the next section on examples and sources. A book about creative writing requires lifetime subscription to The Alexandrian Library, and my recommended reading lists scan only the eye-level shelves. That said, 'A man will read a library to write just one book' – Dr Johnson. Those lists are starting points.

Since this is a book about, of all things, *creative* writing, I tried to keep my language open and personal, tuning out academic white noise – citations only when necessary, endnotes shown the door. I welcomed into the book subjective and general values like pleasure, passion, experience, love, intuition, hate, pain and playfulness. Moreover, the book is written to be read from beginning to end, as a story of learning. It is not a hoard of tips, or a compendium of games. I wanted to make a book that hits things fresh; one that is written from inside writing. While I do not disguise the difficulties of process, I celebrate its epiphanies, especially the euphoria of reading. Reading and writing are never-ending journeys. I wanted to remind myself of how it feels to be beginning as a writer, the first excitements of reading, the waking in created countries.

Creative writing – even clear writing – closes distances between us. It makes us wake up. What this book offers you is an introduction and an invitation. Think of it as a miniature stage: the matters that are closest to the covers are your entrances and exits. What is in the middle is *play*, where you are both the players and – with your acceptance of this invitation – those upon whom ideas and language play.

I gathered the arguments and discussions from my own reading but also from others more deeply and widely read than myself. I took examples of practice from hundreds of discussions with contemporary writers about their philosophies, influences and craft. I reflected on my own teaching of creative writing in universities, adult education, communities and schools; and co-teaching and observing teaching in the English-speaking world, especially the United States, Canada and in Europe. Writing this book has been a chastening personal experience, and my admiration for writers and teachers has increased inestimably. Errors in this book are my responsibility.

Examples and sources for writers

Readers who wish to become writers find resonance – even purpose – in statements on the writing process made by authors who have lived their lives by the word. I pepper the text with examples, and attempt to synthesise some of the best standard guidance. When thinking about the aims and processes of creative writing, literary biographies and autobiographies are a useful place to begin to find out about a writer's working methods and philosophy. The *Paris Review* interviews, downloadable at the journal's website, remain the best resource for testimonies by writers about their practice. There are other rich sources for this type of material (Allen, 1948; Brown and Paterson, 2003; Burke, 1995; Haffenden, 1981; Harmon, 2003; Herbert and Hollis, 2000).

In writing, what we leave half-said is as significant as what we spell out. I signal a variety of key works and further reading that amplify, or exemplify, matters that need your closer attention, especially in regard to writing fiction, creative nonfiction and poems. There are several superb technical books on imaginative and formal writing (Behn and Twichell, 1992; Bernays and Painter, 1991; Burroway, 2006; Fussell, 1979; Koch, 1990; Matthews and Brotchie, 1998; Novakovich, 1995; Padgett, 2000; Steele, 1999; Stein, 1995; Strand and Boland, 2000); on the practical and philosophical processes of writing fiction, poetry or creative nonfiction (Addonizio and Laux, 1997; Boisseau and Wallace, 2004; Brande, 1981; Burroway, 2003; Dillard, 1989; Eshleman, 2001; Gardner, 1983, 1985; Gutkind, 1997; Hughes, 1967; Hugo, 1979; King, 2000; Kinzie, 1999; Kundera, 2000; Lamott, 1995; Lodge, 1992; Oliver, 1994; Packard, 1992; Sansom, 1994; Stein, 1995; Zinsser, 1976); on creative writing, revision and rewriting (Anderson, 2006; Bell and Magrs, 2001; Browne and King, 2004; Le Guin, 1998; Mills, 2006; Ostrom et al., 2001; Schaefer and Diamond, 1998); and on the nature of creativity and the psychology of writing (Boden, 2004; Hershman and Lieb, 1998; Hunt and Sampson, 2006; Koestler, 1975; Lakoff and Johnson,

1980; Pfenninger and Shubik, 2001; Pope, 2005; Turner, 1996). On questions of style, you will find your own answers as you read and practise. Be sure to pack *The Elements of Style* (Strunk and White, 2000) with you on the journey; it will take little room compared to what it offers so generously.

Extensive quotation of primary texts is, unfortunately, expensive in permissions. I offer examples in the main text and epigraphs to chapters, but guide readers towards literature within commonly used anthologies, as widespread in public libraries as they are on international university reading lists. You need not possess those anthologies to use this book. This is the key:

NA1
The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 6th edition/package 1: vols. A and B. General editor: Nina Baym, Norton, 2003.
NA2
The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 6th edition/package 2: vols. C, D and E. General editor: Nina Baym, Norton, 2003.
NE1
The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th edition/vol. 1. General editors: M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, Norton, 2000.
NE2
The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th edition/vol. 2. General editors: M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, Norton, 2000.
NP
The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 5th edition. Editors: Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, Norton, 2005.

Writing Games

Writing creatively can feel a little like working out logistical, even mathematical, challenges. Writing Games provide this elegant calculus in taut form. A bare page can terrify; a game simulates the real thing, or is a means of keeping your hand in, almost like playing scales. With practice, simulations can become the real thing. No writer creates a book at one sitting; they write it in stages, as passages, scenes and stanzas, and each stage requires several drafts. Writing Games clone this process, and are often true to the natural rhythm of literary production in that technique and style are often learned on the job. There are many creative writing projects embedded in the text, as well as ideas and suggestions that students and teachers can use as starting points for games. Within the body of each chapter, I offer some self-standing games that help you explore its issues. Each project has an aim for judging progress.

Acknowledgements

My wife Siobhan Keenan provided wonderful support, ideas and criticism. I thank my colleagues at the University of Warwick – above all, Jeremy Treglown, who took on all of my administrative and managerial duties during the period of composition; and my friend Peter Blegvad, whose drawings are a much-needed parallel world for the reader. Peter Blegvad, with Maureen Freely, led me towards authors I simply would not have come across, left to my own devices. Thanks are due to the University of Warwick for research leave, and for a Warwick Award for Teaching Excellence, the proceeds of which were spent researching this book. Thanks to those who made life easier during the time of writing this book, especially Peter Mack and Thomas Docherty.

My thanks to those who discussed some of these ideas, or who, over the years, were teachers or co-teachers: Anne Ashworth, Susan Bassnett, Jonathan Bate, Richard Beard, Mike Bell, Jay Boyer, Zoe Brigley, Andy Brown, Elizabeth Cameron, Ron Carlson, Peter Carpenter, Nina Cassian, Jonathan Coe, Peter Davidson, Douglas Dunn, Brian Follett, Maureen Freely, Dana Gioia, Jon Glover, David Hart, Miroslav Holub, Ted Hughes, Russell Celyn Jones, Stephen Knight, Doris Lessing, Denise Levertov, Emma McCormack, Paul Muldoon, Les Murray, Bernard O'Donoghue, Maggie O'Farrell, Melissa Pritchard, Al Purdy, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Jane Rogers, Carol Chillington Rutter, William Scammell, Michael Schmidt, Jane Stevenson, George Szirtes, Michelene Wandor; and to the following institutions where thinking took place: the Arvon Foundation, the University of Warwick, National Association of Writers in Education and the Virginia Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. I field-tested many of the Writing Games in the United States, Europe and China. I thank the thousands of members of the public, students, school pupils, medical workers, teachers – and writers – who let me play. Finally, thanks to my former teacher, Charles Tomlinson, who taught me that the first cause of creative writing is creative reading.

Extracts and versions of this text appeared in a slightly altered form in *Anon Magazine* (Edinburgh), the *Guardian* and *Poetry Review* (London).

Writing Game

IN YOUR END IS YOUR BEGINNING

Write a 500-word introduction to your own imaginary collected poems or complete stories. Assume your working life has undergone a struggle, from obscurity to hard-won fame. This is your final opportunity to say something *wise* to your readers and critics. What were your strengths; and why did your audience first ignore your writing, then welcome it? Do you have any literary or personal debts outstanding? Now you can settle them publicly. State what you think the future holds for your work.

AIM: Writers feel intense dissatisfaction. Learn to wait, and work at it; get used to that feeling of being perpetually dissatisfied with your abilities, achievements and the mercury-movement of language as you try to control it:

> Trying to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say
>
> T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (1943)

Contents

Chapter 1

Introducing creative writing

> If you wish to be brief, first prune away those devices that contribute to an elaborate style; let the entire theme be confined within narrow limits. Do not be concerned about verbs; rather, write down with the pen of the mind only the nouns . . . follow, as it were, the technique of the metalworker. Transfer the iron of the material, refined in the fire of the understanding, to the anvil of the study. Let the hammer of the intellect make it pliable; let repeated blows of the hammer fashion from the unformed mass the most suitable words. Let the bellows of the mind afterwards fuse those words, adding others to accompany them, fusing nouns with verbs, and verbs with nouns, to express the whole theme. The glory of a brief work consists in this: it says nothing either more or less than is fitting.
>
> GEOFFREY DE VINSAUF, *Poetria Nova* or *The New Poetics* (c. 1210)

An open space

Think of an empty page as open space. It possesses no dimension; human time makes no claim. Everything is possible, at this point endlessly possible. Anything can grow in it. Anybody, real or imaginary, can travel there, stay put, or move on. There is no constraint, except the honesty of the writer and the scope of imagination – qualities with which we are born and characteristics that we can develop. Writers are born and made.

We could shape a whole world into that space, or even fit several worlds, their latitudes and longitudes, the parallel universes. Equally, we could place very few words there, but just enough of them to show a presence of the life of language. If we can think of the page as an open space, even as a space in which to play, we will understand that it is also Space itself.

By choosing to act, by writing on that page, we are creating another version of time; we are playing out a new version of existence, of life even. We are creating an entirely fresh piece of space-time, and another version of your *self*.

The iceberg

Space-time is a four-dimensional space used to represent the Universe in the theory of relativity, with three dimensions corresponding to ordinary space and the fourth as time. I mean the same when thinking about creative writing. Writing a poem, a story or a piece of creative nonfiction, is to catalyse the creation of a four-dimensional fabric that is the result when space and time become one.

Every event in the universe can be located in the four-dimensional plane of space and time. Writing can create personal universes in which this system of events within space-time operates for the reader; the reader is its co-creator. Writing and reading are collaborative acts in the making and performance of space-time. Readers participate; they become, partly, writers. They will take part, consciously and unconsciously, in a literary creation, and live their life in that moment and at that speed – while they are reading. You make the words; they make the pictures. The reader lives their reading-time in a kind of psychological fifth dimension, where the book takes them, where the reader places themselves. A novel or poem is the visible part of an iceberg. As Ernest Hemingway put it, the knowledge a writer brings to the creation of that novel or poem is the unrevealed submerged section of that same iceberg. This book dives under that iceberg.

The writer weaves a certain degree of sparseness into their final text. If matters are left unexplained, untold, or the language of a poem is elliptically economical without becoming opaque, then inquiring readers will lean towards that world. Readers fill in the gaps for themselves, in essence, writing themselves into that small universe, creating that fifth dimension, and their experience of that dimension. The reader is active, as a hearer and a witness.

Moreover, if they are reading aloud to others, that piece of space-time will attract and alter several lives simultaneously. Some readers may be affected for the rest of their lives, loving that space so much they return to that work repeatedly, and even act out their own lives differently, in their own worlds, once they have put down the book. A well-drawn character in fiction or poetry, say, may find their actions and language imitated by readers simply because of the creative radiation of that fictional self, and the accuracy of the writing. Think about the force and precision behind the creation of fictional or dramatic characters we admire or cherish.

New worlds

Stories, like dreams, have a way of taking care of people, by preparing them, teaching them. I argue that, although there is an inherent simplicity to this, it

is not simple as a practice. With dreams come responsibilities, and the created worlds of a book require a vocation of trust between the writer and reader. It is that vocation, how we create ourselves as writers – never forgetting that we are also readers – that is the subject of the final part of this chapter. We will none of us become a good writer unless we become a great reader, of more matter than just books. We must also learn to become shapers of language and, in that way, shapers of the small, new worlds that take the form of poems or novels, each of them a piece of fresh space-time, remembering itself. Hemingway, writing of the practice of fiction, states:

> You have the sheet of blank paper, the pencil, and the obligation to invent truer than things can be true . . . to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable and . . . have it seem normal . . . so that it can become a part of the experience of the person who reads it. (Phillips, 1984: 16)

Writing can change people, for writing creates new worlds and possible universes, parallel to an actual. At best, creative writing offers examples of life, nothing less. To some, writing remains an artifice, a game even, and it is – as most things are, as all of us are – something made or played upon. However, when nurture builds carefully on nature, then life is not only made well, it can be shaped well and given form.

Why we write

Writing is so absorbing and involving that it can make you feel more alive – concentrated yet euphoric. The process focuses at the same time as it distracts; the routine of its absorptions is addictive. It can also recreate in you something you may have lost without noticing or glimpse when you are reading a rewarding book: your sense for wonder. Certainly, the process of writing is often more rewarding than the outcome, although, when you capture something luminous, that sense of discovery and wonder swims through the words and leaps in the page. There is a pleasure in precision; in solving and resolving the riddles of your syntax and voice; and in the choices of what to lose and what to allow.

However, while creative writing is no panacea, some writers find its practice therapeutic; and some teachers of writing believe that writing is a powerful aid to various types of therapy, from the treatment of depression to social rehabilitation. More accurately, writing may contribute towards self-development and self-awareness (see Hunt, 2000; Sampson, 2004). Writing wakes you up – it forces you beyond your intelligence and quotidian attention – and anything that makes you think and perceive more clearly and expansively may assist