

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# CREATIVE WRITING

*Edited by*  
*David Morley and Philip Neilsen*

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DAVID MORLEY  
and  
PHILIP NEILSEN



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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JONATHAN BATE, born in 1958, was educated at Sevenoaks School and St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where he read English Literature. After completing his doctorate, he was a Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He was appointed King Alfred Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool in 1990. Since 2003, he has been Professor of Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature at the University of Warwick. Well known as a critic, biographer and broadcaster, Jonathan Bate has held visiting posts at Harvard, Yale and UCLA. Among his books are a biography of Shakespeare, *Soul of the Age*, and a history of his fame, *The Genius of Shakespeare*. He is on the Board of the Royal Shakespeare Company and was chief editor of the RSC edition of Shakespeare's Complete Works. His biography of the poet John Clare won Britain's two oldest literary awards, the Hawthornden Prize and the James Tait Black Prize; and his *The Song of the Earth* is one of the founding texts of ecopoetics. His one-man play for Simon Callow, *The Man from Stratford*, went on national tour. A Fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature, he was made CBE in the Queen's 80th Birthday Honours. He is publishing a biography of Ted Hughes and is now Provost of Worcester College, Oxford.

RICHARD BEARD'S eighth book, *Lazarus is Dead*, was published in 2011. From 2003 to 2006 he was Visiting Professor at the University of Tokyo. In 2009/2010 he was Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Birmingham City University and is now Director of the National Academy of Writing. His chapter expands further on an article 'Answers, Answers' that first appeared in *Writing in Education*, 42 (Winter 2007), and which was itself a response to Andrew Cowan's 'Questions, Questions: Can the Creative Survive in Proximity to the Critical?', *Writing in Education*, 41 (Spring 2007). Richard Beard is indebted to the insights of Andrew Cowan both here and in 'The Anxiety of Influence', *Wordplay: The Magazine of the English Subject Centre* (April 2010).

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MAUREEN FREELY was born in the US but grew up in Turkey, where her family still lives. She was educated at Radcliffe College (Harvard University) and has made her home in England since 1984. She is the author of six novels – *Mother’s Helper*, *The Life of the Party*, *The Stork Club*, *Under the Vulcania*, *The Other Rebecca* and *Enlightenment* as well as three works of nonfiction – *Pandora’s Clock*, *What About Us? An Open Letter to the Mothers Feminism Forgot* and *The Parent Trap*. She has been a regular contributor to *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and *The Sunday Times* for two decades, writing on feminism, family and social policy, Turkish culture and politics, and contemporary writing. Now a Professor at the University of Warwick, she is perhaps best known for her translations of *Snow*, *The Black Book*, *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, *Other Colours* and *The Museum of Innocence*, all by the Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, and for her campaigning journalism after Pamuk and an estimated eighty other writers were prosecuted (and in the case of Hrant Dink, assassinated) for insulting Turkishness, state institutions, or the memory of Atatürk.

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DAVID MORLEY is an ecologist and naturalist by background. His poetry has won fourteen writing awards and prizes including the Templar Poetry Prize, the Poetry



Business Competition, an Arts Council of England Writer's Award, an Eric Gregory Award, the Raymond Williams Prize and a Hawthornden Fellowship. A recent collection *The Invisible Kings* was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and a new collection *Enchantment* explores the world of the magical short story in verse. He is also known for his pioneering ecological poetry installations within natural landscapes and the creation of 'slow poetry' sculptures and I-Cast poetry films. His 'writing challenges' podcasts are among the most popular literature downloads on iTunes worldwide: two episodes are now preloaded on to all demo Macs used in Apple Stores across the globe. He writes essays, criticism and reviews for *The Guardian* and *Poetry Review*. A leading international advocate of creative writing both inside and outside the academy, he wrote *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* (2007) which has been translated into many languages. He currently teaches at the University of Warwick where he is Professor of Writing.

PHILIP NEILSEN has published five collections of poetry, including *Without an Alibi* (2008) and been anthologised most recently in *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*, *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* and *Australian Poetry Since 1788*. He has published five books of fiction for young adults and children, his adult short stories have appeared widely, and he has edited major anthologies including *The Penguin Book of Australian Satirical Verse*. His life writing has been published in print and digital formats and he currently researches the therapeutic effect of life writing for those with serious mental illness. He has won an Australian Notable Book award and an Australia Council Writer's Fellowship. His work has been translated into a number of languages including Chinese, German and Korean. He has been a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and after teaching English at the University of Queensland founded the writing programme at the Queensland University of Technology, where he is Professor of Creative Writing.

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was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for 2006. *The Music of the Prophets*, a narrative poem about the resettlement of the Jews in England, was supported by an award from the European Association for Jewish Culture. Her nonfiction includes *Postwar British Drama: Looking Back in Gender* (2001), and *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* and *The Art of Writing Drama* (both 2008). She has taught creative writing for two decades, currently as tutor for the MA at Lancaster University. She has been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow since 2004.

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## FOREWORD: ON CRITICISM AND CREATIVITY

Creative writing has been the subject of university-level study in American universities and colleges far longer than it has been within British higher education. The common pattern in the American system has traditionally set the 'writing program' apart from the critical, historical and theoretical work of the 'literature' department. Typically, the *writers* will be employed for the drudgery of instructing students from almost every discipline in 'freshman composition' (how to structure an argument, a paragraph, even – remedially – a sentence) and then be rewarded with some small-group teaching in which, at a more advanced level, they assist the aspirant writers of the future in the improvement of their novels, stories, scripts and poems. The *academics*, meanwhile, will teach a freshman survey course of the kind that used to be known in the trade as 'from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf' but that is now more likely to be a guided tour of competing theoretical approaches to the subject and to include a high proportion of contemporary, often international, literature; they will then teach other, more advanced courses in their specialism, which could be anything from Shakespeare to the Victorian novel to some aspect of literary theory to postcolonial women's poetry. In terms of their ambitions for publication, the 'writer' will be working on, say, her latest novel and the 'academic' on a learned conference paper that will later be worked into a critical book for a university press. It is not unknown for the writers and the academics to neglect each other's work and even to view their counterparts down the departmental corridor with a degree of suspicion.

There is no inherent reason why there should be such a division between criticism and creativity in English studies. Consider the higher-level teaching of music and art, the disciplines of writing's sister arts. University degrees in music do not confine themselves to questions of form, history and cultural context, as English degrees often do. They have an emphasis on technique and on practice that is rarely encountered within a traditional English degree. The serious student of music will be expected to read music, to play an instrument, to hear a shift from major to minor key. Similarly, the serious student of art

will be expected to know about perspective, to discover the different properties of different materials, and (one hopes) to draw in a life-class. It is not usually demanded of literature students that they should be skilled in the literary equivalents of such techniques as playing a scale, composing a variation, sketching a nude: they are not habitually asked to scan a line of verse, compose a sonnet or sketch a fictional *mise en scène*. An education in the art of writing is often regarded as marginal to an education in the art of critical reading (as the agenda of most English departments used to be) or the art of cultural poetics (as the agenda of most English departments has become). But it is precisely this gap – an education in the *craft* of putting together words, analogous to the craft of putting together musical notes – that creative writing programmes can fill. A healthy dialogue is one in which critics are interested in writerly skills – rhetoric, narrative construction, pacing – and students of creative writing are unafraid of critical judgement.

Historically, the origins of English literary criticism belong within the realm of creativity, not that of academic analysis. John Dryden was long known as the father of English criticism. In the second half of the seventeenth century, he established the terms of debate that dominated critical discourse for a century: what were the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns, of native and continental models, of blank verse and rhyme? What was the correct balance between ‘art’ and ‘nature’, the best means to achieve verisimilitude? What ultimately constitutes good writing? As he put it in his preface to *The State of Innocence* (1677), his dramatisation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, ‘By criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is, to observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader.’ But, and this is the key point, Dryden developed his critical art not in an ‘academic’ context but in a creative one, that of the prefaces to, and essays about, his own plays and poems, in which he had self-consciously set about modernising and classicising English writing during the Restoration era.

In the early eighteenth-century *Spectator* essays mainly by Joseph Addison and *The Tatler* mainly by Richard Steele, questions of literary style were closely linked to debates about national identity and gentlemanly behaviour. The figure who dominated literary debate in the public sphere in the second half of the eighteenth century was Dr Samuel Johnson, a journalist and all-round writer, not a university teacher. So too with the Romantic and Victorian eras: the major critical opinion formers were themselves either poets (most notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold) or journalists, lecturers and what we now call ‘public intellectuals’ (William Hazlitt, John Ruskin). T. S. Eliot was not only the most admired poet but also the most influential critic of the modernist period of the first half of the

twentieth century. It was only from the 1930s onwards that what might be called 'pure' or 'academic' criticism became the norm.

Furthermore, criticism was often forged *through* creativity. Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* was a poem and there was a symbiotic relationship between the creation of his mock-epic masterpiece *The Dunciad* and his dispute with rival textual editor Lewis Theobald over the highly technical critical matter of the emendation of Shakespeare's texts. Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare were partly shaped by, and help to explain, the search for inner unity that he also undertook in his poetry. John Keats offered a 'reading' of *King Lear* not only by way of marginal annotations in his copy of Shakespeare, but also through writing a sonnet. T. S. Eliot's essays on the rich complexity of the metaphysical poets and the Jacobean dramatists were intimately bound to the difficulty and originality of his own verse.

The ascent of literary theory in the late twentieth century took the divide between criticism and creativity to an extreme. Writers became notoriously wary of theory: they found its jargon repellent and its reports of 'the death of the author' unacceptable. Theorists, in turn, were more interested in patterns and deep structures, ideological formations and hidden abysses, than writerly craft and the judgement of 'literary' qualities. In the early twenty-first century, the symbiosis between criticism and creativity has to some degree been restored. At school level, it is now quite common for a 'critical' essay to take the form of a 'creative' response: instead of writing a formal essay about the motivation of Lady Macbeth, students are invited to write her imaginary diary. At a higher level, the *fin-de-siècle* age of anxiety in English studies is well and truly over. Academics have learned to stop worrying and to live with a diversity of critical practices. And it is practice as opposed to theory that is making the running.

Late twentieth-century theory was dominated by a hierarchical model, a pyramid-like corporate structure with gurus at the top (Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Said), high-profile publishing and conference-going disseminators just below, then the foot-soldiers of the profession (the overworked, undervalued lecturers and assistant professors) and finally the students. Orders went out from the top, prescribing the latest theoretical *diktat*. Early twenty-first-century practice, by contrast, is more like the modern 'flat' corporation, in which different approaches are respected and students are empowered. More than lip-service is paid to the rhetoric of 'transferable skills' and student preparedness for the workplace. Old taboos have been stripped away: styles of critical discourse are more colloquial, less mandarin; personal testimony and the articulation of feeling are no longer outlawed; attention to the texture of authors' lives is once again allowed. The latter interest signals a radical departure from the old 'new criticism', in which the text was king, and from

deconstruction, in which the author was dead, and from 'new historicism', in which texts were generated less by individual agency than the circulation of social energy.

Critical approaches are now judged more by the criterion of their usefulness – for students and, more utopianly, for society and the world. The author has returned, biography is newly respectable within the academy and there has been a growth of metabiography and 'cultural influence' studies that have placed literary works within a wider context than that of their purely critical or academic reputation. And criticism has itself become more creative, with fiction, memoir and the personal essay beginning to be regarded as acceptable forms of critical practice – though if this sort of thing is to be done, it has to be done well, self-critically and not self-indulgently.

In the work of the teachers and students in writing programmes, we witness ample, and highly diverse, examples of the dialogue between criticism and creativity, with a focus above all on the practical application of writerly techniques. The essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* demonstrate how the personal, creative and critical combine to create a fresh and important debate about the discipline of creative writing, its relation to literary studies and to other forms of knowledge including science, and to understanding how it might evolve in the future in the academy and the wider world. Here, the writers and the academics are genuinely companions, not rivals – in fact, the distinction dissolves.

Jonathan Bate

## CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>Foreword: on criticism and creativity</i>	xv
JONATHAN BATE	
1. Introduction	
DAVID MORLEY AND PHILIP NEILSEN	I
PART I GENRES AND TYPES	
	9
2. A writing lesson: the three flat tyres and the outer story	
RON CARLSON	II
3. In conversation: a new approach to teaching long fiction	
MAUREEN FREELY	24
4. Genre and speculative fiction	
KIM WILKINS	37
5. Writing drama	
MICHELENE WANDOR	52
6. Poetics and poetry	
BRONWYN LEA	67
7. Travel writing	
KÁRI GÍSLASON	87



# CONTENTS

8. Creative writing and new media		
HAZEL SMITH		102
9. Creative translation		
FIONA SAMPSON		118
10. Life writing		
PHILIP NEILSEN		133
	PART II TOPICS	
		151
11. Serious play: creative writing and science		
DAVID MORLEY		153
12. Outside the academy		
RICHARD BEARD		171
13. Contemporary publishing		
CHRIS HAMILTON-EMERY		181
14. Imaginative crossings: trans-global and trans-cultural narratives		
JEWELL PARKER RHODES		196
15. Does that make sense? Approaches to the creative writing workshop		
A. L. KENNEDY		201
<i>Further reading</i>		215
<i>Index</i>		218

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- |                                                                                                                                                 |         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Sydney Harbour Bridge, copyright Kári Gíslason                                                                                               | page 99 |
| 2. Screenshot from 'Instabilities 2', copyright Hazel Smith and Roger Dean                                                                      | 113     |
| 3. The 'Stanley Cap' in 1885: photograph in <i>The Autobiography of Henry M. Stanley</i> , ed. Dorothy Stanley (1909), copyright not applicable | 145     |
| 4. 'Template Man' by Peter Blegvad, copyright Peter Blegvad                                                                                     | 167     |