

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: CREATIVE WRITING AS A LIFE TOOL

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ABSTRACT

Is creative writing a means for publication or a life tool? The book is dead (Wente, 2010) and so is the author (Holcombe, 2007). Christopher Evans argued, in his book *The Micro Millennium*, the electronic age would make books “begin a steady slide into oblivion” (cited in Mash, 2003). More than ten years before Evans’ book, Roland Barthes, literary critic and theorist, published his important essay “The Death of The Author” and critically elucidated how the author, shaped by history and society, does not exist independently of textual constructions. “It is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes, 1968, p. 2).

The connection between author, text and creative writing as not only a means of publication but also as a life tool will be the focus of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Is creative writing a means for publication or a life tool? The book is dead (Wente, 2010) and so is the author (Holcombe, 2007). Christopher Evans argued, in his book *The Micro Millennium*, the electronic age would make books “begin a steady slide into oblivion” (cited in Mash, 2003). More than ten years before Evans’ book, Roland Barthes, literary critic and theorist, published his important essay “The Death of The Author” and critically elucidated how the author, shaped by history and society, does not exist independently of textual constructions. “It is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes, 1968, p. 2).

I believe these two concepts have impacted upon writing and writers today. The Internet and e-media have indeed cast a dark question mark over the publication of books. Connection to the web, access to blogs and social networking websites such as Facebook makes it easy for everyone to write and be published with a click of a computer mouse. E-books make it possible to download a library of books for personal reading. Publication of physical books has become harder and harder and is now viewed by many would be authors as an increasingly impossible dream. Barthes’ “death of the Author” (Barthes, 1968, p. 5) could also be said to construct the reality of the modern day author who

struggles for relevance and respect in a world glutted with published text. Whilst authors are rightly no longer constructed as textual gods, has Barthes contributed to what I see, and what Hardin (2009) also confirms, as the denial and devaluing of the author?

WHY DO WRITERS WRITE?

The answer is simple - writers write for a purpose. We write for ourselves as the first readers of our work. We write to build a bridge of communication from one human being to another. Words are our stones. Find the right stones and our architecture is long lasting and act as agency for the architecture of other bridges. The bridges that we connect to makes us build and keep building.

We are indebted to the bridges we cross on our road to become writers. We are indebted to the books we read, for “We writers all stand on each other’s shoulders, we all use each other’s ideas and skills and plots and secrets. Literature is a communal enterprise” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 277).

Books take us on unexpected and life-changing journeys. Writer, reader – the energy between text and mind continually exchanges the power of creativity – the possibility of connection, reverberation, of no longer hearing babbling from another human-being but the song they really sing. Writing connects us and its most powerful means of connection is built through books, but as Foucault stresses:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full-stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. (Foucault, cited in Hutcheon, 1989)

As we are creators of this network it therefore follows that we are also nodes within this network – a network that encompasses all writing and writers, and a

network that also births writers. The power of writing is organic in its nature – it grows, matures, and seeds the future.

OUR NETWORK IS UNDER THREAT

While “[p]rint has given power to authorship, authority and hence to authoritative structures like schools and universities” (Arnold, 2010, p. 2), the 21st century has brought writers to an important and often difficult intersection where the value of writing is progressively decreasing in a text-saturated society.

It is becoming more and more difficult for writers to find traditional publishers for their work. Writers first need to persuade the gatekeepers (agents and editors) that their work is publishable and that decision is generally filtered through the prism of marketability. Perry Gamsby notes in *Online writing: From idea to Income*, “The commercial viability of the writing is simply a punt by the publisher, an educated guess as a probable success of their work” (Gamsby, 2010).

Many writers give up their quest for publication and fall by the wayside in despair. The more determined writer might opt for self-publication through either print or web publication.

The Internet provides writers with another place for their writing. Many see it as part of their writing apprenticeship, hoping the Internet will lead to book publication. While writers have proven themselves this way and earn a living through writing, more often it has led to writers giving their writing away as free content for internet sites, which also decreases the value our materialist society puts on writers and writing. It makes us forget that “Imagination is not a means of making money. It has no place in the vocabulary of profit making” (Le Guin, p. 207).

Despite Evans’ prediction thirty years ago that the Internet would cause books to “slide into oblivion” (cited in Mash, 2003) books are still going strong. While the Internet and Kindle have changed the face of publishing they have not changed the importance of books to the publishing world. Hertsgaard quotes publisher and author Eggers as saying “overall, book

sales are holding steady - they’ve been at about \$16 billion for 10 years straight (and that’s not even counting Amazon) (Hertsgaard, 2010).

While this competitive and frequently destructive quest for publication may be seen as sorting out the sheep from the goats, from those deemed marketable to those less marketable, it also raises the question of what is the true purpose of writing. If we build our bridges and they remain in fallow grounds and empty of traffic, have we achieved nothing?

THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING

Michael Hardin says, “To say that writing involves the loss of identity is deceptive; whether Barthes wants to admit it or not, writing expands and elucidates identity (Hardin, 2009).

Writing is also an important life tool to shape identity (Norton, 2000, p. 148). Women especially recognize this and use it as a tool of empowerment. In Renaissance times, when silence in women was seen as a virtue, educated women seized writing as their voice to transform their lives. These renaissance women went on to appreciate “the importance of writing to the composition of self and its recognition of others” (Jordan, 1990, p.184).

Writers continue to transform themselves by engaging with the white page. The white page is a means for unlocking the unconscious through taking us deep within ourselves. The process of writing is a symbolic act. Julia Coylar powerfully underlines this. Coylar writes, “Writing is a symbolic system which articulates what we know, but it is also a tool whereby we come to this understanding; in other words, writing is product and process, noun and verb” (2009, p. 422).

Words take us beyond their initial meaning to an ongoing discourse, beginning with ourselves and then connecting to others. This discourse is paramount to our civilisation’s growth and survival; “Art, especially literature, is the great hall reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered” (Murdoch, cited by Kakutani, 1991)

Writing generally involves a long apprenticeship when craft is learnt (Le Guin 2004, p. 224). For serious writers, this involves committing to the essential writing process; this is the space where learning about writing happens. Our current intersection puts little value on the process of writing – rather it values the product, if the writing is deemed sellable. Placing value purely on products is like putting the cart without the horse and reflects the mindset of a materialistic world. Writing cannot happen without the process, which makes of us writers.

I ask in this paper – why are there so many roadblocks put in the way of writers; why does society not want us to write? Is it because writing is one of the ways we can set ourselves free – because writing makes us aware of the chains put upon us by society and also provide the keys to unlock them? Because, as Le Guin writes, “The size of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are not are not permanent, and not universal, not necessary” (Le Guin, p. 230).

It is time to embrace a future where creators are encouraged; more than that; actively nurtured to create, for major rationale for funding / policy decisions.

“The imagination is a fundamental way of thinking, essential means of becoming and remaining human. It is a tool of the mind” (Le Guin, p. 207)

Writers are not simply “objects of knowledge ” (Klages, 2001); we are bridge builders (who probably learn more from building our bridges than those who cross them); by building those bridges discourse begins and knowledge is communicated and responded to. Like Elizabeth Jolley, we must place value on the process of creation and articulate over and over about the power of words:

You see what happens is this, in trying to write I seem to start from one word, from one little picture, a few more words, ideas so slender they hardly seem to matter and then, suddenly, I am exploring human feelings and reasons. Perhaps one day in this exploration I shall step across a hitherto unknown threshold into some deeper understanding. (Jolley and Lurie, 1992)

WRITING AS A LIFE TOOL? MY OWN LIFE STORY AS EVIDENCE

Graham Green once wrote, “An unhappy childhood is a writer’s goldmine,”(Cited by Goldman, 2000); he also said, “Perhaps a novelist has a greater ability to forget than other men – he has to forget or become sterile. What he forgets is the compost of the imagination” (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/1411>).

I was eight when I knew I wanted to be a writer; two years later, at ten, I won my first poetry competition, the same year a friend gave me a child’s book of English history for my birthday. Powerfully, I connected to one of its chapters, the chapter telling the story of Elizabeth Tudor.

Soon afterwards I watched my tall, broad, bearded father behead another one of our pet chooks for the Sunday roast. An image flashed in my mind: Henry VIII, also good at putting an axe to a bloody use. Struggling to survive an abusive childhood, I thought, Henry VIII’s daughter Elizabeth turned her life into triumph, why can’t I? That book began my desire to learn about the Tudors.

I was born into a working class family; both my parents had barely finished primary school. Growing up in an often financially struggling and troubled family, very few adults encouraged my desire to write.

My father was a working class snob. While he held the upper class in contempt, my father also believed we could never change the status quo. I suspect his belief was arrived at by a lifetime of knock back after knock back. The tragedy of my father's life was similar to many of his generation. He received few opportunities to fulfil his potential and this left him a bitter, tormented man.

My father devoured books; once he read them, he tossed his books into a spare broom cupboard. I burrowed my way through them: history, philosophy, the complete works of Shakespeare, politics and a few classic novels. My love of reading increased my daydreams of a future as a writer.

Despite entering the too brief era of free university in Australia, my father balked (or maybe panicked) at the thought of supporting two daughters (my older sister was a gifted Mathematics student and that pushed her first through the door) through university and pulled the plug out of my hope to complete High School. Obviously not coping, he stepped up the physical and emotional abuse and told me I was old enough to look after myself. Close to nervous breakdown, I left school and home at seventeen, and became a shop assistant.

Not long afterwards, I met my husband, married him at eighteen and had our first child ten months later. But my desire to write never left me. Its lack of fulfilment blighted my happiness, leaving me open to depression. The traumatic birth of my second son awoke me from my half-life and returned me to writing. I seized on it as my preferred form of communication, the way to make sense of life.

Entering La Trobe University through their early leavers' scheme, academic success gave me the confidence to pursue a career in education. Employed as an Arts and Craft teacher, I decided to complete a Graduate Diploma in Visual and Performance Arts. It immersed me in the creative process and the floodgates opened to the novel I had wanted to write since my twenties. Words poured out of me and by the end of the course

I had finished the first draft of my historical novel, *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* An American small press publisher published it in 2002.

Writing shaped my identity, my life and continues to do so. Writing is my life-tool. I restored and re-stored my life through writing. I have been a primary teacher for over twenty-years and now tutor writing at Swinburne University.

Writing is a way of being, "of becoming" (Colyar, 2009, p. 428) to me now rather than a way to earn a living. That no longer matters so much because I have something richer in its place, a deeper appreciation of the process, the process where magic happens. Like the renaissance women I am currently researching for my PhD artefact, I read and write text as a "means by which to revise and rewrite my own experience of exploring the world in the way a woman could, that is in the imagination" (Jordan, 1990, p.139).

But as Colyar stresses, "Writing is always also a product. In this way it externalising and internalising happens at the same time. In our products, too, is a reflection of our rhetoric itself, the self that develops arguments and invents the structure of the text" (2009, p. 429).

Through process and product, I became the writer I wanted to be as a child.

CONCLUSION

Tillie Olsen wrote her book *Silences* thirty-two ago; it still powerfully resonates today. Olsen writes, "The world never asked you to write. My long ago and still instinctive response: What's wrong with the world then, that it doesn't ask - and make it possible - for people to raise and contribute the best that is in them" (Olsen, 1978, p.172).

Is it not time for us to confront society and ask why it makes it so difficult for those who are called to write? Is it simply because writing transforms lives and, consequently, the society in which we live? Is this to be

afraid of? It is our creators who will lead the way out of our dark times to a better future; it is writing that will show the way.

Thirty and more years ago Barthes began us on a road that has increasingly marginalised authors and their importance as creators of text. While I agree with Barthes that the author as god is constructed by the world and its text, I believe it is time to say the author is not dead but also deserves to be no longer marginalised. Let us celebrate writers and writing and own the world is also constructed by text – text written by authors. Rather than “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes, 1968, p. 5), authors and readers exist mutually dependant on one another.

Our current road needs overhauling for the future direction of writing. Those of us who are called to write and those who follow after deserve a sure, certain and respected highway.

How do writers achieve this? Professor Josie Arnold writes, “The greatest difference between print and electronic discourse is the empowerment of the reader through interactivity” (2010, p.3). Let us avail ourselves of this and use the Internet and its forms of social networking as a way to build greater understanding of writing not only as a vehicle for expression but also an important life tool.

Le Guin is right when she says, “The technology is not what matters. Words are what matter. The sharing of words. The activation of imagination through the reading of words” (2004, p. 210).

For those of us fortunate to live in areas with an active arts culture – let us support it by being also active and involved participants of this culture and reap the benefits, like the city of Melbourne, now a UNESCO City of Literature. Melbourne’s privileged position “represents an opportunity for greater cohesion and planning between the arts and education sectors” (Carthew and Croker 2010)). This is only one of the paybacks of ensuring our highway is open to all who wish to travel on it.

For creative writing is a life tool, not only for ourselves as writers but those we write for. It transforms our lives

into authentic lives through the process of writing. By engaging with the white page authors die in one sense but are resurrected in another, reborn into a life where we find meaning. Writing changes us forever.

Long live books and authors.

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