

CREATIVE WRITING IN UNIVERSITY: So what will you say?



Very little stirs the passions more than the issue of teaching Creative Writing at university. You are studying Creative Writing at university – and shortly you will go out into the world looking for a job. You will almost certainly be asked to list, and possibly to demonstrate, the skills you have acquired and you may well be asked to justify your choice of subject. So how will you answer? What will you say?

Carl Tighe

Very little stirs the passions more than the issue of teaching Creative and Professional Writing at university. It is very likely your tutors have several very good reasons why the subject should be included in university study, and can tell you exactly what subject skills, general skills and transferrable skills you can acquire by studying this subject. But that does not prevent detractors claiming that the subject 'cannot be taught', that it is simply one of those new-fangled degrees on a par with Football Studies, Media Studies, Fashion or Event Management, simply designed to Hoover up the less academically minded and relieve them of their money. There are a great many critics who dismiss Creative and Professional Writing as a new (and therefore illegitimate) university subject – without realising that it is in fact the oldest, the original subject of academic study.¹

In May 2009 the journalist Ian Jack published an article criticising Creative and Professional Writing as a university subject. He wrote:

Creative writing can now be learned at nearly every British institute of higher learning. Figures are hard to come by, but Britain is probably turning out about 1,300 "creative writers" every year. Why do young people apply? Because they think they can be the next Zadie Smith. Why do universities encourage them? Because money can be made from fees. Is this responsible behavior? We need to weigh the smashed hopes of creative writers against the financial needs of their tutors, who are themselves writers, and earning the kind of money that writing would never supply. A closed little dance: tutors teach students who in turn teach other students, like silversmiths in a medieval guild where a bangle is rarely bought though many are crafted, and everyone lives in a previous world.²

I felt his article was poorly informed, clichéd, and rather prejudiced: it also assumed that readers would agree Creative and Professional Writing was a legitimate target. While it is true there is an element of opportunism in the way universities have used the popularity of Creative and Professional Writing, the claim that it 'can now be learned at nearly every British institute of higher learning' is just propaganda. In fact only the 'new' universities tend to offer the subject – Oxbridge, the Russell Group and most of the Redbrick universities do not. Indeed they tend to look down on the subject and the universities where it is taught. Apart from that I felt the reference to the 'smashed hopes of creative writers' was coming a bit thick. So I took the opportunity to reply - blowing the subject trumpet more than a little in the process. I wrote:

Dear Ian Jack,

In your recent article you wonder why young people apply to study Creative Writing and why do universities encourage them. You refer to the 'smashed hopes of creative writers', and wonder if teaching Creative Writing is responsible behavior on the part of universities.

¹ Carl Tigue, *Writing The World: Writing as a Subject of Study* (Kingston University Press: London) 2014.

² Ian Jack, 'The age of the gifted amateur has returned' *The Guardian* (12 May 2009): www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/may/02/jk-rowling-charles-dickens-ts-elliott-books-writing.

My understanding of Creative Writing is clearly very different from yours. At Derby Creative Writing has been part of the syllabus for over 25 years – since before Derby became a university. We teach the subject not out of a cynical necessity to support the financial needs of the tutors, nor because of the fees the subject brings in, but because, like Fine Art, Music, Photography and many other creative subjects, it is a subject that can usefully be studied at university level. Creative Writing is, like any other university subject, an introduction to a body of knowledge, a subject discipline and food and training for the mind. We do not aim to ‘turn out’ Creative Writers any more than English aims to ‘turn out’ Renaissance Dramatists or American Studies produces Native Americans, but if we do produce a graduate who goes on to write successfully – as many of our graduates do – we are delighted. The important point is that as part of developing creativity, we teach valuable transferable skills. The jobs market woke up to this some time ago.

The subject is popular, that is certain. But Derby graduates go on to a great variety of work. Of the graduates I have had contact with in the last couple of years, one became a project manager for the NHS, one now manages a retail outlet, two have become a Regional Literature Development Officers, several have become Librarians, one became Black and Asian Arts Development Officer; one gained employment at KLM Engineering as archivist and records co-ordinator. Several have trained as teachers and some are now working in China, India, Japan and Thailand. Several have gone into the Fire and Ambulance services, a couple have gone into the Army and the Air Force. Several work in the administration and marketing departments of the University of Derby. One recently started work for the BBC. Several of our graduates have gone into computer games design – specialising in the construction of narratives and dialogue. Several of our graduates have gone into website design, copywriting and the law and several have gone on to study for MAs. So, not such a useless degree then...

Because as tutors we share our experience, Derby students are under no illusions about the reality of the literary world and their chances of success. It is perhaps because of this they are so determined and successful. Several of our students have won prizes and publication for short stories and poems. One graduate won a major national Writing award, one had poetry published in *The Independent* and achieved a two book contract with a major London publisher; two were commissioned to write film scripts and one has had several plays commissioned and performed by professional companies; another just had his first novel published. Two graduates have had a series of comedy programmes commissioned by the BBC, two others have written for Mitchell and Web. One graduate was short-listed for the Dylan Thomas First Novel Award, with superb reviews in several newspapers including *The Times Literary Supplement*. So, not exactly smashed hopes...

Over the last ten years Creative Writing in Derby has also made a significant (but unquantifiable) contribution to the development of the cultural life of the East Midlands, establishing links to creative industries, particularly with the

Literature Network, based at Charnwood Arts in Loughborough, the Derby City Literature Development Office, the annual Derby Spoken Word festival – in which our students have read and performed - and to the East Midlands, West Midlands and North West storytelling circuits through Derby's own Storytelling outfit, Flying Donkeys.

Artists of all kinds are poorly paid and often have to hold down another job while they create. True. But a quiet revolution has taken place which you do not seem to be aware of. Now a degree in Creative Writing undermines the old idea that artists must starve in a garret. With the transferable skills of this degree behind them our graduates can earn a living while they write. That sounds very responsible to me.

Sadly, *The Guardian* did not publish my reply, but I like to think my point was made. However, the argument, tired and feeble though it is, has not gone away.

In March 2014 the novelist Hanif Kureishi, who teaches Creative Writing at Kingston University, addressed an audience in Bath Spa, saying:

Ninety-nine point nine per cent (of students) are not talented and the little bit that is left is talent. A lot of my students just can't tell a story. They can write sentences but they don't know how to make a story go from there all the way through to the end without people dying of boredom in between. It's a difficult thing to do and it's a great skill to have. Can you teach that? I don't think you can... A lot of students don't really understand. It's the story that really helps you. They worry about the writing and the prose and you think: 'Fuck the prose, no one's going to read your book for the writing, all they want to do is find out what happens in the story next.' They really start to perk up after about three years. And after about five years they really realise something about writing. It's a very slow thing. People go on writing courses for a weekend and you think, 'A weekend?'³

He went on to say that the subject was 'the biggest con-job in academia'.

A week later *The Guardian* printed a long article quoting at some length the comments of Professors and university teachers of the subject, including Philip Hensher, Jeanette Winterson, Rachel Cusk, Michael Cunningham, Tessa Hadley, Gary Shteyngart, Naomi Alderman, Don Paterson, Chang-Rae Lee, Kathryn Hughes, Toby Lit, Joyce Carol Oates, Curtis Sittenfeld and Blake Morrison. Quietly and patiently they refuted Kureishi's comments.⁴ Indeed, one year before Hanif Kureishi made his ill-considered comments about Creative Writing courses, Rachel Cusk, his

³ Professor Hanif Kureishi says 'Creative Writing courses are a waste of time', *The Guardian* 4 March 2014: www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/04/creative-writing-courses-waste-of-time-hanif-kureishi.

⁴ So You Want to be a Writer...' *The Guardian*, 15 March 2014: www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/14/creative-writing-courses-advice-students.

colleague at Kingston University, had produced a long, thoughtful piece on the subject of Creative Writing degrees for *The Guardian*.⁵

Clearly there is an almost impenetrable mystique surrounding the idea of 'the writer' and the act of 'writing'. But there is also some confusion about what Creative and Professional Writing at university does and what a student can get out of such a course.

You are studying Creative Writing at university – and shortly you will go out into the world looking for a job. You will almost certainly be asked to list, and possibly to demonstrate, the skills you have acquired and you may well be asked to justify your choice of subject. So how will you answer? What will you say?

Follow-Up Work

- Read the articles mentioned above.
- Why do you suppose you have been asked to read these articles and to think about this debate?
- 'Given that Rachel Cusk, had already written a long and thoughtful piece on Creative Writing courses the previous year, it is hard to imagine what Kureishi sought to achieve by this tirade.' Do you agree?
- So what do you think Kureishi was doing?
- Who was right - Kureishi or Cusk?
- Have you read anything by Kureishi or Cusk?
- Have you read anything by any of the other writers quoted here?
- What do you feel about changing 'epiphanic moment' to 'moment of epiphany'? Does the change qualify as 'infinite wisdom' or is it basic writing skill?
- What do you suppose Jeanette Winterson means when she says she is going to 'explode language in their faces'?
- Assess Rachel Cusk's ideas on Creative Writing at University.
- What do you think Rachel Cusk means when she refers to 'cultural self-hatred'?
- What do you think Rachel Cusk means when she says the communality of the writing workshop makes up for the 'deficiencies in the social milieu'?
- Do you agree that to be a 'real writer' you have to be the centre of attention?
- How do you feel when people criticize your degree?
- What transferrable skills have you identified in your degree so far?
- How do you distinguish yourself as a writer from the 'old ladies and housewives'?
- In what ways is a discussion about the validity of Creative Writing degrees relevant to the idea of 'professionalism in writing'?
- In your opinion did Kureishi behave professionally as a writer in making his comments?
- In your opinion, who was more professional in the way they handled the topic – Rachel Cusk or Hanif Kureishi?
- Did the writers who responded to Kureishi behave professionally?
- Why was there no rush to respond to Rachel Cusk's article?

⁵ Rachel Cusk, 'In Praise of The Creative Writing Course', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2013: www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/18/in-praise-creative-writing-course.

- So if somebody asked you - 'What are the benefits of a Creative Writing degree?' – How would you reply?
- In what ways does this debate relate to professional development, to your ideas about professionalism in writing, to your personal Professional Development Planning and to your degree?
- 'Creative Writing courses are a waste of time'. (Hanif Kureishi). Discuss.