

## Teaching Creative Writing: A Review Essay

By Chuck Guilford

*Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*, edited by Joseph M. Moxley (Urbana, IL: N.C.T.E., 1989, 272 pages).

*Released into Language*, Wendy Bishop (Urbana, IL: N.C.T.E., 1990, 233 pages).

*Writing Poems*, 3rd ed., Robert Wallace (New York: Harper Collins, 1991, 458 pages).

*What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*, Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter (New York: Harper Collins, 1990, 230 pages).

*The College Handbook of Creative Writing*, Robert DeMaria (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991, 359 pages).

Taken together, these five books offer an illuminating overview of current issues and practices in creative writing instruction. They portray a highly-evolved writing tradition in search of identity as an academic discipline, a situation with which many compositionists will be familiar. For just as composition can trace its roots back to classical rhetoric, creative writing can point to a proud tradition extending back to Homer, and beyond. In spite of such ancient heritage, however, creative writing, like composition, is in the process of redefining and reasserting itself within the academy. Such a process necessarily involves the attempt to identify and define the central paradigmatic features of the field. While compositionists have taken this task up eagerly, creative writers have not been so quick to do so.

Among these books, Joseph Moxley's *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*, offers the most comprehensive overview of creative writing instruction. This anthology is divided into four sections that cover fundamental assumptions, the creative process, editing and publishing, and goals and methods. As Moxley says in his Preface:

At present, no debate rages in professional journals as to whether creative writing

programs are providing students with the necessary writing skills, knowledge of the composing process, or background in literature to write well. . . . Yet there is evidence that our discipline is preparing to undergo a paradigm shift, a period of self-reflexiveness in which we question our theories and practices. (xi)

This theme is taken up by all four essays in the first section, but most notably by George Garrett and Eve Shelnutt.

In "The Future of Creative Writing Programs," before projecting a future, Garrett looks back in time, attempting to determine how creative writing programs have evolved to their present state. Interestingly, he traces creative writing's roots to "the composition of original Latin poetry and prose" during the renaissance and portrays current trends as "a *renewal, a revival*, the return, in somewhat different form and circumstances, of an old-fashioned, centuries-old form of teaching and learning rhetoric" (48). He sees this tradition taking hold in America in the form of "great books" courses and composition courses "that permitted or, indeed, required the students to write poems or stories" (48). This tradition was gradually extended and formalized through the participation of creative writers on college faculties, the inception of the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1937, and the founding of AWP "in the middle of the 1960's" by R. V. Cassill (55). Given this historical perspective, Garrett argues for a future that locates creative writing as a unifying center of literary and rhetorical studies:

. . . for at a time when reading and writing are a serious problem and a great cultural illiteracy prevails, creative writing is one antidote to toxic ignorance, all the more effective because it is somewhat disguised and different from humdrum composition courses. Students are still learning rhetoric and the habits of close reading and careful writing in creative writing courses. (56)

After taking some initial umbrage at Garrett's characterization of composition courses as "humdrum," I can see that he is speaking of an impoverished current-traditionalist mentality, not of more recent efforts to reconnect composition to its rhetorical heritage. Similarly, the

reference to "cultural illiteracy," which initially calls to mind E. D. Hirsch and Harold Bloom, appears in the context of the whole essay to speak to a larger concern for enlarging human understanding through reading and writing. As Garrett says:

If we are training young writers to write well, competently, without also teaching them how to recognize and value excellence for its own sake, substantial as well as technical excellence, we are wasting their time and ours. (59)

Many of Garrett's concerns are shared by Eve Shelnut. Her essay, "Notes From a Cell: Creative Writing Programs in Isolation," argues that creative writing has been severed from its intellectual roots:

Critics of the more than 280 graduate and undergraduate writing programs in colleges and universities across the country would no doubt answer that they never expected "real" writers to emerge from the cocoon of academe, much less intellectuals from among those writers. (3)

She is especially concerned about the proliferation of M.F.A programs and the "Brat Pack" they are producing. Believing that most M.F.A. programs are driven primarily by a concern to produce marketable writers, she sees the recent propagation of literary journals as an attempt to augment publication outlets and credentials for graduates. Similarly, she believes that most writing studied by M.F.A. candidates is read with an eye toward spotting trends and watching the competition rather than with serious consideration of the literary substance of the work. Meanwhile, not only are these students isolated from the central intellectual currents of literature, they are also largely ignorant of recent developments in composition, even though they usually subsidize their educations (and may support themselves after graduation) by teaching in that area. While recognizing the difficulties inherent in teaching imaginative writing in an intellectual climate that is itself unstable, Shelnut returns again to the central theme of isolation:

But if M.F.A. students and their faculty knit themselves into tight cocoons of

unexamined curricula, of defensive responses to literature and composition programs, and of provincial views of success in the field of writing, how are they to participate not only in a worldwide community of writers, but also in a global community of thinkers? (19)

These are serious questions indeed, and while the very asking might seem at first glance to throw the whole enterprise of creative writing instruction into serious doubt, a second thought suggests that these are precisely the kinds of hard questions that must be asked if this time-honored writing tradition is to find a worthy place in contemporary American academia.

If other sections of the book are less noteworthy than the first, they are frequently interesting. Three essays that stand out for me personally are Robert H. Abel's "One Writer's Apprenticeship," Donald M. Murray's "Unlearning to Write," and Valerie Miner's "The Book in the World." These and several others often approach their subjects from fresh perspectives, focusing on how to link the classroom with the world of publishing, for instance, or on the similarities and differences between expository and imaginative writing.

This possible connectedness between composition and creative writing is also a striking feature of Wendy Bishop's *Released into Language*. Indeed, the book draws heavily upon composition research for both its theoretical foundation and its pedagogical applications. Bishop clearly sees "writing" as a unified field and moves freely among references to Sharon Crowley, John Berryman, Nancy Sommers, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mina Shaughnessy, and Anne Sexton without much regard to whether their work is traditionally associated with composition or creative writing. In doing so, she identifies herself most closely with the theories of James Britton. After a brief discussion of expressive, transactional, and poetic discourse, she explains that "Britton and his colleagues' discourse taxonomy helps me to understand the division of writing labor as it now exists in English Departments, and why, somewhat backwardly, we divide writing instruction by types of written products" (29).

Bishop favors a more holistic approach centered in exploration (expressive discourse) and

evolving toward instrumental (transactional) or imaginative (poetic) discourse as the author's ideas and purposes are clarified in the act of writing.

To help foster this approach and to maintain her emphasis on writing as process, Bishop favors a workshop course format, yet one that differs from the more traditional creative writing workshop with its heavy emphasis upon critique and revision. Bishop's workshop, which she calls the *transactional creative writing workshop*, encompasses all stages of the writing process and includes a variety of activities ranging from the standard "full-group critique" to "performance," "student-led discussion," and "one-to-one conferencing--student to teacher *and* peer to peer" (44). Much of the writing is also generated in class through a variety of activities and exercises drawn from both composition and creative writing sources. In her chapter, "Ten Inventions and Variations," she offers a selection of specific assignments, complete with suggestions for their use and examples of completed work by her students and herself. She advocates the teacher's doing an assignment whenever possible in order to get a feel for its levels of opportunity and difficulty. As in many creative writing courses, students submit a portfolio of finished work which is considered along with other factors in determining the final course grade. Chapter Eight, "Evaluating and Responding," contains sample critique sheets for mid-semester and final evaluations. "Appendix A" is a series of "Response Protocol Sheets" for in-class use, and "Appendix B" is "A Selected, Annotated Bibliography" on teaching creative writing.

Wendy Bishop has clearly done an outstanding job of integrating a vast amount of research and experience into an innovative and effective pedagogical package. For this, she deserves high praise and many readers. Certainly most of those readers, whether in composition or creative writing will come away with enlarged awareness and practical ideas to improve their teaching. If pressed to say something negative, I might refuse. Or I might confess that finally I find it just a bit *too* systematic, too reliant on method and technique, without enough acknowledgement of or allowance for the messy and mysterious, the sublime and grotesque. For instance, in Chapter Two we have references to Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and John

Berryman; but students are seldom challenged, as readers or writers, to come to terms with the kinds of crucial issues that these poets dealt with, focusing instead on metaphors for writing or on the creative use of cliché. As Bishop points out, quoting Jim Heynan, poetry involves both craft and vision (40). The philosophy and pedagogy elaborated here are very strong on craft, but somewhat less so on vision.

In *Writing Poems*, Robert Wallace deals with this issue explicitly in Chapter Eight, "Beyond the Rational: Burglars and Housedogs," but he speaks to it implicitly throughout, partly with outstanding examples of student and non-student (I hesitate to say "professional") poets ranging from Sir Philip Sidney through Jorie Graham, and partly with unwavering respect for the mystery of it all: "The poet's technical experience, technical readiness, is like a finely tuned radio apparatus that is activated by the message, whenever it comes" (284). Wallace might even agree with David St. John: "I cannot emphasize enough the importance of making young writers read. Beginning writers have neither the reading experience nor the writing experience to offer much more than the most trite poems about the most conventional subjects" (Moxley 189). More likely, Wallace knows that the "Great Models" and the "Sure-fire Exercise" approach are the Scylla and Charybdis of creative writing instruction. Throughout this book, Wallace most often steers toward the former, yet always avoids wreckage, somehow managing to follow a course of authenticity and understanding through the tangled currents of contemporary poetics.

Even so, the book does favor what might loosely be termed a deductive method. The twelve chapters, for instance, are gathered into three sections: "Form: The Necessary Nothing," "Content: The Essential Something," and "Process: Making the Poem Happen." While Wallace speaks of this organization as "primarily a convenience of exposition, not an implicit theory" and invites users "to skip around freely" (xiii), this pattern of moving from conceptualization to experimentation is fundamental to the book's approach. Just as the overall design encourages teachers and students to try "Making the Poem Happen" only after they have mastered an understanding of form and content, individual chapters tend to begin with definitions and claims,

which are followed by examples and illustrations, which are followed by "Questions and Suggestions," a collection of questions and activities designed both to demonstrate understanding and to foster creative expression.

Chapter Nine, "Starting a Poem: Wind, Sail, and Rigging," offers an interesting illustration of the ways in which Wallace connects composing and understanding. He begins with a discussion of old and new, imitation and originality. In a short passage heavily laden with references to Waller, Chaucer, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Dryden, Wallace tells us, "Tradition is the long handle that gives force to the blow of the new, sharp head of the axe" (280). Then, in a section called "Imitation, Masters, Models, and So Forth," he explores imitation and parody before finally arriving at "Stirrings," an extremely thoughtful discussion of the poetic impulse-- how it may be nurtured, sustained, brought to fruition. The discussion is extended and elaborated with a detailed look at the composition of William Stafford's "Ask Me" and of Wallace's own composing strategies as he wrote "Swimmer in the Rain." Next, he moves to a promising section called "Talking to Oneself," which unfortunately bogs down in warnings about sentimentality and overstatement; then he refines that into a discussion of deliberate overstatement (*hyperbole*) and understatement (why not *litotes*?), before concluding with a discussion of Donne's use of hyperbole in "The Sun Rising" (299, 300). Finally, a brief concluding section called "Tacking" brings back the chapter's central sailing metaphor and relates it to sustaining and developing the initial poetic impulse. After this, "Questions and Suggestions" offers a number of interesting writing suggestions, none relating to over- or understatement; and finally, "Poems to Consider" provides a mini-anthology of eight poems. The individual components of the chapter are all useful and well-presented, but the overall pedagogical strategy is hazy and underinformed. Why doesn't this whole chapter come near the beginning of the book? Why no mention of meditation or the unconscious? Why are discussions of free writing so limited? Why not more accounts of the struggles of student and professional writers bringing poems into being?

Yet despite these reservations, this is a fine book--one I'd order in a minute for my own classes because of its warmth, intelligence, and contagious love of making poems. Wallace writes with grace and wit. His book offers a wealth of information, advice, and inspiration.

*What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* is similarly inspiring but takes a very different instructional approach, downplaying theory and technical terminology in favor of practical activities intended to get students writing at the outset. Like Wallace, Bernays and Painter advocate studying great writers: "Buy their books and read them; study specific passages, write in the margins, type out their sentences. Absorbing the work of great writers is the best education of all" (xix). As though to underline this, the book's final section, "Learning from the Greats," offers five lessons that show how professional authors can be used for inspiration and imitation. Unlike Wallace, however, Bernays and Painter seldom examine great works in detail to illustrate their own ideas. Instead, they favor brief quotations presented without comment in the context of a writing exercise or as epigraph or postscript to a lesson.

This book favors doing and making over understanding and analyzing. The eighty-three lessons are collected into twelve sections, each centered on a dominant concern such as character or dialogue. Within a given section, the individual lessons typically begin with a paragraph or two of introductory comment followed by subsections entitled "The Exercise," "The Objective," and "Student Example." While most lessons appear to be original to the authors, several are borrowed, with appropriate acknowledgement, from other writers such as William Kittredge or Alison Lurie. Although Painter and Bernays never make explicit any overriding organizational theory, the lessons do appear to progress according to a system, earlier exercises focusing on getting started and later ones on structure and technique. One notable absence in this scheme is any significant attention to revision. Despite the authors' observation that "first drafts are apt to be a mess--this holds true for even the most accomplished writers" (167), only one lesson, "Identifying Story Scenes During Revision," tackles the subject head on. More characteristically, exercises focus on generating and shaping fiction. They appear to assume the need for future

revision, but offer little guidance in how to go about it.

Thus, while the book is quite strong in its varied suggestions for discovering potential stories and for using fictional techniques to explore and develop that potential, a lack of emphasis upon "finishing" the stories gives the impression that most students would be left with a number of notebook entries and perhaps a few completed drafts but little if any work that received much sustained attention or was carried all the way through the writing process.

Even so, the authors do provide a wealth of provocative, stimulating activities designed to help students get into the act of writing fiction. These range from practice beginning *in medias res* to a lesson called "Put Your Heart on the Page," which features a quote from William Kittredge, "If you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self" (23). The objectives of these exercises are clearly spelled out, and student examples are generally provided (but not for "Put Your Heart on the Page"). In all, *What If?* offers an innovative, exploratory approach to teaching fiction writing. Fresh, engaging, and practical, it looks especially appealing for a beginning course.

*The College Handbook of Creative Writing* by Robert DeMaria is a very different book, an apparent effort to carry the *Harbrace Handbook* method over from composition into creative writing. As though anticipating reservations to the very concept, DeMaria begins somewhat defensively:

This book does not aim to be prescriptive. It does not tell the student what to write or how to write it. Instead it describes how universal writing problems have been dealt with by experienced writers, and it explains how the mistakes commonly made by novice writers can be avoided. (v)

And so, with Zenlike accuracy, DeMaria hits the mark without aiming: he does not show students what to do or how to do it. Instead, he provides great models and suggestions for avoiding error.

At the end of each chapter, a few exercises appear. Seldom does much thought appear to

have been given to their effectiveness. No examples of student performance are provided. A few typical exercises, drawn from various chapters, may indicate the amount of imagination and teaching experience that have gone into this aspect of the book:

--Write a short story that takes place in a foreign country that you have never been to. (44)

--Write a poem about some aspect of nature, using as many images as possible. (261)

--Visit the zoo and describe some of the animals. Rely on observation, not memory or stereotypes. (159)

But this is not a book about enabling writing. It is a book about extrinsic definitions, admonitions, and motivations: "Suspense is a condition created by uncertainty" (74), "The period is commonly used to end a declarative sentence or even an imperative sentence" (293), "Avoid the vague use of the term *plot*" (66), "Marketing your writing is the next step" (319).

The last paragraph of the last chapter of the book deals with the problem of taxes:

The net loss or gain on schedule C is subtracted from or added to one's adjusted gross income. There are, however, limitations on how many years a writer can claim a loss. (327)

Yet if the book ends on a note of loss, it is reassuring to know that these losses can be deducted for a few years. And perhaps this is only realism, a way of consoling oneself for having invested so much in an enterprise that was doomed from the start to fail. I imagine a student, someone very much like me, asking: Didn't my father tell me this would happen? Can I deduct the price of this book? How can I deduct from an income of zero? Or--maybe I can get a job teaching Comp.

And this all-too-familiar scenario again calls to mind the bond between composition and creative writing. Maybe the student I'm imagining will get that job teaching Comp, fend off starvation, placate father, read Wendy Bishop and Peter Elbow and James Britton, join (or start)

a writing group, get access to a laser printer, take a course from Valerie Miner, design and publish and sell a book or journal, inspire others to do the same. Essays, poems, stories--people writing and reading and talking about that writing. All five books reviewed here suggest to me that this may be starting to happen, that we are beginning to recognize and honor a fundamental connectedness between composition and creative writing--in our histories, in our goals, and in our methodologies.

Yet despite this connectedness, we also have our differences. No, composition and creative writing are not one thing. But as these five books make clear, our paths do intersect in interesting and significant ways. We all have much to learn from a dialogue on the subject, and we all have much to give.