



The Routledge
Creative
Writing
Coursebook

PAUL MILLS

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THE ROUTLEDGE CREATIVE WRITING COURSEBOOK

This step-by-step, practical guide to the process of creative writing provides readers with a comprehensive course in its art and skill. With genre-based chapters, such as life writing, novels and short stories, poetry, fiction for children and screenwriting, it is an indispensable guide to writing successfully.

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Paul Mills teaches creative writing at York St John College. He has held writing fellowships at Leeds and Manchester universities and a Fulbright Teaching exchange fellowship in the US. He is a poet and dramatist.

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CREATIVELYWRITING
COURSEBOOK

Paul Mills



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FOR ELIZABETH

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PREFACE

Somewhere between a second edition and a sequel, the present book follows *Writing In Action*, with a focus exclusively on *creative* writing. It aims to offer fresh approaches and some new terms to match. Whilst writing this book I became aware of new ground to be discovered, and the constant need to rethink what happens when we read and write creatively.

Creative writing as a taught discipline is on the move; it is going places, and I hope I've provided some opportunity to think about interesting new directions. As well as that, my method, as in *Writing In Action*, has been to encourage genuine pleasure in the things good writing can do, and to move from given examples to suggestions for writing. Excitement and pleasure in written words generates momentum without which technical advice would be sterile. The plan of each chapter is therefore quite straight-forward, and offers, I hope, enough but not too much guidance.

I acknowledge that what I have written in every chapter stems from my personal experience as a writer and reader. The whole idea is to stimulate not just good writing but open discussion, assuming that one leads to the other, and so leave room for tutors and students to make their own discoveries. With this point very much in mind, I am pleased to acknowledge how much I myself have benefited from the influence of students, colleagues and friends, many of whom are writers themselves, whose insights are mirrored here in so many ways.

Paul Mills, July 2005

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CHAPTER 1

WRITING AS ART

Writers build up worlds, make them real, emphasise and illuminate them through images. Through voices they hold our attention, remind us of the varying tones of speech. Through stories told and heard they show the way our thoughts are shaped by narrative, how we shape the thoughts and lives of others and ourselves. From among the features by which we identify writing as an art form, in this first chapter I have selected four that produce a consistently powerful impact for writers and readers. These are voice, world, image and story. Without these elements our practice as writers would become disadvantaged. Creative language would not be as it is, neither would we read with the special attention and pleasure it generates.

Story implies structure, and structure meaning. Stories are told by voices creating images; voices also build and inhabit worlds. A writer staying close to the voices of characters has more chance of crossing over into their rhythm of living, of involving readers in that rhythm, so that as readers we feel we know it for ourselves. The use of speaking and thinking voices in writing seems to be a key quality, perhaps the most important skill of all for a writer to learn. But then, if we think about it, the voices that most hold our attention are those that tell stories, generate images, make their world as real to us as our own.

In this chapter I shall begin my exploration of how these qualities interact. Not one of them stands alone as the central foundation. But it may be that each of the five genres I cover in this book—memoir or personal narrative, poetry, fiction, children's writing and drama—typically favours one quality above others. We might see *image* as the domain of poets. We might expect *voice* to be the foremost interest of any dramatist, while *story* dominates every instance of prose fiction or memoir. It will help, however, if we *don't* make these assumptions. A successful poem can be written as dramatic story. A piece of short fiction might have very little in the way of narrative. Voices might not always be appropriate. Obviously there will be differences within genres, between writers. While Alan Ayckbourn writes by devising a carefully plotted story, Harold Pinter describes a play as 'an evolving and compulsive dramatic image' (Pinter, 1976:12). The emphasis may change from writer to writer, but to value their impact we need to experience voice, world, image and story as strengths, qualities, amazing creative inventions. What is it that they do? How do they work? This chapter will be the first step in discovering some answers to these questions.

VOICE

Writing as art helps us to recognise the voices, images, worlds and stories we inhabit—and which inhabit us—in other words, our acquired culture. But it usually does this not

through explanation or analysis, but by encouraging us to listen and see. In the following passage from her novel *The Bluest Eye*, the black American writer Toni Morrison paints a picture of weekends in a family household in Ohio. The child narrator remembers the impact of her mother's voice. She recreates her singing, her idioms of speech, the actual words spoken in the house. The picture has been painted for us in sound:

Saturdays were lonesome, fussy, soapy days. Second in misery only to those tight, starchy, cough-drop Sundays, so full of 'don'ts' and 'set'cha self downs'.

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me-times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-me to my name'. I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave me, when I would 'hate to see that evening sun go down...' ...Misery coloured by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.

But without song, those Saturdays sat on my head like a coal scuttle, and if Mama was fussing, as she was now, it was like somebody throwing stones at it

(Morrison, 1994:25–6)

This last image (of the mother fussing at her children), even without mentioning voice directly, represents it to us as something terribly uncomfortable: we see hands going up over ears to block it out. In the passage we also hear the narrator and catch a sense of her own speech-rhythms. Morrison has got right inside this child's voice. The story at this point is being told to us through a distinctly spoken language: 'lonesome...fussy, soapy ...starchy, cough-drop Sundays.' This narrator is inclined to speak very much in her own fashion—independent, awkward to handle, yet also sensitive, sympathetic. Other voices come through to us: the first line of a lyric from the black jazz singer Bessie Smith, 'I hate to see that evening sun go down'.

Exploring the voice has uncovered a rich field in contemporary writing. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison describes a conversation like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop' (Ibid: 15). Yet a fascination with voices and speech has been present in fiction for over two centuries. The personal letter, a form where writing comes closest to natural speech, made its appearance in one of the earliest examples of fiction. *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson (1740) contains a series of letters written between women on the subject of love. Authentic, spontaneous, as if close to real, unedited experience, it was partly through its use of the letter (we call this an 'epistolary style') that fiction placed its emphasis on speech. In a recent, unusual example of such emphasis, Iris Murdoch begins her novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, written and set in the 1960s, by inventing a conversation which continues for almost twenty pages, with only one short interjection by the author setting the scene. If one rule of fiction is to discover *what most interests the characters*, then one such interest could be love, but another might be

conversation itself. As she demonstrates, talk, conversation, interests this husband and wife because it is their way of shaping experience. We hear their voices because, for them, voices are important. Talking matters.

Dialect and Diversity

In the middle of the last century, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called attention to voices used creatively by writers. ‘Diversity of speech’, he wrote, ‘is the ground of style’, and commenting particularly of the novel: ‘For the prose artist the world is full of other people’s words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear’ (Bakhtin, 1984:200–1). In his book *After Bakhtin*, David Lodge, himself a prolific novelist, draws attention to this feature in the novels of Dickens, George Eliot and D.H.Lawrence.

But the uses of voice don’t confine themselves only to fiction. In our time poetry has also widened its appeal by developing its range of speaking voices, tones, registers, accents, slang expressions. Writing in all its creative forms no longer limits itself to the voice of one dominant authority, or to a form of address by a single speaker; that is, white, middle-class, educated British-American. Writing as art is now practised by people from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, representing differences of age, gender and sexuality. All these voices are actively sought by audiences and readers whose numbers reflect a similar range of culture and experience.

When it comes to the question of how much or how little we know about other people, it is hardly surprising that voices provide one of the first signals of difference or similarity. We might indeed remember a voice more than a name or face. City neighbourhoods often consist of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Living on the same staircase as an Asian family, the Scottish poet Liz Lochhead wonders about the mother’s position in terms of her speech and location. Spoken language can differ between generations in the same household: ‘How does she feel? / her children grow up with foreign accents, / swearing in fluent Glaswegian’ (‘Something I’m Not’, in Crawford and Imlah, eds, 2000:505). In a radio play by Benjamin Zephaniah, a young boy with a natural-born English Midlands accent wonders about his father’s black Caribbean preacher-voice holding forth in a manner astonishing to him—one is obsessed with football, the other with the Bible.

In his poem ‘The Shout’, Simon Armitage describes how he and another boy at school were testing ‘the range of the human voice’. How far does a voice carry? was the question they asked themselves:

He called from over the park—I lifted an arm.
Out of bounds,
he yelled from the end of the road...

Neither, however, could have foreseen the end of the test:

He left town. went on to be twenty vears dead

with a gunshot hole
in the roof of his mouth, in Western Australia.

(Armitage 2003:2)

‘You can stop shouting now, I can still hear you’, Armitage writes in the final line of the poem. The real question was not about distance but difference: of age and of experience. Can voices ever overcome the sense of growing apart? The news of suicide carries further than any shout could reach. The voice has stopped, yet in a truer sense it persists.

Deception and Evasion

For some strange reason we often associate creative literature with truth, yet novels and plays are full of characters who fail to tell it, deliberately avoid it, prefer to tell what they wish was the case rather than what actually is. Plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, like those by Chekhov and Ibsen, typify what we might call the literature of evasion. The truth, of course, finally gets spoken, but not until a voice for it can be found. In terms of structure their plays are about discovering that voice, but sometimes the reverse happens, and we hear an especially courageous voice begin to founder and almost silence itself. The voices in Beckett’s plays seem to prefer silence. Another voice known for its bleakness and humour is that of Holden Caulfield in Salinger’s novel *The Catcher In The Rye*:

I thought what I’d do was, I’d pretend I was one of those deaf mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam stupid useless conversation with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they’d have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They’d get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I’d be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody’d think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they’d leave me alone.

(Salinger, 1995:178–9)

Holden’s ideal world is *without* voices—even without his own. Even so, we can hear his voice speaking. His bond with the reader overrides his desire to stop communicating. It goes on despite his urge to escape to a permanent deaf-mute state. The voice we recognise—slangy, immediate, often perverse—speaks to us even when he explains he’d rather not. To neutralise one’s voice, as here, could be a form of cancelling out one’s story. Holden hasn’t committed vocal suicide, even though the story he tells contains moments when he’s seriously tempted.

In the following extract from a novel by Tim O’Brien, *In The Lake of the Woods*, again the setting is the United States, and the voices project an imagined alternative space, an ideal:

As a kind of game they would sometimes make up lists of romantic places to travel.

‘Verona,’ Kathy would say, ‘I’d love to spend a few days in Verona.’ And then for a long while they would talk about Verona, the things they would see and do, trying to make it real in their minds. All around them the fog moved in low and fat off the lake, and their voices would seem to flow away for a time and then return to them from somewhere in the woods beyond the porch...

They would go on talking about the fine old churches of Verona, the museums and outdoor cafes where they would drink strong coffee and eat pastries. They invented happy stories for each other A late-night train-ride to Florence, or maybe north into the mountains, or maybe Venice, and then back to Verona, where there was no defeat and nothing in real life ever ended badly. For both of them it was a wishing game. They envisioned happiness as a physical place on the earth, a secret country, perhaps, or an exotic foreign capital with bizarre customs and a different new language. To live there would require practice and many changes, but they were willing to learn.

(O’Brien, 1995:2–3)

These two characters create a world—they call it ‘Verona’—simply by talking about it. It becomes their own ‘secret country’ an ‘envisioned happiness’. It’s important, of course, that they don’t actually go to the real place, don’t make actual, practical plans. Would they agree with the author’s explanation—that their talk hardly amounts to more than ‘a wishing game’? They probably would. His voice overlaps with theirs. They half-know, half-suspect this Verona is an evasion, an easy escape-route. From what? They probably wouldn’t be willing or ready to say. Voices can be used to show concealment; sometimes this is precisely what speech is about.

This merging of the writer’s voice with the voices of characters in fiction is known as free indirect speech, a valuable device in third person narrative, as shown above. As readers it keeps our attention where it should be, not on the writer’s views and opinions, but on the characters in the story. We listen to *them*, engage with what is happening in their minds *below* the level of conscious, articulate speech. The writer enables us to see, hear and feel their hidden sensations, first intimations (for example) of doubt or of desire, before these become conscious or can be spoken about directly.

Finding a Voice

If creative language frequently makes use of *voiced* forms, does this mean each writer is burdened with the quest to discover his or her unique voice, something expressly *original* among this huge polyphony of voices? The notion of ‘your own voice’, ‘finding a voice’, refers to a writer’s stance towards all the creative features of writing as art, including, of course, voice itself. Your voice will be generated by what you write about, the recurrent places, aspects and qualities of the world you represent, by the images you choose to highlight, the types of story or story-like events that hold for you a special fascination.

Some readers might think certain idioms, slang expressions and regional speech qualities to be a handicap. To others the possession of an accent suggests vitality. Conor MacPherson’s play *The Weir* (see Chapter 6, p. 214) is a play written to celebrate voices

(and stories) from the northwest of Ireland. But how do we choose our words, the right words? I don't like the word 'handicap', for instance, even though I found myself using it in a sentence above. Somehow it doesn't have quite the right sound to it, possibly because it's actually disappearing from spoken use. I really want something less old-fashioned sounding: 'dysfunction'? This is a euphemistic term, now therapist-journalese. Another possibility might be 'encumbrance', another 'liability'.

Choice of words depends more than we think on the currents and undercurrents of speech. Creative language incorporates what people say and how they speak—to themselves, to each other—and builds up a rich supply of spoken rhythms. Inside each single voice are many voices, some angry or calm, moral or perverse, some native, others overheard. One of the skills of the writer is learning how to listen to voices—those all around us and within us, those of characters in a story or play. It is as if the writer's job is to write down what his or her characters are saying, remaining wholly faithful to the way *they* speak. Maybe that is one way, paradoxically, of finding one's own voice—by hearing and recording those of others.

Voices under Pressure

MacPherson's play is set in a pub in a remote part of Ireland. Voices of people in a bar in any region will be influenced by their surroundings. Is there a pool table, wide-screen TV? Background noise, even background silence? Degrees of relaxation and tension influence speech, just as they do other types of behaviour. Talking never happens in the abstract. He said it on that day, in that place, and had these been different...who knows? This question applies to writers, too.

All writing is influenced by the conditions of its production. These conditions might be political or personal, close at hand, far in the background, almost invisible, unknowable, or very much in the foreground and invasive. Coleridge famously records how the arrival of an unwelcome guest—the 'person from Porlock'—interrupted the flow of his inspiration. Can we tell from a piece of writing anything about the immediate, practical conditions and pressures that helped or hindered, or at least influenced, the tone, form and content of it as a text? Might it encourage a certain reading by hinting (through its degree of formality/informality, its voice under pressure) at what might be called its *implied* circumstances? Can we tell if a poem was made spontaneously, *in the moment*, or heavily revised?

For writers and teachers of writing, such issues are quite specific and practical. A good many poets have developed the skill of writing as if in the presence of the scene, place, person they are describing, a style we might call responsive or expressionist. Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought Fox' describes not just a subject but a method, and one he recommends in his book on writing, *Poetry In The Making*. Against this is the measured, careful phrasing found in the work of other poets—the 'midnight oil' of the study Yeats refers to in his poem 'Among School Children'. Poems such as 'The Thought Fox' operate by describing a physical location—snow, shadow, movement—in a way that makes the physical location so real it seems to replace the actual conditions under which the poem was written, conditions we don't actually know about unless we were there with the poet when he was writing. But in another sense we are there with the poet, looking at that landscape, that fox, through the transforming force of imagination. Certain

poems appear to have been written all at once, in one sitting, with few corrections, whether they have or not, while others show a formal care that seems to rule against a sense of such immediacy. When Sylvia Plath in the title poem of her book *Ariel* writes the line ‘The child’s cry/Melts in the wall’, was this a response to the real thing happening in an adjacent room as she was writing the poem? Do her poems carry a trace of being written ‘Between five in the morning and the milkman rattling his bottles’ as she explained in an interview? Was an alertness to sound in the predawn winter of 1963 a conditioning influence on her poems in *Ariel*? Or was she aiming, for the best of reasons, to give us that impression?

The English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt in the sixteenth century wrote under constant threat of imprisonment, possibly even execution, in the court of Henry VIII. Does his verse betray such conditions, or attempt to conceal them? Would a judicious degree of formality guarantee his survival, or should he adopt the disguise of careless spontaneity? In plays and films we expect physical and social conditions to influence the way characters speak. In David Mamet’s play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a real-estate salesman’s loss of confidence leads to abusive, sexist slang, deformed, unfinished sentences. This is a voice *under pressure*:

LEVENE: I tell you why I’m out I’m out, you’re giving me toilet paper, John. I’ve seen those leads. I saw them when I was at Homestead, we pitched those cocksuckers Rio Rancho nine-teen sixty nine they wouldn’t buy. They couldn’t buy a fucking *toaster*. They’re broke John. They’re deadbeats, you can’t judge on that. Even so. Even so. Alright. Fine. Fine. Even so. I go in, FOUR FUCKING LEADS they got their money in a sock. They’re fucking Polacks, John. Four leads. I close two. Two. Fifty per...

WILLIAMSON: ...they kicked out.

LEVENE: They *all* kick out. You run in streaks, pal. *Streaks*. I’m... I’m...don’t look at the board, look at me. Shelly Levene. Anyone Ask them on Western. Ask Getz at Homestead. Go ask Jerry Graff. You know who I am... I NEED A SHOT. I got to get on the fucking board. Ask them. Ask them who ever picked up a check I was flush. Moss, Jerry Graff. Mitch himself... Those guys *lived* on the business I brought in. (Mamet, 1984:7)

In his book on writing plays, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, Alan Ayckbourn notes the importance of punctuation in speech: ‘Sometimes the speeches are broken up (quite grammatically incorrectly) in order to give an indication to the actor of the preferred delivery’ (Ayckbourn, 2002:62). He then quotes a speech from his play *Woman in Mind* as an example, and adds—the speaker is Susan—‘her pattern is breaking up like her personality’.

A huge advantage of bringing the voice and voices to the fore in any piece of writing will be that readers engage with a text more sympathetically; also, they are going to connect with its verbal energy. If a character in a poem or play says something—to themselves or to somebody else, tells a story, reports or records an experience in their own words—there is a sense of human fragility, of excitement, danger, possible misunderstanding and risk. And it could well be that in creative writing this sense of risk, far from being a fault or a weakness, is the very stuff that makes us sit up and take notice.

Orality and Literacy

One final thought about voices. This section's title above repeats that of Walter Ong's book about the differences between words as sounds (orality), and written words. As Ong explains, 'Writing... was a very late development in human history. Homo Sapiens had been on earth perhaps some 50,000 years' (Ong, 1995:83). The visual field of the written word (writing has to be seen, spatially mapped) differs fundamentally from sound sensations. We can only read print as individuals, while we hear collectively as an audience. Voice is produced by, and resonates with, the body, it 'vanishes as soon as it is uttered', while writing 'separates the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist' (Ibid: 31-3). I hope it's clear, even from the few examples I've chosen, that writing *as* speech, writing *about* speech, adds vital qualities to a text, and we might even claim that *creative* writing, developing as it has done from an oral tradition, not only reduces the separation between writing and voice, but thrives on their proximity. If speech 'vanishes', creative writing keeps alive the traces of its vanishing.

WORLD

Whenever writers create credible worlds, each of these imagined spaces holds the attention of readers and audiences by making us share, care about and appreciate the actions and events that happen within its borders. Such borders might be close to the real world, adjacent to it, or far away from it. The distance is less relevant than the convincing representation of this space as authentic, consistent, believable, so that we feel our interest will be rewarded. Cinema audiences watching films whose setting is contemporary, respond to shots of cities, highways, deserts, rivers, streets and home interiors. These spaces connect with spaces they feel they could travel to and from. Fiction writers have to do this through words. The novelist Margaret Atwood remembers being told early on in her career, 'Respect the page—it's all you've got!' All forms of creative writing, including poems, need to persuade readers to keep attending, because the world of their invention has a distinct reality. A basic element of this hold on the reader is the skill of verbal realisation.

Stories can't happen without places made real to us as we read. As the writer John Berger explains, 'When we read a story we inhabit it. The covers of a book are like a roof and four walls' (Berger, 1992:15) But this feature applies just as much to other creative forms, as in this poem by the Canadian poet Gary Geddes:

*'Sandra Lee Scheuer' (Killed at Kent State University on May 4th,
1970, by the Ohio National Guard)*

You might have met her on a Saturday night
cutting precise circles, clockwise, at the Moon-Glo
Roller Rink, or walking with quick step

between the campus and a green two-storey house.

where the room was always tidy, the bed made,
the books in confraternity on the shelves.

She did not throw stones, major in philosophy
or set fire to buildings, though acquaintances say
she hated war; had heard of Cambodia.

In truth she wore a modicum of make-up, a brassiere,
And could, no doubt, more easily have married a guardsman
Than cursed or put a flower in his rifle barrel.

While the armouries burned she studied,
Bent low over notes, speech therapy books, pages
Open at sections on impairment, physiology.

And while they milled and shouted on the commons
she helped a boy named Billy with his lisp, saying
Hiss, Billy, like a snake. That's it, SSSSSSS,

Tongue well up and back behind your teeth.
Now buzz, Billy, like a bee. Feel the air
vibrating in my windpipe as I breathe?

As she walked in sunlight through the parking lot
at noon, feeling the world a passing lovely place,
a young guardsman, who had his sights on her,

Was going down on one knee as if he might propose.
His declaration, unmistakable, articulate,
flowered within her; passed through her neck,

Severed her trachea, taking her breath away.
Now who will burn the midnight oil for Billy,
ensure the perilous freedom of his speech?

And who will see her skating at the Moon Glo
Roller Rink, the eight small wooden wheels
making their countless revolutions on the floor?

Although this poem's setting is Ohio, USA; Baghdad, Beijing, London—nowhere is protected in the present state of the world. But the poem's ability to deliver this message is effective because it shows us 'a green two-storey house...speech therapy books' because it records a voice saying, 'SSSSSSSS... Feel the air/vibrating in my windpipe as I breathe'. The details are there in close-up realisation. The poem builds a world, her world, and allows us to inhabit it with her. As we read, we are there, able to listen and hear, to see. The subject of this poem could and probably did originate as a report in a newspaper or on television, yet events recorded in the media generally reveal very little that could help us experience them with such intimacy and exactness.

The subject of the next extract has no obvious link with news or the media, although some images may be familiar through films. From the start of the poem I am aiming simply to build up a scene, recreate its impact. Here, a family is making their first visit to San Francisco:

from 'The Bridge'

The day we chose to let America show us its first city,
north of Santa Cruz, Half Moon Bay, Pacifica,
driving the coast route to the Golden Gate,
out of the fog, our glimpse of it
was of two swaying masts, a pilot craft
moored to San Francisco,
moving the whole city out of harbour;
ready to break free, cut loose, vanish
into a river of light.
Other ships were moving fast upstream,
a floating Toyota factory out of Japan.
Out on the flat shining plane of the bay
Alcatraz like a cubist mirage.

Downtown crowded us with streets, steepness,
the entire city a huge lift to the top
of the Trans-America Pyramid and its window, like thick
aquarium-glass, as if the gold of the sun swam in America.
Houses flung on the hills like litter Every space used up.

(Mills, 2000:36)

Although the people involved are not referred to in this opening, we still might be able to sense their reactions, as if they can hardly believe that they are there. Re-reading the lines I can recapture the excitement I felt when writing them. They aim to produce the sense of being in a place and a moment unlike any other.

De-familiarisation

Writers sharpen our sense of the world by making us hear and see with intensified clarity at times when otherwise we might just take things for granted. The Golden Gate Bridge probably doesn't need de-familiarising, while other, more common, experiences, will. The poet Peter Sansom, for example, instead of saying 'drove off at speed', writes of a 'floored accelerator waking the whole street'. Rather than 'looking a mess' D.B.C.Pierre writes: 'Ella's just skinny, with some freckles, and this big ole head of tangly blond hair that's always blown to hell, like a Barbie doll your dog's been chewing on for a month' (Pierre, 2003:126).

Why do writers build worlds, struggle to make them real to readers? One reason might be to intensify the sensation of being alive, as the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky explains in his essay 'Art as Technique': 'to increase the difficulty of length and perception, because the process of perception...must be prolonged' (Shklovsky, 1917). To find new ways of being in spaces that are otherwise familiar, putting readers in touch with a reality we might easily ignore, as in Gary Geddes's poem. Another might be sheer pleasure as in 'The Bridge'. Building a world is a means of welcoming readers, enabling them to inhabit the scene of a poem, novel or play, and writers do this by opening doors, letting readers in, rather than just by telling them what this or that place signifies. The word 'excitement' doesn't appear in 'The Bridge'. In Gary Geddes's poem no one is being instructed what to think. The setting, the unique presence of Sandra Lee Scheuer, is realised without any attached authorial commentary. Words that sum up a feeling-response—anger, injustice, waste of life—don't get a look in. The business is to make things real, to surprise us. The doors that are opened don't have signs on them: excitement, pleasure, outrage or evasion, or the name of the writer. No matter how public or private these worlds seem, they are made open to everyone through the art of looking and listening more closely, and turning the sensation into words.

Public and Private

As well as the worlds writers create, there is the world out there in its present existence, and sometimes writers feel the need to comment on it, give their opinion, intervene directly and unambiguously. Here is a list of slogans mounted on placards during a recent demonstration in America:

Go Solar, Not Ballistic
 God Does Not Bless Only America
 How Did Our Oil Get Under Their Soil?
 How Many Lives Per Gallon?
 Justice Or Just Us?
 Let's Try Pre-emptive Peace
 Make Alternative Energy Not War
 Rich Man's War Poor Man's Blood
 Stop Mad Cowbov Disease

Our Grief Is Not A Cry For War

Parallelisms, reversals, verbal play—do these lines, singly or together, make up writing we might call ‘creative? In a world that faces increasing numbers of unsolved public questions, should writers aim to preserve a distance, not get involved, or, on occasions when involvement beckons, stick to the well-tried writing-workshop approach of ‘show’ don’t ‘tell’? The slogans exhibit features we might well describe as creative, not least because to awaken response they make strange what was familiar: ‘Let’s try *Pre-emptive Peace*.’

In the words of the American poet and essayist Eliot Weinberger, ‘In all the anthologies and magazines devoted to 9/11 and its aftermath, nearly every single writer resorted to first-person anecdote: ‘It reminded me of the day my father died...’; ‘I took an herbal bath and decided to call my old boyfriend...’. Barely a one could imagine the event outside the prison cell of their own expressive self.’

Weinberger’s comments ask serious questions. Should students of creative writing continue to be encouraged to focus on personal experience as their foremost subject, and so risk neglecting themes such as war, poverty, terrorism, global warming, human rights, racism, marginality? Can the right ‘anecdote’ bridge the gap? Is the ‘expressive self’ indeed a prison? Must sloganised writing be the alternative, and, if so, is it desirable? Or is there still room for the personal voice whether or not this is attached to an issue or a position? My own reaction to these dilemmas is that they should be debated. Two points of guidance spring to mind.

Imagination

The first is that no one can write anything of significance—to themselves (and therefore, it follows, to anybody else)—unless *imagination* is allowed to play a major part in the process. Worlds and spaces in writing as art can’t be made real without the imaginative play of the mind remembering, selecting, attending. Memory is often the primary source of imaginative experience. Not all memories stored away in the inaccessible filing-system of our ordinary minds attract the same level of attention. Some things stand out, stay with us consciously or half-consciously. Here, in the introduction to an essay on Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, I explain the process of retrieval:

As a poet and teacher of creative writing, at some point I ask my students to retrieve from memory places, things, experiences or events which have become lodged in their imagination. Some things will have been stored at the back of their minds—something in childhood, something which might have happened only a week, a day, or even just hours before. There will be things that aren’t just memory but which will have acquired a particular colour; an unusual resonance. Ordinary memory will have transferred certain impressions into imagination, and these will be part of ourselves as individuals, also of who we are as a culture. We might not know why these things are transferred, or why certain events feel so different. Knowing why isn’t really the business. Writing about them, and making

them real, is, however; and if attention is given to the imagination in this way, the idea is that it will collect more and more experiences, more and more significance will be available. The idea behind this method is a belief—that imagination acts as a shaping force, is more intelligent than our ordinary minds. Imagination is present in each one of us. It is what defines us as a species. To write, paint, or do whatever imagination offers, requires a kind of listening to its suggestions.

(Mills 2002:170)

Imagination, then, is the main directive. It selects; we follow. We may be led to illuminate worlds that are public in the media sense of the word—war, poverty, racism—or we may not. But unless we are actually driven to explore them, it's difficult to see how these can become imaginative spaces realised through an adequate state of attention. Imagination, starting with memory, does lead to a widening out beyond the confines of an inert privacy. Or we might say that personal meaning itself has been extended.

The second point asks the question: 'How do we know our world?' While technologies seem to expand our knowledge, we feel a growing mistrust about what we are told, what we are shown, what in fact is the case. Much of our seeing and knowing is second-hand, received by secondary means. In these conditions, validation through direct experience happens in isolation or by chance. This phenomenon has implications that go far beyond the issues of writing. To take the example of climate change: the problem is that when we come to know it directly, locally and personally, protest could be too late. Obvious, too, is the likelihood that so-called 'experience' can no longer be separated from secondary information. Such information—whether we call it news, science, rumour or myth—will always be there as background noise, distorting what we like to protect as our own subjective response.

The poet's view of Sandra Lee Scheuer will be, like all others, incomplete. Nothing can ever be a last word. People are complex. What is hidden? How do we know each other or ourselves? These are questions keenly felt in the work of contemporary writers. While the work of many writers explores this secondary position—control through media, the fictive as real—a parallel movement continues. Creative writing resists the cliché, rejects the sentimental, builds new links between self and world. So much writing continues to bring the localised and specific into focus.

The act of making alike, *assimilation*, might seem to be one aim of the writing process. Simile and metaphor, we might argue, are its basic devices—the art of seeing one thing in terms of another, fusing their identities, explicitly in a simile, implicitly in the case of metaphor. But to describe Alcatraz as a cubist painting, or say of the young guardsman that his 'declaration...flowered within her' is to enhance the actual *difference* between things compared, to reinforce our sense of their strange otherness and importance. Whenever we experience something in its full vividness, assimilation is forced into retreat. Art cultivates edge, contrast, and the respect for difference.

Experience beyond the personal range of the writer can still be felt—through imagination. Another of its attributes is the desire to reach and acknowledge as real other people's worlds. In poetry, for example, the use of a personae (see Chapter 3, p. 87) has helped to refashion our understanding of world events, bringing distant experiences up close. 'All night pitiless pilotless things go shrieking/above us somewhere', writes the

American poet Adrienne Rich, ‘...when fear vacuums out the streets/when the whole town flinches’ (Rich, 2004:23).

IMAGE

Words as Images

All writers fall in love with words. They realise words can do something amazing. Sometimes this love-affair goes on in front of our eyes. In Pinter’s plays we sense the writer collecting certain words and phrases out of the mouths of his characters, holding them up to the light, making a display of galleried language even while he’s equally interested in two old women, for example, talking in a café late at night, or a husband and wife discussing the strength of the sun on a hot afternoon in London. The writer can be sensed mounting his display of phenomenal words, while the characters talk with no apparent awareness of this exhibiting, no awareness whatsoever of audience.

A fascination with Pinter’s language comes about whenever his characters generate images through words. They do this as though they might not be fully aware of what they are doing, which is one reason why his plays have achieved a lasting appeal to audiences as well as to directors and actors. Everyone wonders what these characters sense, whether or not they, like the writer, are involved in a kind of expert exhibitor’s display—or whether they are simply talking. A half-mocking, verbal imaging shifts in and out of his characters’ voices, in and out of the playwright’s creative attention. Who is who? Nobody can be certain.

Writers too may talk and talk, but unless they are able to focus our minds through images, much of what they say to us will be lost. Metaphor, icon, symbol; together these words convey the range of meaning attached to *image*, but we don’t need to consider exact definitions at this point. What we do need to think about is impact, resonance, how images work, and, as in the following extract from Pinter’s play *The Lover*, what dramatic function they perform.

In the following scene Richard and Sarah, a married couple in their thirties, are talking about Venetian blinds. Richard has just returned from a day at the office. What has Sarah been doing with her day? (*The Lover* was written in 1966.)

Richard: What about this afternoon? Pleasant afternoon?

Sarah: Oh yes, quite marvellous.

Richard: Your lover came did he?

Sarah: Mmmn. Oh yes.

Richard: Did you go out or stay in?

Sarah: We stayed in.

Richard. Ah! (He *looks up at the Venetian* Winds) That blind hasn’t been put up properly.

Sarah: Yes, it is a bit crooked isn’t it?

Pause

Richard: Very sunny on the road. Of course, by the time I got on to it the sun was beginning to sink. But I imagine it was quite warm here this afternoon. It was warm in the City.

Sarah: Was it?

... He pours *drinks*

Richard: I see you had the Venetian blinds down.

Sarah: We did, yes.

Richard: The light was terribly strong.

Sarah: It was, awfully strong.

Richard: The trouble with this room is that it catches the sun so directly, when it's shining. You didn't move to another room?

Sarah: No. We stayed here.

Richard: Must have been blinding.

Sarah: It was. That's why we put the blinds down.

Pause

Richard: The thing is it gets so awfully hot in here with the blinds down.

Sarah: Would you say so?

Richard: Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just that you feel hotter

Sarah: Yes. That's probably it

(Pinter; 1963:51–2)

During her lover's visit, the blinds were down. Now they are up, but a bit crooked. The sun was strong. Now it has sunk. Sarah and her lover didn't decide to move to another room, possibly a bedroom. ('No, we stayed here.') How 'hot' was the encounter in this living-room? The word 'hot' has become detached from the sun or the light, and might be referring to something else—the activities in the room hidden by blinds. The sun, rooms, heat, the City become an extended topic of conversation, but the reason for such extension is to establish a set of images surrounding an otherwise simple and innocuous object—a blind. As well as an object shutting out light, 'blind', of course, is a word in its own right. Who is blind? Who is blinding who? Does Richard know what he's saying, asking, suggesting? The audience can't be sure.

Reading Images

An image can be something we feel invited to walk around, view from different angles like a sculpture. Something has been carved out so that each view of it is equal to any other. No single perspective has the last word. No matter how powerful images are, their reception may still be unclear, and that uncertainty can prove creative. In creative writing, the audience or reader needs to feel actively involved in the construction of meaning. In Margaret Atwood's story 'Death by Landscape' the central character, Lois, has accumulated a collection of paintings over many years:

They are pictures of convoluted tree trunks on an island of pink wave-smoothed stone, with more islands behind; of a lake with rough, bright sparsely wooded cliffs; of a vivid river-shore with a tangle of bush and two beached canoes, one red, one grey; of a yellow autumn woods with the ice-blue gleam of a pond half-seen through the interlaced branches.

The paintings have increased in market value, but

She bought them because she wanted them. She wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time [of buying them] what it was. It was not peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least. Looking at them fills her with a wordless unease. Despite the fact that there are no people in them or even animals, it's as if there is something, or someone, looking back out.

(Atwood, 1992:110).

In the narrative that follows, Atwood shows us a scene where Lois and her friend Lucy, girls in their teens, make an excursion to an island during a summer camp expedition in the Canadian wilderness. During this episode Lucy unaccountably vanishes without trace. Her disappearance leaves no evidence behind and no explanation. Only through her collection of paintings can Lois find any way of accommodating her loss or making it real. Atwood makes the point that these are not 'landscape paintings in the old, tidy, European sense...mountain in the background, a golden evening sky'. Instead they are images of wilderness, neither of possession nor of control but rather dispossession.

There are no backgrounds to these paintings, no vistas, only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour...

Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She is in Lois's apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors. She is here. She is entirely alive.

(Ibid, 1992:129)

The observer (of the wilderness, of the paintings) herself becomes lost in all those foregrounds...holes that open inwards...like doors'. The passage above ends with the final sentence of the story, completing the mystery while keeping it open.

'Death by Landscape' serves several purposes. One might be to render an impression of the Canadian bush country of Atwood's childhood: this is a place that draws you in and yet resists your every attempt at perspective or understanding. But the story, far from being an essay on wilderness, childhood, landscape art, perspective or its opposite, actually demonstrates its point—which is that images control us; they have power. Artists and writers invent or discover images that will 'involve' us, which might start off as mere objects in a scene (a tree, a lake), yet are delivered in such a way that they become 'doors'. An image is an object with a hinge, and works by opening. Through them, like Lois with her paintings, we might recover an access to lost worlds, find what is still alive there—ourselves, others. 'She [Lucy] is entirely alive.' As a short story the fictional framework itself leaves this generous conclusion ajar, but do we accept it? We walk through, look around, think again about Lois's 'wordless unease'. What fits with what? What is the truth?

The whole point of images is their drama: the way they provoke our active, imaginative involvement. Both writers and readers become participants. Atwood and Pinter invite us to be Lois, Richard or Sarah in a process dominated by images. Things in

the world surrounding these characters are highlighted for us as problematic, potentially illuminating, ultimately confounding but compulsive—the subject both of our attention and theirs.

Image-making

How do writers construct worlds where objects become hinged openings, doors, invitations to enter and speculate? In a way I might already have answered this question. Images occur when a mind is closely attending to some object or event in its surroundings. To elaborate, the mind is in an unusual state of attention, so that a once familiar state or condition of things appears to be unfamiliar, surprising, joyful or hazardous. This view will not appeal to everybody. It assumes, it is argued, a ‘moment of vision’ theory of creativity. It depends upon an abnormal state of emotion, as if real writing happens involuntarily, under pressure, or is induced only in the presence of certain quite specific groups of objects—mountains or glaciers or the moon. In other words, it shows a dangerous tendency to Romanticism, an approach to writing developed by Wordsworth and Coleridge in the final years of the eighteenth century in England—dangerous because it limits our scope of response, directs it, favours a notion of mood as opposed to intelligence. But if we are going to allow imagination a free hand, we don’t have to follow Wordsworth’s theories. Nor do we need to embrace an opposing alternative. A number of early seventeenth-century poets in England believed that the ultimate image-maker was God, and that symbol, image and metaphor act as echoes of His divinity, or at least derive their power from a connection with it. We don’t have to believe that either.

Another approach, based on experiment, takes nothing for granted. Next to me in the room where I am writing is a square, red table, about the same height from the floor as my chair. You can get such tables cheap from IKEA. On this table is an orange tree plant (with fruit on it) and a white circular plate eight inches in diameter. On the plate are flakes of a sausage roll I’ve just eaten. I am in a moment of *now*, whatever now is, along with chair, table, plate, oranges on a tree. What holds my attention is this plate; why, I don’t know. Is it the absence of glaciers or mountains? I don’t think so. The question seems irrelevant. As well as flakes of pastry the plate has two areas of shadow—one made by two leaves from the plant which seem to merge on its white surface, the other by the frame of a window interrupting the sun and so holding a third of the plate in shade. So far I have tried not to use metaphors. Even so, the longer I look, the more these start to emerge or become possible. I’m not in any unusual state of emotion, just looking at what is in front of me in this *now* I occupy, noticing white on red, circle on square, flakes, shadows. The flakes are scattered randomly, like... I want to use a metaphor. The shadow of window frame darkens a gradually smaller section of plate. This is because the planet moves in an orbit, signalled by light. The plate has a flat surface centre and a raised area all the way round. Between the two is another shadow, curved dark like a new moon curved bright. I start to think what else this plate might have held: a melon slice, or an orange—not just the shadow of an orange; I also consider how quickly, unquietly, the plate would shatter. When I look at the flakes I see randomly scattered clumps inside a circle, as if somehow moved around by it. They seem random, yet suppose I were now looking at a map of the universe scattered with clumps of matter, accidental, not

accidental, some sticking together—as if I could read its meaning, as if I were looking directly into its future. Everything is evidence, nothing random. The key to physics is in the tiny details of an eaten sausage roll.

What I aim to demonstrate here is the mind's tendency to make images even in the most ordinary of circumstances, under no emotional pressure, only by means of the act of attention itself. Under attention things start to transform, become significant, link up with sets of preoccupations you might not know you possessed. Metaphors happen uninhibited. I make no apologies for the moon. Under different emotional circumstances I might have produced other metaphors—or my attention might have been interrupted.

The aim is to explore what happens in practice—by researching the issue, and to write in such a way that readers share the experience. By careful looking, alert response, objects emerge from their ordinary background, start to induce a gradual widening out of associations. What these will be is hard to predict. At the very least you will have encountered a bit of the world as real, made it more real than it would be seen through usual functional perception—sausage roll eaten, paragraph finished, time for a cup of tea, etc. The presence of images implies readers will not feel left out. The point at which an object becomes an image: this is the moment of fascination, discovery, more so if the process is shown to us. We need to feel how significance accretes and why, and one way to experiment is with images in the making.

Icons, signs, logos: Eagle signifies USA; 007 a gun-barrel filling with blood; North Sea Gas a trident sprouting flames; the Cross, Golgotha; images of redemption, power, licence to kill, money; yin and yang; pictorial plaque of the Pioneer spacecraft; hammers, sickles; scythes; locks and doors; mother and child in paintings; sculptures; sexual images; the exotic; a Playtex bra ad in Times Square New York—all of these we might call received images. We do not meet with them in their process of making, yet they confirm our sense of shared worlds. Writing frequently draws on images received, while it also renders them as subjective. Sometimes the process of making is close at hand, almost seems to happen before our eyes. The black British poet Fred D'Aguiar describes a return to London, his home city:

from 'Home'

The cockney cab driver begins chirpily
but can't or won't steer clear of race,
so rounds on Asians. I lock eyes with him
in the rear-view when I say I live with one.

He settles at the wheel grudgingly,
in a huffed silence. Cha! Drive man!
I have legal tender burning in my pocket
to move on, like a cross in Transylvania.

At my front door, why doesn't the lock
recognise me and budge? I give an extra

twist and fall forward over the threshold
piled with felicitations of junk mail,

into a cool reception in the hall.
Grey light and close skies, I love you,
chokey streets, roundabouts and streetlamps
with tyres chucked around them, I love you.

Police Officer; your boots need re-heeling.
Robin Redbreast, special request—a burst
of song so the worm can wind to the surface.
We must all sing for our supper or else.

(D'Aguiar, 1993:14)

Get Fred D'Aguiar to an interview, ask him what he thinks about England. Something like this will be his answer. There are no words for any exact, named, specific emotion, only images: 'I love you, /chokey streets...' The poem records a series of awkward obstacles—the taxi driver, the lock, junk mail stuffed with the type of received images we can imagine, a 'cool reception'—meaning the weather? Something else? The image of that 'burst of song/so the worm can wind to the surface'. Is this how the poet/singer feels, is made to feel—victim of a predatory capitalism rendered somehow lyrical: 'We must all sing for our supper or else'? Notice, too, the received images: 'a cross in Transylvania'—held up to ward off harm (held in the form of money), and the lock that has a mind of its own. The poem is so rich in images they become increasingly difficult to count. Some are just recorded observations: 'Grey light and close skies'. Others derive from English folk song tradition, singing 'for our supper', implying in passing a familiarity, revived by love but also alienation. And all these images occur just by putting himself in the mood of return, giving that his attention. We feel them being generated as he speaks, also as we read, and this is the huge advantage of writing—that readers share in the process as it happens.

STORY

Story occurs whenever importance is attached to events in time. This phenomenon happens so frequently that it seems fundamental to how we communicate. The events may have happened to somebody else, not to the speaker or writer. Whatever the listening, speaking, reading situation, we can assume that when any form of storytelling occurs, it has a purpose: to entertain, instruct, inform, enlighten. In the last four stanzas of 'Sandra Lee Scheuer', Geddes imagines two linked interwoven sets of events: a marriage proposal, a shooting—both in their opposite ways momentous. His purpose here isn't hard to detect: one story reveals to us what the natural course of her life might have been, another the unnatural cause of her death. By placing them together in slow motion the

poem engages us, so that we feel the moment of impact intensely, almost as if it were happening before our eyes. Story therefore recreates, enacts, doesn't simply state or tell. Even so, it has a purpose. Aesop's fables end with pronouncements: 'Persuasion is better than force.' The underlying point of fables, however, is that story is better than pronouncement, enactment more vivid to us than statement. Story has the better chance of making things matter to us. When we want to clarify the great importance of something, our best way of doing so is through narrative.

Participation, Enactment

Storytelling achieves the clarification of the great importance of something by creating a sense of moments as *momentous*, for those involved, for its audiences and readers. In live performance the storytellers art succeeds by action and gesture, moulding the voice, body and features into a state of empathy with the people and events, so that the moment of telling allows the story to come fully into existence, thus allowing the listener to participate. This quality I call *enactment*. The characters become habitable spaces, there all the time but coming alive whenever the space is filled by a real actor. Characters in fairy tales, any characters known through previous tellings, pre-exist the performance or reading. 'Hamlet' has become a space inhabited by generations of actors and audiences, and this is so because 'Hamlet' is a voice within a compelling story. Hamlet's condition is one of profound scepticism mixed with adult sexual revulsion. It needs a particular story to bring that out. Once out and enacted, we can see it, feel, empathise with and come to understand the nature of this scepticism—sometimes perverse, sometimes full of insight. We understand it *in time*, not just as abstraction.

Story and Performer: The Oral Tradition

Performance poetry also shares something with the art of narrative enactment. Asked about the influences on his writing, Adrian Mitchell comments, 'I think it goes back to the ballads. I can recall the impact of Sir Patrick Spens. It was that simplicity you find in the old ballads...then later came the attraction of the voice, the delivery' (Munden, 1999:32). In oral traditions, songs and ballads declare that something worth our attention has happened. We know the story already, yet whenever the piece is delivered its world pushes aside the stream of unshaped time, replacing it with an inkling of the extraordinary. Writing about Irish Lament poetry and the oral tradition, Aileen La Tourette sees these forms in terms of a physical act:

I can imagine the poet, the keener; recalling the dead person with all the passion they could summon, and then, in a quieter voice, gently laying them to rest. I imagine the act of corporate keening, the repetition of a cry, as a healing, energetic, physical act.... It lies, like all performance poetry perhaps, on some kind of cusp of drama, ritual, dance—I imagine a swaying and bending of the body—where words meet actions and form gestures and postures almost inextricable from the syllables themselves.

(Ibid., 1999:29)

Reacting to the momentous, enacting it, the emphasis falls on ‘recalling...summoning...where words meet actions...’—the dead are brought to life, then laid to rest, in forms of ‘ritual, dance’. Statement is there, yet a statement enacted, as in this poem about Art:

from ‘W-H-A-M’

Paintings should not be locked up in galleries
 Or pinned to walls with nails of steel.
 Paintings should not be dormant and dusted
 Sad as last year’s Christmas cracker
 They should be released, set free
 Live in trees in sunlit France
 Be invited to balls
 football matches
 symphony concerts
 orgies and outings
 They should wave to people in the street

(Ibid., 1999:88)

The poet John Mole has explained that ‘the very act of writing itself, with its continually renewed challenge, becomes my performance’ (Munden, 1999:48)—as though a poem itself were an event, a moment of challenge. In the passage above by Peter Dixon, paintings become events, or like people set free in a world their presence passionately transforms. The poet is using a sense of story. A new world of story is required. The ordinary world of paintings locked in galleries needs story, action, some new event or change of state.

Story and Change

Whereas the other features of creative language operate by bringing us in close, showing more of the world, exposing the inherent attributes of a person or scene, story drives us forward—through and beyond. Richard in Pinter’s *The Lover* tries to fix the meaning of ‘blind’. Lois’s paintings in Atwood’s story will always reveal the irreclaimable presence of her friend. The point about making images is to make them stay in place: the statue that will never be dislodged from the public square; the works of art stowed in their museums; D’Aguair’s worm that always winds to the surface; his London of chokey streets, grey light, close skies. Story rebels against such continuities. If popular journalism loves images, its addiction to story draws even more followers. The celebrity ideal attracts because story puts it at risk, and so this sense that things can always get better, or worse, feeds an appetite for *discontinuity*. Here is an example from a piece of journalism:

It starts with the little things: the unscrubbed bath, the unwashed dishes, the socks on the living room floor. Then the little things become bigger; the unpaid share of the gas bill, the 'borrowed' clothes, the continuous late night thump of the stereo system. Gradually you come to realise that you are living with the flatmate from hell.

(Tredre, 1995)

From an *Observer* article by Nicholas Tredre, this passage implies a point where the person causing these kinds of disruption won't be tolerated much longer. Even though this is the opening paragraph, already the language has started to move us on, tracking a situation as it develops. The writing enacts, builds tension, records time as events not just in a list but as a shape. We are allowed to feel the developments from the viewpoint of someone there in the picture—a picture already changing, moving on.

The 'little things' are getting bigger, yet the tone remains comparatively light. Not so in this next extract from Michael Herr's introduction to the photographer Don McCullin's autobiography, where the setting is a road intersection in North Vietnam:

This was an elemental crossroads, where body and spirit could meet and then be sheared away from one another in a second. It had been cold and dark for days, and all the light seemed to be weighed with gray, greasy particles. And without breaking it down into its components of smoke, cordite, fear; dust, death, prayers, and the palpable pyramiding misery, the air was just too thick. It was thick along the ground where we were lying, and above us it was thick with rounds. We then saw McCullin step into this crossroads with what was, at the very least, a great impersonation of total deliberateness. He referred to his light meter, made some adjustments on his camera, and began taking pictures.

(Herr, 1990:10)

The rule is: set the scene, move it forward. 'For days...' becomes 'the ground where we were lying...', becomes the first moment of action: 'We then saw...' followed rapidly by more moments of action. The whole style of the passage is an acting out. Whenever events develop in real time, as in reports or records, someone could always be ready to say, '*I was there, and it wasn't like that*'. A writer aims to counter such objections, and does so using reality effects, details that carry an '*I was there*' type element of 'convincingness'. Here we have 'light...weighed with gray, greasy particles...the air was just too thick'. Most of us have enough sense of war to accept these details, and it's important we do so because when McCullin does appear he is going to be playing a hero's role, or at least a 'great impersonation' of it. We are being asked to accept this, too, and we do. The passage has slipped from real time into time where heroes arise. Armed with a camera, McCullin appears like Beowulf facing Grendell's ravages in the hall of the Geats. Someone has stepped forward with hero qualities, crossing the borders of real time into a world of story.

Shaping Time: Story Worlds

As well as a moment by moment telling, story also moves us into a world becoming extraordinary. You are a flatmate, then, apparently, you are a *flatmate from hell*. People who are experiencing story find themselves in circumstances no longer safe. The real world is still present, but changed. The shift can be gradual or sudden, wondrous, sometimes deeply horrifying: love, loss, grief, illness, possible recovery, sudden news, travels and expeditions, things from the past erupting into the present. We sense that time is shaped differently from how we thought it was. Buried conflicts surface. Opposite forces face each other, struggle for domination. We ask, ‘What’s going on?’

In fiction, the extraordinary becomes real, the real extraordinary. But to make the shift from one to the other requires extraordinary skill on the part of the writer. Building up worlds we recognise as authentic helps to enact the shift and make it credible. Harry Potter begins in Privet Drive. The world of story—demons, goblins, witches, wizards, owls—waits to pounce on the normal and rip it apart, which is why the normal has to be there. ‘Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense’ (Rowling, 1997:1). Rowling’s stories usually start with the ordinary, with characters representing its limitations. She makes us want to move forward into the strange, the eventful—to mystery.

‘A certain man planted a vineyard, and let it forth to husbandmen, and went away into a far country.’ The idea of parables was to speak in images people could understand. Jokes do it too. ‘An Alsatian went into a post office... Can I send a telegram, please, he said.’ Extreme disruption, yet against a background of the familiar. Even Harry Potter is unnerved at first by what he discovers, and this is so because his upbringing is still partly Dursley. Faced with Hogwarts, readers will recognise the experience of being inducted into a new school—a big one—where mysterious doors lead you astray, staircases go nowhere, as if the place itself had it in for you.

The American novelist Jean Hegland sees story occurring when characters find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. In her first novel, *Into the Forest*, there is a war somewhere; power stations fail for days and weeks, then months. The moveable point is *circumstances*. The characters—for the most part ordinary just like ourselves—will either cope or die. At first they resist this story-world, hoping it will end, longing for the familiar to return, and on occasions it seems it almost might. Other writers might be inclined to invent one or more extraordinary *characters*, so that they become the point of movement, circumstances shaped by their actions, thoughts and behaviour. But there must be some impact of strangeness—either the *situation* is strange or the *characters* are. Story will insist this is so. *Into The Forest* begins in one of these modes—it is circumstances—yet ends with the characters. Gradually it is they who become extraordinary, and the special quality of the extraordinary in this case is that instead of remaining dependent children in the face of disaster, together they decide to shape their future. In the following passage, the narrator, a girl of eighteen, writes her diary. Her younger sister Eva is heavily pregnant. Their parents are dead. They live on the edge of a forest in northern California, where only their resourcefulness allows them to survive.

Every moment of experience demands this constant effort of survival, yet with occasional rare times for reflection:

Again the moon grows full. There has been a break in the rain, but the weather is so cold and Eva so enormously big that we stay close to home, close to the stove and pantry and our warm mattresses. Eva dozes and drinks the tea I steep for her. She knits odd little gowns from the silks our mother left, while I scan the encyclopedia for the dreams it contains, and write by the light of the round moon and the open stove, my pen scratching its tiny markings onto these last sheets of paper.

This afternoon I read: *The oldest use of the word 'virgin' meant not the physiological condition of chastity, but the psychological state of belonging to no man, of belonging to oneself. To be virginal did not mean to be inviolate, but rather to be true to nature and instinct, just as the virgin forest is not barren or unfertilised, but instead is unexploited by man.*

Children born out of wedlock were at one time referred to as 'virgin-born'

(Hegland, 1998:208)

This new state of being and action is their story and one they approach, as here, with increasing conviction and commitment. We might call it their story-world, one of danger, insecurity, but also determination, drive, anxiety and desire. Nothing is certain. To enter the forest, let go of the past, means to become virginal as defined by that encyclopedia: 'belonging to oneself'.

In sharp contrast with Hegland's gradual induction of her characters, Stephen King's novels move swiftly into their story-world. Yet he also prefers to make circumstances the driving point of a story. As he explains, too much focus on characters entangles him in a need for complicated plots, a feature of fiction King would rather avoid:

A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine with me. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a *what if* question:

What if vampires invaded a small New England village (Salem's Lot)

What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog (Cujo)

... In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech.

(King, 2001:196)

Realism

The first character in fiction to experience ‘belonging to oneself’ was Robinson Crusoe. There are similarities between Hegland’s story and Defoe’s novel, one of the earliest examples of modern fiction, written near the beginning of the eighteenth century.

As well as a new attention to self and surroundings, modern fiction writers aimed to position their story-worlds close to the common experience of living readers. This stylistic development is usually defined by the term *realism*. King also insists on ‘sensory reality’. However strange, the world of the story must be made habitable, believable. If it were not, his peculiar horrors wouldn’t be able to threaten or attack. In terms of technique, King, too, is a realist. Indeed it might be that all modern fiction requires a credible state of sensory reality, and that this is its difference from the world of religious allegory and seasonal myth whose authorship is often anonymous and whose main purpose doesn’t require a world of credible illusions. This was a quality that myths and fables didn’t even need to consider. Fiction in the modern world has to earn its right to credibility, and does so in a style that uses reality effects and constant researched reference to the actual. It has to convince by experience, not by authority or tradition. Story thereafter aims to give *real* experience a shape, to remind us constantly of ourselves as its potential heroes and heroines, victims and criminals, witnesses and participants. Instead of demons, dragons, prophets and saints, it is ourselves who inhabit the new world of story.

We will explore realism and its developments in other chapters on prose narrative. What are its implications for fiction writing, writing for children, writing autobiography? Should we think of a split between realism and fantasy or myth, or does all narrative share a common root? Were the events in Beowulf true? Was there a dragon? Did Jane Austen’s Emma really believe Mr Knightly wanted to marry Harriet? Like a jury we use our sense of what evidence counts, even though we know for a fact there wasn’t any Emma or Beowulf. These characters become real to us through a manner and style of presentation, through the rhythm of words, through our notions of what forms of story we can accept, through our own relationship with time. We have to believe that somehow their realness will be to our advantage, that we will, as a result, understand ourselves and our own shaping; that we will do this by hearing, moment by moment, how their experience shapes time.

The Moving Edge

By the time you read this book, events dominating the present news in the world will be history. Mostly we are living in ordinary time—then something happens, a break with what we expected or thought predictable. We pass into the extraordinary, into story. Once across the threshold we find suspense, crisis, resolution, closure or lack of closure, the conventions of oral and written stories that correspond to shaped time in experience. Love and loss, illness and recovery, departure, return, triumph and disappointment: if we are undergoing these shifts of position then we might describe ourselves as being *in a story*. Ordinary time, by contrast, leaves us stranded in routines, habits, timetables—the familiar. In story-worlds our sense of the moving edge of time reaches uncomfortable

heights, becomes intense, threatens to overwhelm us. All of us live at the moving edge of time. In fiction, drama, poetry, writing enacts that sense of an edge. Writers in the creative genres give a consistent emphasis to the moment, the moving edge, in subjective experience.

What if Time Stopped?

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold lover; never; never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

(Keats, 1996:848)

Keats was obsessed with time and here in ‘Ode On A Grecian Urn’ he puts his finger on its pulse so that it does stop. He chose a moment when it was beating fast. Bliss is deferred until the next moment, yet he keeps his finger there. Why? Keats was trying to reshape time. Death is the end of time; he knows this, so why not reverse it back to a moment of bliss? Why not reverse it further back to the moment *before* bliss? That was what he aimed to do. Keats was using his feeling of story to show a moment overshadowed not by death, age, disease or change, but instead by what is *about* to happen—the lovers’ kiss. Beauty is truth.

This exclusive focus on the moment is found in many contemporary poems written nearly two centuries after Keats wrote his. The use of the present tense in poetry has become almost a compulsory feature of style. It allows the poet to get close to the detail of an experience, show it in close-up, pause it for the eye’s searching scrutiny. Whether or not the aim is to hold the moment at flash-point, hold it in life and so avoid what Philip Larkin called the ‘long perspectives’—which lead to death—we can’t be sure, but this technique still usually involves a sense of story, an overshadowing. Poets using the present tense can focus on events long in the past, thus making these present and immediate, as in these first lines from the winning poem of a recent National Poetry Competition, where the poet, Julia Copus, revisits the thoughts of a medieval illustrator of a Book of Hours:

from ‘The Art of Illumination’

At times it is a good life, with the evening sun
 Gilding the abbey tower, the brook’s cold waters

Sliding past and every Hour in my book

a blank page, vellum pumice-storied

to chalky lustres which my inks suffuse:
saffron and sandarach and dragon's blood,

azure and verdigris. Monsters and every type of beast
curl round the words. Each man here has a past,

and each man reason for his faith. I wronged
A woman once and nothing I did after could atone

or throw a light upon the blackness of that deed
whose harm lay in the telling, not the doing.

(Copus, *IOS*, 13 April 2003)

This speaker's past curls round his words just as the dragons do round those he inscribes. In subjects approached with a sense of story, moments in a poem's present will have a past and future, a shadow cast by one or other of these. Another example, the following poem by Susan Burns, successfully demonstrates this type of perception. The version printed here is in draft form, yet we can see the poet already working to create habitable worlds using reality effects, voices, images, and most of all a sense of story:

'Farewell on the Town Hall Steps'

It's as good a place as any to end it.
A July gone cold, the middle of an overcast night
You're walking me home but we won't reach
Brixton Water Lane and we both know
There won't be a fight.

We sit on the concrete steps, roll a cigarette.

I can hear the goods trains at Loughborough junction,
Distant sirens and your reasoning, sketching the air
With a thin white cigarette paper. I don't cry then
As I have made up my mind,
As you are drunk to your bitten fingernails,
As you can't bring the paper to your dry mouth.
I take it. fumble with tobacco. Your voice thick

With tears, your chin on your knees, unfolding
The usual: how useless a father how reckless a lover;
How just one more drink, how I don't deserve.

I half-listen; it's always that way with you.
I concentrate on the upturned collar of your jacket
The truth is always in what's not being said.

Unexpectedly, across the street, an alfresco party,
The end of a wedding. A woman in red satin,
Confetti still in her hair, laughs at the wide sky.

Six stops away from the Victoria line, the hostel
In Copenhagen Street, Chris on the night shift,
Miracle worker; rearranges the confiscations,
The cans of Special, the pocket knives.

As well as the basic narrative of what happened, who said what to whom, where and when, this poem is variously overshadowed by other events. What happened echoes what happened once, what was said—or not said—before. The poet has chosen a moment which shapes time—afterwards things will not be as they were. Other events happening in the present and simultaneously—the party across the street, the night shift—cast their shade and light on the situation, but it may be that the final stanza misses it, becomes a new scene, not an overshadowing. Drafts are important, especially in workshop situations. Should this last stanza be omitted? Some might think so, others feel less certain, but everyone knows the writer herself will have the last word.

No Story?

In the extracts below, the Australian poet Les Murray explores an absence of story, giving it a specific setting that might apply more widely. Moments are seen in a type of life without overshadowing or shape:

from 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns'

... You glide on through town,
Your mudguards damp with cloud.
The houses there wear verandahs out of shyness,
All day in calendared kitchens, women listen
For cars on the road,
Lost children in the bush.

A cry from the mill, a footstep—
Nothing happens.

... Sometimes a woman, sweeping her front step,
or a plain young wife at a tankstand fetching water
in a metal bucket will turn round and gaze
at the mountains in wonderment,
looking for a city.

... As night comes down, the houses watch each other;
A light going out in a window has a meaning.
... Men sit after tea
by the stove while their wives talk, rolling a dead match
between their fingers,
thinking of the future.

(Murray, 2001:2–4)

Murray shows us lives stalled at the point of hunger for story. Nothing happens, yet the lack of story is overpowering—in the people, in the minimal instances of their lives: ‘calendared kitchens...metal bucket...rolling a dead match.’ Nothing distracts them from the passage of time. Nothing either shapes it or reshapes it. The women ‘gaze at the mountains in wonderment/ looking for a city’. For the word ‘city’ here we might read ‘story’.

Summary

Can we identify the special qualities that make a piece of writing *creative* writing? In this chapter I have tried to answer this question, but in ways that will open doors to writing as practice. Most of us will be readers and listeners before we become writers, but reading and listening are for writers active and ongoing. We need to become experts in listening to voices, in sensing what it takes to make a story, in discovering images that stay with us and somehow compel our attention, in knowing about the worlds people inhabit—those they wish for, those they visit or live in from day to day.

What makes certain voices, images, worlds and stories important to a writer, and others less so? My term for this power of shaping and selecting is *imagination*. To know what we enjoy in other people’s writing means that our imagination is already at work, and that we ourselves are selecting the stories, styles, characters and settings that will go on attracting this power and winning its approval. Sometimes an unusual combination of words can stir the imagination, sometimes a dramatic scene in a story, poem, play or film, or in a real life experience.

Reading is therefore important to all writers, and in this first chapter I have endeavoured to introduce some of the ways we might read *as writers*. The question a

writer will always ask is: ‘What can I learn from this or that piece of writing as art; how can it influence my own work?’ But there will be other questions too, about how a character’s experience of time is shaped for him or her, how a writer gets across the sense of a real experience, how he or she builds up a story’s world, creates the sense of voices under pressure. How does the writer attract and hold our attention—in this poem, in this scene of a play?

But just as important as reading is the fact that we need to be alert to the real world, to the way people and places make us feel, in other words, to actual experience and its sensations in time—the stuff, basically, which art transforms. The passages I have chosen all demonstrate—in one way or another—not just a fascination with experience but a need to make it worth our attention.

The chapters that follow are organised according to genres, beginning with memoir or life-writing, but as this introductory chapter suggests, we can, if we choose, begin to see in every genre the same features that make writing creative: voice, world, image and story.

Getting Started. Ideas for Good Practice

Start a writer’s workbook. Start looking and listening more closely to what is around you. Begin to write brief sketches of scenes witnessed, for example, in a street, among people, at a public event. Try to find the best words to capture things glimpsed fleetingly. Include as many sense impressions as you can.

Write in your workbook regularly every day. If you don’t have anything you want to write, try free-writing, letting your pen take you where it wants to go. Don’t worry about being coherent or writing on a particular subject. Don’t worry either if you find you *are* writing about something in particular. Just write.

Become a word-hoarder. Make good use of thesauruses and etymological dictionaries. Think about the shifting usages of words.

Collect ‘found’ texts: the names of shops, words on placards, graffiti, signs in the streets, epigraphs on tombstones, names of moored boats, snippets of overheard conversations, bits of texts from newspapers, anything that strikes you as an interesting, typical/untypical use of language.

A line from something you’re reading, whether it’s factual, philosophical, political or literary, can be the starting point to trigger some writing of your own. Words themselves are triggers.

The novelist Paul Auster has commented: ‘The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it.... There’s a way in which a writer can do too much, overwhelming the reader with so many details that he no longer has any air to breathe.’ Find some examples from poems, novels, and stories you have read where you think the reader is given room to breathe and can inhabit the writing. How is this done? Start to read as a writer, make a note of effects you like in texts. Start thinking about the way opening lines work, about the structures and shapes writing has. Think about the changing pace and patterning of the language, the significance of images and how they’re used. Whatever its mode, think about those moments in a text that surprise you and how they are achieved. Think about the way texts conclude, how much is

suggested rather than stated, where the spaces are for you as a reader to enter the text, how you can achieve that as a writer.

Start to examine your own life as a source of insight and information about the world. Think about the sorts of worlds you inhabit now and have inhabited in the past, your own particular family, home, workplace. Go back to other places you have lived in. Focus closely on a particular interior, its detail and mood, the reality-effects that make it memorable. How important are seasons, time of day? Think of jobs you have done: Just what was it like in the kitchen of that pizza place? Serving awkward customers in the shoe shop? Working on the early morning post? What about the world of the leisure centre, or disco, or martial arts group? All these places will have their own routines, their own jargons and rituals. Try to describe a typical scene. How are people dressed, how do they speak, relate to each other? Think about the dynamic between members of the group. Who's in charge? What are the unspoken rules? Where are the tensions? You are an authority on your own world(s) that are wider than you think. Try to find a fresh way of describing the ordinary. What's everyday to you will be unusual to someone else. When you have got your 'reality effects' you have basic material you can work on, not only for writing memoir but to develop into fiction, poetry or drama.



Suggestions for Writing

The conditions under which writing happens, both physical and emotional, is a topic of much fascination and little certainty. We can only guess what causes the seeds to grow. But we do know that writing workshops sometimes allow the imagination a chance to create those conditions. The imagination acts as a form of flight simulator, so that although you are actually sitting at a desk and writing, you are also, in your imagination, somewhere else, writing in the voice of someone else, maybe a character or persona, or reliving an experience of your own. You are also learning at the controls what happens when language is used creatively. The suggestions below, as with others in this book, are intended to advance your confidence, and help you both to explore new possibilities, and to devise your own simulations using these as examples.

Read the following passage by Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop lived and wrote in South America. The animal in this prose poem is a real creature and here she has given it a voice.

from 'Strayed Crab'

This is not my home. How did I get so far from water? It must be over that way somewhere.

I am the color of wine, of tinta. The inside of my powerful right claw is saffron-yellow. See, I see it now; I wave it like a flag. I am dapper and elegant; I move with great precision, cleverly managing all my smaller yellow claws. I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself.

But on this strange, smooth surface I am making too much noise. I wasn't meant for this. If I maneuver a bit and keep a sharp lookout, I shall find my pool again. Watch out for my right claw, all passersby!

My eyes are good, though small: my shell is tough and tight. In my own pool are many small gray fish. I see right through them. Only their large eyes are opaque, and twitch at me. They are hard to catch, but I, I catch them quickly in my arms and eat them up.

What is that big soft monster; like a yellow cloud, stifling and warm? What is it doing? It pats my back Out, claw. There, I have frightened it away. It's sitting down, pretending nothing's happened. I'll skirt it. It's still pretending not to see me. Out of my way, O monster. I own a pool, all the little fish that swim in it, and all the skittering waterbugs that smell like rotten apples.

Cheer up, O grievous snail. I tap your shell, encouragingly, not that you will ever know about it.

And I want nothing to do with you, either, sulking toad. Imagine, at least four times my size and yet so vulnerable... I could open your belly with my claw. You glare and bulge, a watchdog near my pool; you make a loud and hollow noise. I do not care for such stupidity. I admire compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world.

(Bishop, 1991:140)

Notice how Bishop gets right inside the nervous system of the crab and develops its voice accordingly. She is maybe saying something about herself, but indirectly.

1 Write a passage of similar length using an animal as speaker. This animal is in a state of discomfort, possibly dislodged from its usual habitat. Another animal appears. An action takes place.

Write another passage where the speaker is human. Again, in a state of physical discomfort, showing an attitude. Another person or people are present, and at some point—as in the passage above—the speaker is threatened.

2 Write a poem in the voice of a famous person; alive or dead, past or present. Try to enter his or her imagination. Include in your poem three things significant to your speaker; these are an object, a question difficult to answer, another voice.

3 Each of us is involved in a whole range of different activities and any of these could be useful for writing. Using ideas from your workbook, write a short story, a poem, the first scene of a play, or a piece of personal narrative, making use of your special understanding of a work place, surroundings you know well, an individual or group activity. Pay attention to voices, details and reality effects, close-up images, building on your sense of what you know.

4 Try looking out of a window or taking a walk down a street—perhaps it leads somewhere a little unusual, or to somewhere not very surprising. Maybe the window looks out over neighbouring gardens or fields. Whatever you see, describe it, find something in the surroundings interesting to you, something you are looking at with new eyes. Using these and other details, put together a poem or short story with these surroundings as its opening setting.

5 Go into the streets of a nearby town. Write down words from notices, street signs: 'WALK THIS SIDE', 'FOLLOW DIVERSION', 'KEEP OUT'... Also write down words and phrases from street adverts you can find. Mix these together into a long sequence—one phrase per line—repeating some if you need to. Working in small groups, assemble your list in a way that satisfies you. Be aware of the process and discuss your decisions.

6 Write a piece of dialogue between two characters. Centre this dialogue round an object in a room, for example, a cupboard, a vase of flowers, a suitcase, a chair. Or think up a more unusual object—a toolbox, a screwed-up piece of paper with a message on it, a supermarket trolley, a dismantled motorbike. Write it so that the object becomes an image with real force of significance for the two speakers. At one point one says to the other, 'Don't touch it!'

7 Imagine a photograph of the room in which you are sitting—you are in the photograph too, and there might be other people there with you in the moment of the shot. Write a poem as if *you* are describing this photograph. Use close-up focus, significant details. Make the reader see it. Then write about what it does NOT show: a moment, scene, event or feeling that the photograph leaves out. Also try this using an actual photograph. Decide who is the speaker and the voice.

8 Write a very short story or a poem which centres on a character in a film, but not one of the main characters. Find one of the extras—somebody relatively insignificant. Explore his or her position, viewpoint, and voice.

9 Working in twos, each person tells the other a story. Choose something that has happened to you and has become fixed in your memory, or something that happened to someone you know. Exchange stories with your partner. Pay close attention to what you are being told. Then tell the other person's story to the whole group. Tell it as if it had happened to you personally. You might want to exaggerate certain details, and leave out others. If so, go ahead. Aim to attract the attention of your listeners. Bring the story to life in your own words. Make it animated. If you can, perform the story, emphasising speech and dialogue, elements of suspense, particular images that seem to you important or unusual.

Compare the story as you heard it with the way you told it. Be aware of how these versions differ.

The group will now have a collection of stories, a pool of images to draw on for writing. From this resource, each person chooses something that engages his or her imagination, sense of drama and story, and writes a short piece of fiction (1,000 words limit) or a poem (40 lines limit). You might choose your own story, the one you told, or one you have heard. Use images, voices, close-up focus, reality effects. Think about whether the story has a point or purpose—what is it? Can you make your readers sense what this might be without telling them directly?

10 In the following poem I am describing a small crowd of people in a London tube train. They all believe they are watching a story: two people about to become lovers. A story world seems to be happening right in front of their eyes.

'Mile End Opera'

The man with whiskers of ponytail hair
growing out of the back of his shaved skull,
the woman with the Anna Ford face,
catacombed under London with other strangers.
Cornered, like prison visitors.
Swaying with the machinery.
Also a boy and girl—he's black, she's white.

Beautiful black and white.
He's telling her about his college courses.
Things he likes. She telling him about her.
They are directing such smiles at each other
every one is a hit,
so that everyone in this carriage seems happier
a shade less absent. People are listening.

Even Anna Ford is feeling distinct.
Even the shaved/unshaved head is alert.
This girl's voice is luminous with this boy.
Whatever she's saying to him she can't stop.
just listening, just looking at her
is becoming something phenomenal to him.
And, if she's seen that smile—which she has—

she must know what the audience also knows—
that it's real, that these two are somehow
going to get off at the same stop,
that they've only just met but...what the hell...
This is it! Though they don't know it
we're all shouting for them, leaning towards them,
giving them space, swaying together,

silently wishing them things which in ourselves
we never knew,
or once or twice have known.
'This is it. Do it. Go for it'.

punching the air for them in a whole Yes!

The trains stops, he gets us, goes, he's gone.
She sits staring into the walls of London.

(Mills 2000:74)

Write a poem describing, for example, two people in a room, your neighbours outdoors or glimpsed through a window, a group of people in the street or in a photograph. Watch them carefully. What are they doing? Why? Can you tell what if anything the real story is? Describe them using a sense of story.

Revision and Editing

Although you may have been using a workbook, you also need to work on pieces of writing that will be read by other people. It's vital to get feedback on your work. Whether you revise and edit your writing as a result is your decision. Even the most negative feedback can sometimes be useful but, practically speaking, your opinion ultimately matters the most. You are in charge.

As you prepare your work for a reader you will need to think about presentation—word processing, line spacing, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation. Errors can interrupt the flow of reading, and, if you are submitting a piece for publication, will definitely look unprofessional.

Check your sentences. Are they too long, too complicated, weakly structured? Can they be followed first time if heard aloud or do they lose their point? Check your paragraphs. If any paragraph is longer than 150 words, see if you can reduce it or make a new paragraph break. See how sentences and paragraphs work in a piece of writing you would like to have written. Finally, check your punctuation. Find out how to use forms you're maybe less familiar with—the colon, semi-colon, dash.

If you are formatting your writing on a word processor, use double spacing for prose, single spacing for poems. Check that your work is easily accessible to the eye of your reader, with consistent font variations—italics and underlines. To save your early drafts, use the 'Track Changes' facility from the Tools menu on the rule bar.

All creative writing will have an oral quality, written for the voice. Test this out by reading your work aloud. How does it sound? Can it be understood clearly by a listener as well as by a reader? If so, you will have made something significant to you and equally meaningful to your audience.

CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The Story of the Self

The sensations of a mind and body, in finite time, moving through a physical universe: if this is one definition of the self, it perhaps becomes more recognisable if we add desires, fears, and, in some cases, prayers for its everlasting salvation. These attributes link each of us to a culture, so that we learn to desire, fear and speak to each other only as we belong to groups of people sharing customs, values and beliefs. The self still remains a neurological mystery, however—in so far as how it can inhabit that cluster of cells somewhere inside the lobes of the brain, how it recognises itself through memory, links up experiences into a story. First memories, first evidence of such linking, are what we think of when it comes to that fascinating question: ‘Who am I?’ Personal narrative comprises, for many writers, a first acquaintance with images, voices, stories and worlds significant to that act of self-recognition. But the other important attribute of this form is that we can write as we speak. Personal narrative can be like conversation. In the passages below, I particularly admire the way John Berger opens up a discussion with his readers. The subject of his first paragraph is a familiar one:

Every time I went to bed—and in this I am sure I was like millions of other children—the fear that one or both of my parents might die in the night touched the nape of my neck with its finger. Such a fear has, I believe, little to do with a particular psychological climate and a great deal to do with nightfall. Yet since it was impossible to say ‘You won’t die in the night, will you?’ (when Grandmother died, I was told she had gone to have a rest, or—this was from my uncle who was more outspoken—that she had passed over), since I couldn’t ask the real question and I sought a reassurance, I invented—like millions before me—the euphemism See you in the morning! To which either my father or mother who had come to turn out the light in my bedroom would reply, See you in the morning, John.

After their footsteps had died away, I would try for as long as possible not to lift my head from the pillow so that the last words spoken remained, trapped like a fish in a rock pool at low tide, between my pillow and my ear. The implicit promise of the words was also a protection against the dark. The words promised that I would not (yet) be alone.

Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form. Yet I have no wish to do so. All that interests me about my past life are the common moments. The moments—which if I relate them well enough—will join countless others lived by people I do not personally know.