



A CREATIVE WRITING HANDBOOK

DEVELOPING DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE,
INDIVIDUAL STYLE AND VOICE

EDITED BY **DEREK NEALE**

A **CREATIVE WRITING** HANDBOOK

DEVELOPING DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE,
INDIVIDUAL STYLE AND VOICE

A **CREATIVE WRITING** HANDBOOK

DEVELOPING DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE,
INDIVIDUAL STYLE AND VOICE

EDITED BY **DEREK NEALE**

A & C Black Publishers Ltd
in association with The Open University

Published by

A & C Black Publishers Limited
38 Soho Square
London
W1D 3HB
www.acblack.com

in association with

The Open University
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

First published 2009

Copyright © 2009 The Open University

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher or a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd. Details of such licences (for reprographic reproduction) may be obtained from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, Saffron House, 6–10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS; website <http://www.cla.co.uk/>

Open University course materials may also be made available in electronic formats for use by students of the University. All rights, including copyright and related rights and database rights, in electronic course materials and their contents are owned by or licensed to The Open University, or otherwise used by The Open University as permitted by applicable law.

In using electronic course materials and their contents you agree that your use will be solely for the purposes of following an Open University course of study or otherwise as licensed by The Open University or its assigns.

Except as permitted above you undertake not to copy, store in any medium (including electronic storage or use in a website), distribute, transmit or retransmit, broadcast, modify or show in public such electronic materials in whole or in part without the prior written consent of The Open University or in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Edited and designed by The Open University.

Typeset by SR Nova Pvt. Ltd, Bangalore, India.

Printed in Malta by Gutenberg Press Limited.

This book forms part of an Open University course: A363 *Advanced creative writing*. Details of this and other Open University courses can be obtained from the Student Registration and Enquiry Service, The Open University, PO Box 197, Milton Keynes MK7 6BJ, United Kingdom: tel. +44 (0)845 300 60 90, email general-enquiries@open.ac.uk

<http://www.open.ac.uk>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: applied for

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data: applied for

ISBN 978 1 4081 0941 0

1.1

Contents

Contributors	vii
Introduction	ix

Part 1 Ways of writing

1	Playing with genre	1
2	Conflict and contrast	14
3	Vision and revision	28

Part 2 Writing drama

4	Writing stage plays	41
5	Revealing secrets	58
6	Staging stories	73
7	Writing radio drama	93
8	Writing films	113
9	Film structure	134

Part 3 Developing style

10	Film technique in fiction	149
11	Splicing the strands	164
12	Voices in fiction	181
13	Rhetoric and style	196
14	Using analogy	210
15	Poetry: the freedom of form	228
16	Time and timing	249
17	Theme and sequence	262

Part 4 Readings

1	'Violin Lessons', Derek Neale	279
2	'A Real Durwan', Jhumpa Lahiri	287
3	'The Fly in the Ointment', V.S. Pritchett	296
4	from <i>The Kingdom by the Sea</i> , Paul Theroux	303

5	from <i>Coasting</i> , Jonathan Raban	304
6	from <i>The Night Watch</i> , Sarah Waters	305
7	from <i>War Crimes for the Home</i> , Liz Jensen	307
8	from <i>Nella Last's War</i> , Housewife, 49	310
9	from <i>Housewife</i> , 49, Victoria Wood	311
10	from <i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</i>	312
11	'The Bee Meeting', Sylvia Plath	315
12	from <i>Sanctuary</i> , Tanika Gupta	316
13	from <i>Top Girls</i> , Caryl Churchill	321
14	from <i>The Homecoming</i> , Harold Pinter	329
15	from 'Status', Keith Johnstone	334
16	from <i>Our Country's Good</i> , Timberlake Wertenbaker	338
17	from <i>Temporary Shelter</i> , Rose Tremain	341
18	from <i>Cigarettes and Chocolate</i> , Anthony Minghella	345
19	from <i>An Angel at My Table</i> , Laura Jones	347
20	from <i>The Hours</i> (screenplay), David Hare	350
21	from <i>The Singing Detective</i> , Dennis Potter	354
22	from <i>The Hours</i> (novel), Michael Cunningham	360
23	from <i>Her Big Chance</i> , Alan Bennett	364
24	from <i>Last Orders</i> , Graham Swift	366
25	from <i>Be Near Me</i> , Andrew O'Hagan	368
26	On the genesis of <i>Be Near Me</i> , Andrew O'Hagan	369
27	from <i>Tragedy at Bethnal Green</i> , L.R. Dunne	371
28	from <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> , Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	372
29	from 'In the Pit', Annie Proulx	377
30	'That First Time', Christopher Coake	380
31	from <i>A History of the World in 10½ Chapters</i> , Julian Barnes	399
	Acknowledgements	403
	Index	407

Contributors

The authors are current members of the English Department at The Open University.

Derek Neale is Lecturer in Creative Writing and has helped launch the Open University's new generation of writing courses. He is co-author of *Writing Fiction* and *Life Writing* (both 2008, Routledge) and has written about literary approaches and techniques in several genres. He is an award-winning fiction writer and dramatist, and his stories have appeared in various anthologies and periodicals. He taught creative writing at the University of East Anglia for a number of years, lecturing in both dramatic writing and fiction writing. He completed his Creative Writing MA and his PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at UEA. He has also facilitated writing activities in a prison – poetry, plays, fiction and even song writing – and has edited two collections of prison writing.

Bill Greenwell is a poet, parodist and life writer. His collection *Impossible Objects*, published by Cinnamon in 2006, was short-listed for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection; he won the *Mail on Sunday* Poetry Prize in 2004. He was *New Statesman*'s weekly satirical poet from 1994 to 2002. His poetry and parodies have appeared in more than forty anthologies, and in many poetry magazines, as well as on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4. He also contributes to *The Independent*. Before becoming a Lecturer in Creative Writing at The Open University, he taught poetry and fiction at the University of Exeter and University College, Falmouth. He was Head of Performing Arts, Languages and English at Exeter College, Exeter, from 1986 to 2002.

Linda Anderson is Reader in Creative Writing at The Open University. She is the editor of *Creative Writing: A workbook with readings* (2006, Routledge/OU), which has been acclaimed as a 'major contribution to the pedagogy of creative writing'. She is an award-winning novelist (*To Stay Alive* and *Cuckoo*, both published by Bodley Head) and writer of short stories, poetry, performance pieces and critical reviews. From 1995 to 2002 she was Head of Creative Writing at Lancaster University, where she designed the first computer-mediated postgraduate writing course in Britain. She has also worked as a producer and director for BBC Radio Drama. In 2007 she was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy in recognition of her outstanding impact on the student learning experience.

Introduction

Derek Neale

‘If there is no wind, row’ goes the Latin proverb. This is handy advice for a writer. You are on the boat already – you have begun to write – and then the wind starts to drop. The dream you are attempting to put down in words still compels you, yet in order to make something of that early inspiration you need technical knowhow. *A Creative Writing Handbook* is for writers who have already started, for those who want to go on and to develop their style and approach. One of the key suggestions offered in this book is that dramatic writing is connected to other forms of writing. Developing a fuller understanding of this connection can revive the way in which you generate ideas, improve the drafting of your stories and poems, as well as extending the range of forms in which you write.

All writing benefits from the writer’s decision to pause at vital moments, to follow the hunch that something could be improved, however slightly. When the writer waits, puts the story or poem away in a drawer, takes another look not in five minutes but in a few days, this is not procrastination or avoidance. The habitual, assiduous rearranging of words, without promise of immediate reward, appears in most accounts of writing practice. Yet such drafting and redrafting is not done in a vacuum. Each consideration is an amalgam of a very personal inquiry – what do I want to say? – and an awareness of technique – how do I want to say it?

The American novelist Joyce Carol Oates (2003) has suggested that without craft, art is too private; and that without art, craft is just hackwork. Oates says that art comes from the personal, from the idiosyncrasy of a compelling idea. Yet it is nothing without the scaffolding of technique. This book will talk about many approaches to the craft of writing, some of them familiar, some of them new to you. It will suggest methods of generating ideas but also explore new ways in which you can review your work. According to Oates, rewriting, revising and re-imagining your work are the lifeblood of the creative process. It is this dedicated attentiveness to the original conception that can transform an idea, and it is this approach that can improve and develop your writing style.

This Handbook forms one of the core components of an Open University writing course (*A363 Advanced creative writing*). It is appropriate for use on other writing courses. It can be used by writers’ groups and by individuals working alone. It is suitable for a range of writers: from those who have not yet settled on a preferred form to those more experienced

writers who want to expand their range, to seek new directions and genres or to hone the subtlety of their style. It may be worked through sequentially or used as a resource book for writers and writing tutors.

This book contains a series of writing activities which will prompt you to write both brief and more extensive pieces of work. These activities are designed to be worked through progressively, but can also be used out of sequence. They can complement writing workshops by helping to generate new work and by prompting complex discussion about approaches and techniques. Each chapter will provide you with immediately relevant practice in an aspect of writing. Many of the writing tasks will be challenging. You may get hooked on activities, even on ones that you initially find difficult. Such tussles can sometimes be productive. On occasions you may find that an exercise grows into something unexpected – a character resists being confined to a page; a scene suggests a whole story; a personal memory evolves into a poem. Some tasks might generate substantial new work. These writing activities are also places to return when you are seeking ideas. Many of them are designed to be repeated or to be tried in a variety of ways.

A writer can, and often will, discover different ways of writing in what he or she reads. Each of the following chapters uses examples by established writers. You will see poems, extracts of fiction, life writing, films and plays which suggest a range of possible approaches to the question of marrying form and content, craft and idea. Reading can help your writing in a number of ways. As the playwright Mark Ravenhill says:

Feeling how a dramatist's words feel on your lips and your teeth, how it feels in your stomach, what it does to your chest is really, really important ... I think if people want to write, they should pick two or three dramatists whose work they really like and learn some of it and actually walk around the house, or if you feel very bold, at the bus stop, and speak that stuff aloud and see how it feels.

(Ravenhill, 2007)

A Creative Writing Handbook has been written by three published writers who are also experienced tutors. We have taught writing in workshops in a wide range of institutions, including the universities of East Anglia and Lancaster, both of which pioneered the teaching of Creative Writing in Britain. Our approach covers three main genres – fiction, poetry and drama – but also with some appropriate consideration of the often connected genre of life writing. Many chapters feature more than one genre and a key approach of the book is that we advocate an integrated approach to your writing. For instance, we often discuss writing novels alongside writing films, and writing poetry alongside writing short stories and memoirs. You

will encounter many different ways of writing and be asked to consider how your own writing might benefit from these various methods.

The book is arranged in four parts. Part 1, ‘Ways of Writing’, explores some of the close links between reading and writing. In considering the importance of revision, research, conflict and contrast, we examine the influential role of genre, and, in particular, encourage you to investigate the importance of drama in your writing.

Part 2, ‘Writing Drama’, develops this awareness. We introduce some principles of dramatic writing in the context of stage drama, offering script layout guidance for the playwright and suggesting ways of adapting stories for the stage. We also explore approaches to writing dialogue and creating subtext, and consider staging, status, exposition and action. We then look at radio drama, again offering layout guidance specific to the medium, exploring the possibilities of radio adaptations, and considering how to create aural contrasts. We go on to explore writing films, offering layout guidance and advice on writing film adaptations. You will examine how to write more visually, how to construct scenes and how to use the juxtaposition of images.

In Part 3, ‘Developing Style’, we work on improving your techniques in prose and poetry. By taking different approaches we aim to generate new and exciting momentum, encouraging writers to be bold in their experiments, and to be diligent and brave in their redrafting. We explore how some of the methods used in writing scripts for dramatic performance can be used to revise and improve your writing in other genres. For instance, you will examine the similarities between a novel’s narrative voice and a dramatic monologue; you will be encouraged to approach fiction with a film-maker’s eye, creating visually rich stories with graceful transitions between scenes and even between sentences. We go on to examine the use of rhetorical techniques such as repetition, variation and understatement to improve your writing style. You will see how variation in the use of analogy can improve your fiction, life writing and poetry. You will investigate the paradox of poetic form – how the constraint of a traditional way of writing can be liberating. We conclude this part by looking at how the vital elements of time and theme can create cohesion and unity in your writing.

Part 4, ‘Readings’, contains examples from established writers in all the genres, and for all the media, explored throughout the book. These readings demonstrate how certain techniques can be achieved. We have chosen a rich blend of writers and styles to illustrate the range of possible ways of writing. As you progress through the book we will refer you to these readings, posing questions and linking discussion with each example. This

will enable you to reflect upon what the particular extract might mean to you and your own writing strategies.

Reading will always help you to carry on writing; you will want and need to read, and not just the extracts contained here. These were chosen because they display possible methods; they represent solutions to problems of form and the personal responses of various writers to those problems. The writer will always be faced with such dilemmas. As Oates says:

I have to tell is the writer's first thought; the second thought is *How do I tell it?* From our reading, we discover how various the solutions to these questions are; how stamped with an individual's personality. For it's at the juncture of private vision and the wish to create a communal, public vision that art and craft merge.

(Oates, 2003, p.126)

This book's aim is to refresh and sustain you as a writer, by showing, explaining and inviting you to try, various ways of writing. By illuminating the potentially fruitful connection between different genres, and especially the influential connection of drama to other forms of writing, we hope to help you to create work which is both crafted and artful.

References

- Oates, Joyce Carol (2003) *The Faith of a Writer*, New York: Ecco.
- Ravenhill, Mark (2007) Interview, *Ian McMillan's Writing Lab*, BBC Radio 3, podcast [online], <http://www.open2.net/writing/markravenhill.html> (accessed 30 December 2007).