

Self-belief and the art of writing

A big issue in the inaugural New Writing Types event concerned the growth of the "creative writing industry". Do creative writing courses, such as that at the UEA, raise students' hopes unfairly and lead to a homogenised style of writing? UEA scientist and poet ANNE OSBOURN, who attended the weekend, gives her perspective.

The thing about writing is that anyone can aspire to be a writer. Your mum, the milkman, the woman behind the counter at the building society, the 16-year-old boy who delivers the newspaper; all may have their blockbusters out with agents. Or, like a proportion of the students who have been on creative writing courses, they may have a bundle of manuscripts in the bin.

In principle this shouldn't matter because all writers who face up to reality know that fulfilment should lie in the act of writing, and that any ideas of making a living from their craft are very often shattered.

But anyone can have a go at creative writing, be it fiction, nonfiction or poetry. They just need self-belief, self-discipline and, of course, talent.

And prolonged periods of self-imposed exile, shut away writing.

As a research scientist, I have published extensively. I have spent years crafting cold clinical sentences in the passive voice in the time-honoured way.

A year or so ago I voiced my frustrations about my tethered pen to the head of the School of Literature and Creative Writing at UEA, Professor Clive Scott.

With the support of Clive, Patricia Duncker and others in the school I secured a one-year National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) Dream Time Fellowship to explore ways in which scientific awareness can enrich the lives and language of others, using creative writing as my medium. I am now doing this full time as a Fellow of the School of Literature and Creative Writing at UEA.

It has been argued that a sheltered life in academia is unlikely to provide the zest and originality that goes to make outstanding writing; that there needs to be a life outside writing – an experience of the real world – in order to ignite and sustain the creative flame.

Nevertheless it is clear that the best-known creative writing courses in this country, such as that of the UEA, have been hugely successful in identifying budding writers and in providing an environment that enables these individuals to grow and flourish.



ASPIRING: Anne Osbourn.

Like any other university course, no one expects all the students to pursue the discipline that they have been studying as a career, at least not in its purest form.

What proportion of science students, for example, go on to do cutting-edge research of the highest international calibre? The answer is, very few.

A small number of students who have been on creative writing courses will join the ranks of their highly successful predecessors, the likes of Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Trezza Azzopardi and Tracy Chevalier.

Others will not, but that doesn't mean that their university education has been wasted. These students will have developed the skills to read sensitively, to think critically and to write effectively.

They will go out into the working throngs as articulate and creative members of society.

And just maybe they will have enjoyed themselves while they were on their creative writing course, regardless of their long-term prospects as writers.

What does it take to be creative? Creativity can manifest itself in many different forms. Isaac Newton, for example, was a highly creative individual.

He had an inkling that led to a series of experiments that demonstrated that white light is not pure but comprises an infinite array of colours. The metaphysical poets were offended because they felt that Newton had destroyed the majesty of the rainbow.

In fact, Newton's visionary experiments have enabled us to understand why we see objects as different colours – to understand vision itself.

White objects are selfless; they receive all of the colours of the rainbow and give them back intact. Leaves absorb the colours required for photosynthesis – the blues and the reds – and return the dispensable shades of green. And black objects greedily imbibe all of the colours and refuse to hand them back.

Newton's findings underpin not only optical physics but also the whole field of cognitive neurosciences. Perception. How we see our world.

What about other forms of creativity? Take poetry. Poems are potent capsules – heavy doses of life. They are perhaps the most intense form of creative writing, at least when intensity is considered in relation to length.

A 40-line poem can guide us in our endless quest for an anchor, a trade-wind, a horizon. Most poets when asked how they write, will say that a poem first makes itself known to them in an unintelligible form, as a physical feeling.

This feeling gradually takes hold and with encouragement grows into something that makes the transition into language. A first line may be "taken for a walk".

An intangible feeling may crystallize into a message that the words then blossom around. Poems can spurge on to the page in their final form in a matter of hours. More likely they will be filed away (mentally if not physically) and reviewed – seen repeatedly in a new light – over a period of years until they are reluctantly regarded as finished.

That inkling – that visceral feeling – is the same in science and poetry.

■ Anne Osbourn is a research scientist at the Sainsbury Laboratory in Norwich and a Fellow in the School of Literature and Creative Writing supported by Nesta.



Three local people who were at New Writing Types explain how they became writers and what they thought of the event itself.

Johnny Fincham

Once in my troubled and tormented youth, I was arrested and asked if I wanted to write a statement to 'make it easier on myself'.



I sat down and scribbled for four hours – a series of elaborate excuses, anecdotes and justifications, even managing to get a reference to astrology in there. The detective constable who read the thing whistled and said: "This is easily the most entertaining statement I've read in 22 years in the force – are you a writer?" Well, I wasn't, but I determined then that day that I would be. Though I came to write seriously relatively late in life, I've had a short story and an article published and got a couple of non-fiction works out there. And for the past year-and-a-half I've been slaving over a science fiction novel.

The New Writing Types event I attended recently was fantastic. Writing is such a lonely business and it was wonderful to meet other scribes lured from their wormholes blinking into the light. The three authors who taught the seminars were generous and full of enthusiasm, treating us like equals rather than students. Not only was the level of the teaching intelligent and stimulating, it was splendid to discover they suffer the same anxieties, insecurities and desperation I do. They also whip out a notebook at parties at 4am to get that quirky comment down. They also have to dump their best lines and spend endless time re-writing.

The one-to-one with an industry professional was encouraging. The ex-publisher who examined my work praised it and gave me a list of authors whose writing was in a similar vein to my own. She also advised me how to go about selling my book.

I met loads of other writers, networked furiously and collected lots of email addresses.

The weekend finished with The Forum, where we went to a flurry of talks by people inside the publishing trade and well-known writers talked about their work.

I'd imagined agents and publishers as ruthless fire-breathers sniffing for a quick profit, but on meeting them, I found them real people with beating hearts who really care about literature.

I'm much more confident now about where I'm going with my work and it's given me a real boost. I'm ready to start sending stuff out to agents and publishers; with luck I may even make it.

■ Johnny Fincham, from Kirby Bedon, near Norwich, is a palmetist and yoga teacher.

Anne Funnell

I began writing as a small child but did not write down the stories until the mid-'80s, when computers able to hold more than a chapter in memory came on to the market at a price I could afford.



After several years with no success at getting published, I decided I needed help and began to attend seminars and workshops. I joined the Writers' Circle and completed the UEA Creative Writing Diploma course – this is the one night a week evening classes, not the MA course.

What I do in my day job, making china models, is what many people do for a hobby. All the experts at The Forum run by the New Writing Partnership stressed the importance of the advice to all writers: "Don't give up the day job". So I treat writing, even though I take it seriously, as a hobby. That way I am not devastated when the inevitable rejection letter drops through the box.

I write non-fiction as well: business letters, instructional books, reports of meetings, as well as researching the story of a woman who ran a famous pottery in 1750 – unheard of in that era. I attended the Lab's workshops for Creative Non-Fiction, at the offices of the New Writing Partnership in a revitalised area of King Street. Many of the participants on this course were trying "life writing", and the sessions were quite serious. The helpful exercises were relevant to any form of creative writing.

However, the tone of the Fiction Lab sessions on November 27 and 28 at King Street was more light-hearted. The writing exercises were designed to stretch the muscle of our imagination and the last one on Sunday afternoon resulted in a dozen stories constructed from perverse juxtapositions of setting, character and conflict which roused gales of laughter. There's no doubt that all of us thoroughly enjoyed the workshops.

■ Anne Funnell, of Poringland, is a potter and has been a member of the Norwich Writers' Circle since 1992.

Mike O'Driscoll

I left the New Writing Types programme with my creative batteries thoroughly recharged and my enthusiasm rekindled. Aspiring writers need to be around other writers. I think they need the sense of community and shared purpose that workers in offices, factories or shops take for granted. That's why I'm involved with Café Writers, a local group which provides a performance platform for all kinds of new writing.



New Writing Types offered more than solidarity. It made available the sort of expert guidance and advice that could be the difference between promising and published.

The advice from attending publishers, editors and agents not to give up the day job came too late for me. A few years ago I quit a well-paid job in TV journalism to pursue my own writing while being a househusband.

Obviously, I was going to write an award-winning, world-changing blockbuster. But it hasn't quite happened like that. I've had a few sketches performed on radio, and the odd article, story and poem published. My near misses include radio plays and a TV comedy drama.

Rejection is part of every writer's life so it was encouraging to hear Graham Swift, a writer I greatly admire, telling of his faltering early career. Another prize-winning novelist was brave enough to read out a publisher's rejection letter far worse than any I've ever received!

The group work was stimulating. Doing writing exercises with published authors and experiencing their different approaches offered valuable insight and a chance to test my own work and views.

We each had a potentially daunting one-to-one session with a professional reader from The Literary Consultancy. I was delighted to get some very positive feedback and encouragement to continue some memoir writing that I've been toying with for some time.

The message from across the board was "if you really want to write, stick at it".

That's what I aim to do and I feel New Writing Types has given me a useful push.

■ Mike O'Driscoll, from Norwich, is a freelance journalist and writer.



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