



Writing in Education

Issue 97
NAWE Conference
Special Edition

National Association
of Writers in Education

JOIN NAWE

the only UK wide organization supporting the development of creative writing in all educational and community settings.

Join your fellow writers and educators to get:

Writer's Compass news and jobs bulletin

Public liability insurance

Processing of Enhanced DBS

3 issues of Writing in Education annually

Regional gatherings and the NAWE Conference

Career advice and resources

Professional Directory

nawe.co.uk/membership.html • admin@nawe.co.uk • 0330 3335 909

NEW: WRITING IN PRACTICE VOLUME 10

We are delighted to announce that Volume 10 (2024) of Writing in Practice has been published and is available to download now.

NAWE's Journal of Creative Writing Research features a range of articles that engage with the use of creative writing for mental health and wellbeing purposes. For our guest article, Professor Scott Thurston of Salford University has kindly given us a transcript of his inaugural professorial lecture, which took the form of a structured, improvised physical and poetic performance.

[READ NOW](#)

Welcome to issue 97

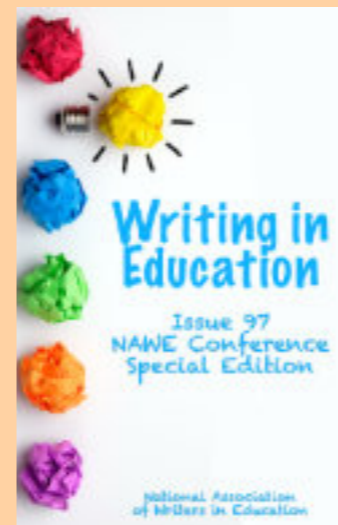
This is a special edition of *Writing in Education*. It always is when we have the first issue after the annual NAWE Conference because it's here that the event's presenters get to write more on their topics and bring them both to people who attended and people who could not. As much as I enjoy the conference, these expanded, in-depth versions of the presenters' topics are fascinating.

Not least because of the sheer breadth and range of them. From negatives and positives about AI, to practical ideas you can use right now, NAWE has always been a broad church and I think this issue particularly demonstrates that.

Yet it's also special because it marks a change in NAWE itself. After many years being led by Jonathan Davidson and Derek Neale, NAWE now has two new co-chairs with Jocelyn Page and Jane Moss. You can read their first *Writing in Education* columns on page 5.

But I also got to interview them both. Read about what NAWE has meant to them as members and now what they hope to do for you, starting on page 10.

William Gallagher, editor



Cover of *Writing in Education* issue 97

Interested in contributing?

We invite NAWE members to write on the subject of creative writing in education - in schools, universities, adult education and community settings. We encourage you to think broadly on this topic and address any issue relating to the development of a space for creative writing in the education system, in care homes, libraries or wherever you are using writing in your work.

Please note, it is developmental work that we wish to highlight, not self-promotion. It may be useful to think about the kinds of articles most useful to your teaching and practice.

Submission deadlines:

Writing In Education issue 98: Submissions close March 6, 2026

For submission guidelines please refer to:

www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/nawe-magazine/submissions.html

Editor: William Gallagher, publications@nawe.co.uk

Reviews: Matthew Tett, reviews@nawe.co.uk

Advertisement enquiries: publications@nawe.co.uk

ISSN 1361-8539. *Writing in Education* is the members magazine for the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). All work is copyrighted to the author or artist. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced without permission from the publisher.

Contents

Co-Chair's Report	5
AAWP Report (Australasia)	6
Lapidus	8
Higher Education Committee	9
Who to contact at NAWE	9
Interview: NAWE's new co-chairs: Jocelyn Page and Jane Moss	10
How To Make Your Own Story Dice With Europeana.Eu <i>Beth Daley</i>	12
Inspiring & Delivering Community Anthology Writing Presentation Report <i>Fiona Lindsay</i>	14
The (Un)Finished Memoir: Process As Inspiration For The Aspiring Memoir Writer <i>Harley Ryley</i>	17
The Ethics of Interviewing in Creative Nonfiction: Impact of Interviewees' Withdrawals on a Project's Outcome <i>Dr. Olga Kenton</i>	20
Raising the Voices and Visibility of Unpaid Family Carers Through Writing and Poetry Film <i>Shelley Tracey</i>	25
The Joy of Finding a Voice: Writing and publishing with recovering addicts in Great Yarmouth <i>Belona Greenwood</i>	30
'Be Me. Write Free': the benefits of utilising writing for wellbeing as a form of 'play' inside and outside the secondary classroom <i>Isabel Caddy</i>	32
Embedding Ethics in Creative Writing Teaching <i>Alexia Casale</i>	37
Using Creative Writing for Social Good: The Act of Creative Writing and Story Telling as a Tool for Positive Social Change <i>Emma McKenzie</i>	42
The Creative Writing with AI Unworkshop <i>Sarah Gibson Yates</i>	48
Creating Space for NHS Voices - Creative writing with Frontline Healthcare Workers in the NHS: How emergent collective poems establish new ways of evaluation <i>Siobhan Campbell and Mel McEvoy</i>	52
So bad, it's good: using cliché and collaboration to make metaphor less scary <i>Anna Polonyi</i>	58
Stimulating Texts for Found Poetry: A Register-Based Exploration of Writing Inspiration <i>Yuka Nakai</i>	61
Poetry as a facilitator of conversation in safe spaces <i>Gill Connors</i>	69
The Use of Questions and Silence as Feedback on Creative Writing in the Narrative Coaching Process <i>esme mills</i>	73
Writing as Water: Towards a Non- Innocent Practice of Creative Writing in the Digital Age <i>Yilin Tang</i>	78
Translation as a way into Creative Writing <i>Liz Cashdan</i>	81
BOOK REVIEWS edited by Matthew Tett	83

News

The Libraro Book Deal Prize is a new global competition designed to open up publishing opportunities for emerging writers and discover new voices through the Libraro platform. Libraro is a digital publishing platform that helps writers share their work safely, retain full copyright and reach readers, agents, and publishers. By combining blockchain protected discoverability with professional support and author protection The Libraro Book Deal Prize gives emerging voices a secure and inclusive path into publishing.

One winner will receive a £50,000 publishing package (£30,000 advance and £20,000 marketing contribution), with additional support for shortlisted authors to refine and present their work to publishers. Entry is free and open to writers aged 18+ worldwide who are currently unrepresented by a literary agent.

- Entries open: 8 January 2026
- Entries close: 31 January 2026
- Reader voting: 1-28 February 2026
- Winner announced: by 18 April 2026

Writers are invited to submit:

- The Story About Your Story (a short reflection on the work and inspiration behind it)
- A Blurb
- Sample Chapters (up to 10,000 words)
- Full First Draft (secure upload only, visible to judges and partners with permission)

Submissions can be from any adult fiction genre, including crossover YA. Entrants retain full copyright, and all entries will be moderated for originality and quality. The judging process combines platform engagement with an industry panel assessment, culminating in a shortlist of six writers.

Upload now. Register as a Writer on [Libraro.com](https://www.libraro.com)



A new second edition of this creative writing handbook is [now available](#). Edited by Emma Claire Sweeney, Heather Richardson, Derek Neale and Siobhan Campbell, it's an Open University book that aims to bring practical approaches to writing and to teaching writing.

Co-Chairs' Report

Greetings from Lewisham, Southeast London!

I first became a member of NAWE in 2010 whilst completing a PhD in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where I now lecture. Presenting on 'Creative Writing and the Practice-based PhD' at the 2011 conference in Northampton was scary and motivating in equal measures; I felt welcomed, heard and part of a community. And as a fledgling poet at that time, the opportunity to be in the room with Carol Ann Duffy was thrilling.

In the years since, like many of you, I suspect, I have attended other NAWE conferences, in person and online, met and fostered friendships with educators in my region and field of practice, and relied on *The Writer's Compass* to keep me informed of the opportunities and happenings in our discipline. NAWE has felt like one of the most collegial spaces of my career, where challenges, fears and joys are able to be expressed with honesty and a sense of shared understanding. The network has felt indispensable as I've navigated a path through rejections, appointments, promotions and the ongoing reinvention of the HE sector.

As such, with gratitude for a careful handover from Jonathan Davidson and Derek Neale, and the support of the wider NAWE team, I am genuinely so pleased to be working with my co-chair Jane Moss as we look toward the future. Jane and I recently read the conference feedback with great interest and welcome all further suggestions for how we can deliver value to our membership. We plan to co-chair with an openness to new ideas, strategies and events that will make this organisation feel indispensable to you as writers and educators.

I hope to see you at a membership meet-up soon, but in the meantime, if you have questions or would like to chat, please contact me: j.page@gold.ac.uk or [jocelyn-page.com](https://www.jocelyn-page.com).

Jocelyn Page

Our predecessors Jonathan and Derek have been so generous with their time and knowledge as Jocelyn and I step up to our new role. Our priority now is to sustain their stable approach while we gain insight into what NAWE members value most, and what else we might do in future, within our resources.

NAWE is a precious community. I joined in 2010 as an MA graduate, having run away to join the writing circus after several decades in arts marketing for theatres and Arts Council England, and a communications role in the Home Office's Community Engagement policy team. My MA Professor Robyn Bolam was NAWE chair and through her, I quickly saw how essential NAWE would be as I embarked on freelance life.

As a writer running community groups in local centres, residencies with counselling teams in bereavement support, respite projects for carers, adult education, and university community-outreach, the access to insurance and DBS checks was a part of that. Most of all, though, I found the NAWE community to be essential to my sense of who I was and what I was aiming to do in this exciting but sometimes daunting new career path.

That was fifteen years ago and community practice remains my passion. You'll find 'cultural democracy' written on my heart and I believe creative and expressive writing to be among the most accessible of creative activities. My favourite projects are with those who hesitate - at first, at least - to even call themselves 'writers'. In my work and research I seek participants to join in an activity they love, in the way others craft, sing, join a band, or dance. If publication becomes possible it is the icing on the cake. The process of self-expression and the sense of community are just as valuable.

In her introduction to our conference, Naomi Alderman was clear that we must attend to ourselves as writers, as well as enabling others to write. We need our tribe, for the peer support, the learning and collaborations, and the connections we make through our meet ups, publications, and conferences.

I look forward to the rich conversations we'll have as we steer NAWE into its future. If you ever travel west to Cornwall, please look me up for tea, scones (jam first), and a real-life conversation in a beach café. Until then, see you on Zoom.

Jane Moss

janeemoss@outlook.com and www.janemoss.com



Jocelyn Page



Jane Moss

AAWP Report (Australasia)

Dear NAWE readers.

My name is Julia Prendergast. It is my privilege and pleasure to serve the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) as the current President/Chair. I oversee the Prizes and Partnerships portfolio. I am inordinately passionate about this portfolio, not only because of the opportunities we provide for writers and translators, but also for the partnerships we have forged with publishers and writing communities in Australasia, and beyond.

I am supported in managing the activities of this portfolio by the AAWP executive body, broadly, but in particular by the prizes team: Sarah Giles and Professor Jen Webb.

This portfolio abounds in positive energy generated by outreach and engagement. We provide publication pathways and networking avenues for writers and translators, with a particular focus on facilitating opportunities for emerging writers and under-represented voices.

I take this opportunity to share our 2026 suite of prizes.

Chapter One Prize

This opportunity is offered in partnership with the University of Western Australia Publishing (UWAP). The prize is aimed at emerging writers. It is open to authors who have written a literary novel, a poetry collection, a short story collection, or a hybrid work, crossing genre boundaries.

The winner receives a \$500 cash prize. In addition, the winner receives a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised conference fees to attend AAWP's annual conference.

The AAWP judge's report is sent to UWAP, together with the winner's manuscript, and UWAP agree to assess the manuscript as a matter of priority. Entries should not exceed 50 lines (poetry) or 5000 words (prose).

AAWP / Recent Work Press Novella Prize

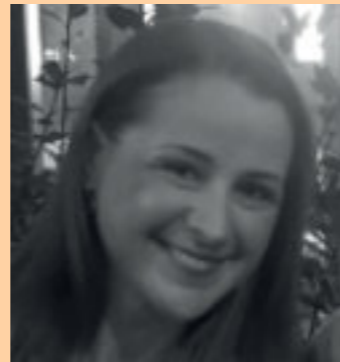
This prize is offered in partnership with the Recent Work Press. The prize is aimed at emerging writers. It is open to authors who have written a novella, in traditional form, or a hybrid work, crossing genre boundaries, including verse novels and linked stories. The winner receives a \$500 cash prize, a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised fees to attend the AAWP's annual conference.

Recent Work Press agrees to assess the manuscript as a matter of priority. Entries should not exceed 5000 words.

AAWP / UWRF Prize for Emerging Writers of Prose

This prize is offered in partnership with Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF). The prize is open to emerging writers of short-form prose. The

prize includes a ticket to UWRF, and accommodation for the duration of the festival. In addition, the winner receives a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised conference fees to attend AAWP's annual conference. The winning entry will be considered for publication in *Meniscus Literary Journal* / *ACE Anthology* (Recent Work Press). Entries should not exceed 3000 words.



Julia Prendergast

AAWP / UWRF Prize for Emerging Writers of Poetry

This prize is offered in partnership with Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF). The prize is open to emerging writers of poetry. The prize includes a ticket to UWRF, and accommodation for the duration of the festival.

In addition, the winner receives a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised conference fees to attend AAWP's annual conference. The winning entry will be considered for publication in *Meniscus Literary Journal* / *ACE Anthology* (Recent Work Press). Entries should not exceed 30 lines.

AAWP/ UWRF Translators' Prize

This prize is offered in partnership with Ubud Writers and Readers Festival (UWRF). The prize is open to translators at any stage of their career. The winner receives a ticket to UWRF, and accommodation for the duration of the festival.

In addition, the winner receives a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised conference fees to attend AAWP's annual conference.

The winning entry will be considered for publication in *Meniscus Literary Journal*. Entries must be no more than 30 lines (poetry) or 3000 words (prose). Entrants can translate their own work or the work of others, into English.

Entries must be accompanied by a 'Translator's Statement of Intention' (up to 400 words). The aim of this prize is to promote the work of under-represented writers to a broader "English-using" audience – to celebrate the art of translation by building both local and global writing communities from within our broad geographical region.

AAWP / Westerly Life Writing Prize

This prize is offered in partnership with *Westerly Magazine*. We welcome submissions of autobiography, biography, memoir, and essays. We celebrate Life Writing as a rumination upon memory and experience and encourage creative and hybrid

AAWP X UWRF Translators' Prize

The AAWP X UWRF Translators' Prize is offered by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) in partnership with Ubud Writers & Readers Festival (UWRF). The prize is open to translators at all stages of their career. The aim of the prize is to promote the work of emerging translators by facilitating networking opportunities and publication pathways.

The winner will receive an invitation to attend and participate in Ubud Writers & Readers Festival 2026, including accommodation for the duration of the festival. In addition, the winner will receive fully subsidised fees to attend the AAWP annual conference and a written commendation from AAWP.

Entries close: 30 June 2026.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO ENTER,



OR VISIT:

meniscusliteraryjournal.submittable.com/submit

approaches. The prize is open to writers at all stages of their journey; both emerging and established writers are welcome to enter. The prize recognises excellence in non-fiction, creative non-fiction and hybrid modes of storytelling.

Hybrid storytelling is broadly conceived as storytelling that crosses traditional boundaries of non-fiction and creative non-fiction and/or is experimental in form.

The winner will receive a \$500 cash prize, and a one-year subscription to *Westerly*.

In addition, the winner receives a written commendation from AAWP, and fully-subsidised conference fees to attend AAWP's annual conference.

AAWP and Voiceworks / Express Media Sudden Writing Prize

This prize is offered in partnership with *Voiceworks* (Express Media). We welcome submissions of Sudden Writing.

Please send creative work—short-short fiction, "sudden" fiction, "sketchy" stories, creative nonfiction, poetry, as well as hybrid forms.

We accept submissions of up to 400 words prose, 40 lines for poetry, 200 words for prose poems, and the equivalent for hybrid forms.

Submissions must be previously unpublished. The winner will receive a \$500 cash prize. You will have



your work published on the Express Media website and receive a *Voiceworks* subscription.

You will also receive fully subsidised conference fees to attend the annual conference of the AAWP.

Full details of all of our prizes are [available online](#).

The AAWP community wishes our NAWE friends good health and positive energy. We welcome submissions to our suite of prizes from the NAWE community.

Warmly,

Julia Prendergast

Julia Prendergast is a fiction writer and essayist. Her novel, *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* was longlisted for the Indie Book Awards (debut fiction). *Bloodrust and Other Stories* was published in 2022 (fiction of the week: *SMH/The Age* newspapers). *Blent* was published in 2025.

Her essays are available in *New Writing*, and elsewhere.

Julia lives in Melbourne (unceded Wurundjeri land). She is Associate Professor / Discipline Leader (Creative Writing, Literature, and Publishing) at Swinburne University, and President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing in Australasia.

Lapidus

News from Lapidus International January 2026

The fire of research

The world grows darker as the language and actuality of oppression, antipathy and war take hold. Our own institutional lives and work are measured and monitored, and we need to avoid being stuck in the process of machinery that seems to devalue the importance of creativity and expression.

We often talk in Lapidus about lighting small fires, beacons that can be seen from horizon to horizon, that can send invitations of light, life and kinship. Through our individual practice and offerings as an organisation we see people brought together through writing, expression, sharing and reflection. We do see change and agency in people's lives. This agency is significant and offers hope wherever we work.

The editor, at the time, of our LIRIC Journal wrote about changes across publishers and varied disciplines where editorial boards of research and academic journals resigned en masse to found alternative, open access publications without prohibitive fees for contributors or readers, (Buescher, 2024).

Curiosity, the spirit of inquiry and ethics are at the heart of practice in the words and writing for wellbeing arena. We encourage those alongside whom we work to notice, be reflective and reflexive about the issues they encounter or seek to address in themselves through expression and writing. As we kindle this in our participants so, as practitioners, we need to be alive to thinking and approaches that may not be necessarily new but are being interrogated, documented and shared to wider audiences. Thinking that builds and shapes our current and future practice.

Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community (LIRIC) Journal is a welcoming and encouraging academic journal in which to publish research. A place that is not constrained by disciplinary or societal narrowness; one which in fact champions the exploration of intersections, and fosters innovative modes of delivery and presentation. LIRIC is free to authors who submit and to readers who enjoy the articles, book reviews and essays it is pleased to publish.

To complement LIRIC, Lapidus hosts a vibrant community of those individuals prepared to present their research to peers in short seminars. Active since 2020 and never missing a beat in its monthly programme, the Lapidus Living Research Community (LLRC) is a member benefit, one where we can see practice and research blend and inform each other.

We now record these hour-long sessions for members to enjoy again in their own time. Recent LLRC sessions have included Compassion Journalling with Kate Poll; a conversation about Collaborative Inquiry between Kim Etherington and Jeannie Wright; and Finding the Road to Voice Again: After the Silencing Process by Homophobia with Ineke Duit.

The sessions usually include a writing activity of some kind and this often supports my own richer exploration of the issue in myself. The sessions inspire me, shift my perspective and offer me material for my own work as a therapeutic writing practitioner.

New for 2026

The New Year, 2026, sees Lapidus International celebrating its 30th anniversary. We have a new lean coordination team who will continue to support, alongside our swathe of active volunteers, our regular offerings of LLRC, LIRIC, the research database, our magazine, the hour-long Write Here, Right Now sessions, free advertising of courses and events delivered by members. At our AGM in November our members approved that we should apply to become a Community Interest Company (CIC) so our Board of Directors and coordination team will be exploring how and where we develop our activities through partnerships to realise our beneficial purpose and objectives, mark our 30th anniversary and move to a vibrant future.

European Connections

Lapidus International is delighted to be partnering with The Poetry Practice Ltd to deliver the 3rd European Biblio/Poetry Therapy Conference in Canterbury, Kent on Thursday 1st and Friday 2nd, October 2026. There will be a pre-conference day for researchers, early-career practitioners and students to meet and share more informally on Wednesday 30th September. And on Saturday 3rd October, there will be a chance to explore Canterbury's rich history with local literature enthusiasts.

The first and second European conferences were held in Budapest, Hungary in 2024 and Jyväskylä, Finland in 2025. Biblio/Poetry therapy networks in European countries are strongly rooted within academic institutions with extensive community collaboration. These vibrant conference gatherings have included workshops and presentations on biblio/poetry therapy

- with young people and through AI
- with survivors of breast cancer
- in palliative care
- in dementia care
- on myths of parenthood and motherhood

through "The throb of European voices all drawn to the invisible moment of silent unity"

We are especially interested in fostering long-term collaborations in biblio/poetry therapy and its many allied practices. The first two conferences drew people from across Europe and beyond, and we hope to create an equally beautiful and meaningful experience in Canterbury.

The [2026 conference website](#) will go live at the end of January with full details of how to submit a proposal and register for the different elements of the conference, as well as practical details. Mark your new diaries!

Mel Perry,
Chair, Lapidus International.

HE Committee

A brief note at the beginning of the year from Andrea Holland and Joanne Reardon who will be co-chairing the HE committee from 2026.

Thank you to everyone who attended the HEC drop-in session at the NAWE conference in November.

We are delighted to welcome some new members to the Higher Education Committee for the coming year and look forward to working together, developing new plans and ideas we can take forward with the incoming co-chairs of NAWE, Jocelyn Page and Jane Moss.

We'd like to extend our sincere thanks to those who stepped down from the committee at the end of the last academic year.

We start this new year with many of the same challenges we faced in the past year and still no real solutions to the problems.

AI is continuing to pose the greatest challenge for many of us teaching creative writing in higher education and each institution seems to have its own way of dealing with this.

Sharing knowledge and best practice is a good way forward and probably the best we can do at the present time.

The AI subcommittee will continue to work on this with a view to sharing our findings more widely with NAWE over the coming year.

The PhD network continues to show a strong level of engagement. The network holds online and in-person meetings over the year, focusing on issues and topics that are particularly relevant to PhD students.

New members are always welcome and details can be found on NAWE's website.

We have a proposal for you – for 2026, we'd like to hear from any members working in higher education about anything you would like to draw our attention to in the committee.

We have mentioned AI and LLM's as one example but perhaps there are other equally pressing issues where the NAWE HE committee could make a difference. Please get in touch with us, via the NAWE email address, we'd love to hear from you!

Joanne Reardon (Senior Lecturer, Creative Writing, OU) and Andrea Holland, (Associate Professor of Creative Writing, UEA) co-chairs, Higher Education Committee

NAWE

If you have a query about the National Association of Writers in Education, here's exactly who is best to contact about what:

Membership

Katie Worman is our Membership Administrator and is happy to help with all membership-related queries including enquiries about membership renewal and payment options, your profile on the NAWE Professional Directory, and accessing your public liability insurance documents.

Katie also looks after the Directory of Creative Writing External Examiners. Contact: Tel: 0330 3335 909 Email: admin@nawe.co.uk

Publications

William Gallagher is our Publication Manager, edits our member magazine Writing in Education, and handles advertising enquiries. Email: publications@nawe.co.uk

William is also the first port of call if you have any queries about submitting to Writing in Practice, NAWE's Journal of Creative Writing Research, or are interested in putting yourself forward as a peer reviewer.

The Editorial Board for Writing in Practice is drawn from the NAWE Higher Education Committee. A Principal Editor works on each edition with three Issue Editors from the Board, with William producing the publication.

Writing in Education Book Reviews

If you would like to send in a book for review in the magazine, or are interested in being a reviewer, email our Reviews Editor Matthew Tett on reviews@nawe.co.uk.

E-Bulletin and website listings

Philippa Johnston is our Information Manager and handles all requests from members (and non-members) for their opportunities and events to be added to our website listing and included in our fortnightly The Writer's Compass email. Email: pjohnston@nawe.co.uk

NAWE Conference

Sophie Flood is our Events Co-ordinator and masterminds the organisation and delivery of our annual conference including sponsorship opportunities. Contact: sophie@mosaicevents.co.uk

Programme curation for the conference is undertaken by Trustees with members of the NAWE team providing brochure and marketing support.

Interview: NAWE's new co-chairs Jocelyn Page and Jane Moss



Jane Moss

WILLIAM GALLAGHER asks JOCELYN PAGE and JANE MOSS about their time as NAWE members and their plans for the future.

What work do you do as writers in education?

JOCELYN PAGE (JP): I'm a lecturer at Goldsmiths, where I teach across undergraduate programmes. I do assessments within the MA in Creative and Life Writing, including supervision of some MA and PhD students. Then I work as well as a lecturer for the University of London Worldwide, teaching creative writing to undergraduate students.

JANE MOSS (JM): I'm more of a community practitioner. I run something called the Writing Retreat, which is based in Cornwall, providing all kinds of services for writers. I'm doing a piece of work, which is annual for the Peninsula Medical School, in the educational department based at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, where we run special study units for fourth year medical students.

The one I co-host is about creative journal writing as part of stress management, self-care, empathy, that kind of thing. I see myself as an independent researcher, having completed my PhD at Falmouth University in 2003.

When did you join NAWE?

JM: I'm going to say 2010. I had just completed an MA in Creative Writing in the Community and our professor was Robyn Bolam, who at the time was the chair of NAWE. She talked to us about the benefits of membership, and it was a no-brainer, so I signed up straight away.

I knew that I wanted to establish a practice where I was going to be working with community groups

and charities, plus I had a special interest in working with hospice bereavement and counselling teams. It meant I was going to be working on my own, so a big benefit for me was being part of a network of people, some of whom were doing similar things.

It was also the public liability insurance, that was absolutely crucial, and it was the DBS checking, which made it so much easier for me than having to go out on my own and find all of those things.

That was really useful. It set me up for the work I've been doing ever since.

JP: I think it must have been through the MA at Goldsmiths, so I think someone must have come in and or someone who was already a member of NAWE chatted to us as a cohort. That would have been around 2007 or 2008 and I thought it just sounded like a wonderful way to kind of widen out from Goldsmiths in London.

I needed the insurance too, and so I turned to this organisation that I've now been part of ever since.

Has NAWE helped your careers?

JM: Hugely, I don't think I could have done without it, to be honest, or it would have been much lonelier. Very early on, I remember meeting NAWE's Information Manager, Philippa Johnston, at a NAWE conference, that set me on my road. It was really great to find this community of people working in writing education, in all sorts of different guises, you know, not just writers in schools, not just particular universities, but people like me who are kind of out here in the wild.

JP: When I was doing the MA, I was starting to think that academia might be a path for me, and a way of testing that out was to go to the NAWE Conference in 2011. I put together a paper, submitted it for that conference in Northampton, and when it was selected, I thought, oh, okay, this is the way you do it. When I was on a NAWE committee, before joining the board of trustees, we were looking for ways of increasing the membership, of inviting people in. We found NAWE indispensable in our early careers so we wanted to make sure that people out there on MAs and PhDs and also working in the community, know about us.

How did you both become trustees of NAWE

JM: Before I was a trustee, I think I was probably always one of those people who put forward things for the conference. I always loved doing that kind of thing. We had a community subcommittee where we were quietly beaver away, saying we're not all in formal education in NAWE, there are some of us



Jocelyn Page

working in other places, let's raise our profile a bit. We were then invited to attend trustee meetings and were then co-opted onto the board.

JP: I got stuck into what was previously called the social media committee, which I think we're now about to reshape as communications. So I've been working quite closely with others in that committee, including Philippa Johnston.

What do trustees do?

JM: We are responsible for the good running of NAWE, we're responsible for making sure that the finances are in good order, that the policies are in place, and that the members' services are being delivered in an appropriate way. I think as well that we have a strategic role to play.

JP: We're kind of trained to think as a trustee toward ways of benefitting the membership. That's really our chief role: how to make the most of this. So I think from the very beginning, Jonathan Davidson and Derek Neale asked trustees to bring that to every every trustee meeting, every committee meeting.

JM: It's the trustees' responsibility to think about how we can make best use of our resources. NAWE is very light in terms of structure, which I think is good because that makes us agile. But it means that as trustees, we have a bit of a sort of voluntary role to play as well, in terms of bringing our skills and expertise and knowledge to the organisation.

And looking ahead, you know, the day-to-day running is great, but I think it's our role as well to see what else we can do and why we might.

Why did you want to be co-chairs?

JM: I've chaired other things and I enjoy chairing because I'm somebody who likes to look at the big picture. I can do detail, but I really like looking across the piece and thinking about how can we make this even better, even stronger than it is on the resources that we have? I'm somebody who looks quite a long

way ahead naturally. I think about where do we want this to be this time next year or in three years time?

JP: I've had several different sort of careers, adjacent careers, and volunteering has always been part of my life with various organisations. I think you get to a point in your career where you're quite happy with what you're doing, but you also want to give back a little bit, if that doesn't sound too too grandiose. You want to spend a bit of time working toward building a foundation for people coming up within the industry, the wider industry of teaching, within the community spaces or within schools. I was also – and remain – really pleased with the feeling of camaraderie within the organisation. The people make it really fun, they make it worthwhile.

What changes are you planning to make?

JM: I don't think NAWE is an organisation that requires substantial change. It's not about change management. It's about a sort of gentle managed growth in terms of who we are, what we do, what we can offer our members. And also, it's about our profile with the outside world. We've had a few years under Jonathan and Derek's incredibly wise management where we're in a stable place. My hope now is that we can we can go out into the world again, that maybe there are some meaningful, useful partnerships out there to get our messages across. I think there are lots more people out there who would benefit from NAWE's services, so it's our job to go and find them.

That may be all the strategy we need, actually, just to be a little bit more outward-facing, more campaigning, to tell our story and be a bit more vocal about who we are, what we do, why we do it, why it matters.

Because it does matter, NAWE does matter.

JP: People have already brought us a number of ideas and I think we have really great plans afoot, which are predicated largely and importantly on what the membership wants. It's so important that we take to heart our personal ideas as co-chairs and as we've gathered them from the board or the trustees, but really it's about what the members feel.

That is what is most pressing. At a time when people don't have a lot of money to give to organisations like this, what is going to give them value? We have to be absolutely certain that we're doing what people want us to do.

HAVE YOUR SAY AS A NAWE MEMBER

You can contact Jane and Jocelyn directly.

Email Jocelyn on j.page@gold.ac.uk and Jane on janeemoss@outlook.com

But also look out for our regular NAWE Member Meet-ups online. Details of the next ones are always in *The Writers' Compass*, your fortnightly news bulletin.

How To Make Your Own Story Dice With Europeana.Eu

Beth Daley



Europeana Story dice, Europeana Foundation, CC BY-SA

This article is based on a session run by DR BETH DALEY at the 2025 NAWE Inspiring Writing Conference.

The Europeana story dice set is a creative writing tool for individuals or groups. The dice have a different image on each side to help spark writers' imagination, develop creative ideas, and enhance problem-solving skills. Used in a group, they also encourage collaboration, listening and self-expression.

Europeana's story dice use cultural heritage images to provide creative prompts. Pick an image you like, or roll a dice at random, and then write, draw or discuss. Use more images to develop your story or discussion. The dice encourage open-ended play and creativity, and can be used by people of all ages and in any language - just download, cut out and fold, roll and be inspired!

WHAT'S IN EUROPEANA STORY DICE SET?

There are six dice in the set. Each has its own theme, but what each image means will vary from person to person, and there is no right or wrong interpretation. Have fun and be creative!

*Character - six people from different ages/stages of life.
Emotion - six people displaying different emotions.
Setting - six types of landscape and weather to give you a sense of place, setting or mood.
Transport - six ways to get around.*

*Objects - six random everyday items.
Genre - six suggestions for the type of story or theme to explore.*

You can [download the original set](#), or you can follow the instructions below to create your own. If you do, we'd love to know what you have made - please email beth.daley@europeana.eu and share your creations!

FIVE STEPS TO CREATE YOUR OWN STORY DICE WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE

1. Use Europeana to search for images.
2. Save images.
3. Access the Canva template.
4. Add your images.
5. Download, print and play!

[Download the slideshow](#) used at the NAWE conference, which includes full instructions and screenshots.

Step 1. Use Europeana to search for images

Europeana.eu is a free online+ resource, funded by the European Commission. Search and browse the diverse cultural heritage collections and stories from Europe's galleries, libraries, museums and archives to find content on almost any topic you can think of! You will need six images for each story dice. Look for items that will crop nicely into a square (we'll do that in step 4).

Use the search box to type in a keyword or phrase, then use the filters to narrow down your results. For story dice, it's useful to filter by 'Type of media > Image' and 'Can I use this? > Yes'.

If you intend to use your story dice in a professional environment, consider the rights statements for each image you choose. The best to use are marked as 'Public Domain', 'CC0', 'CC BY' or 'CC BY SA'. Other rights statements mean there are more restrictions on an item and you may need to contact the rights holder for permission to use it. For more support on searching Europeana, see the [help page](#).

Step 2. Save images

To save images for use in your story dice, click through from the results to an item page and click the 'Download' button to save them to your computer.

If you have created a Europeana account (click 'Log in/Join' and follow the instructions), you can also collate the images you like by clicking the 'heart' icon, which adds the item to your favourites, or '+' icon to add to a gallery.

There are full instructions on how to do this on the [europeana.eu help page](#). Keep a note of the image credits so that if you share your story dice, you can also share the information about the works you have used.

Step 3. Access the Canva template

Next, use Canva to add your saved images to the [story dice template](#). You will need a [free Canva account](#) to do this.

Make your own copy of the template pictured below ('File> Make a copy'). Then in your new copy, upload your files ('Uploads' button).

Step 4. Add your images

To add an image to the template, drag it from the 'Uploads' box into a frame and release. It should snap into place. Double-click on an image and reposition its edges for a good fit inside the square. For support on working with frames and images, see Canva's help page.

Step 5. Download, print and play!

Once you are happy with your images, you can download your template. Go to 'Share>Download' then choose 'PDF print' as the 'File type'. Then click 'Download' and you're done! Now you can print your story dice, cut them out, fold them up and play!

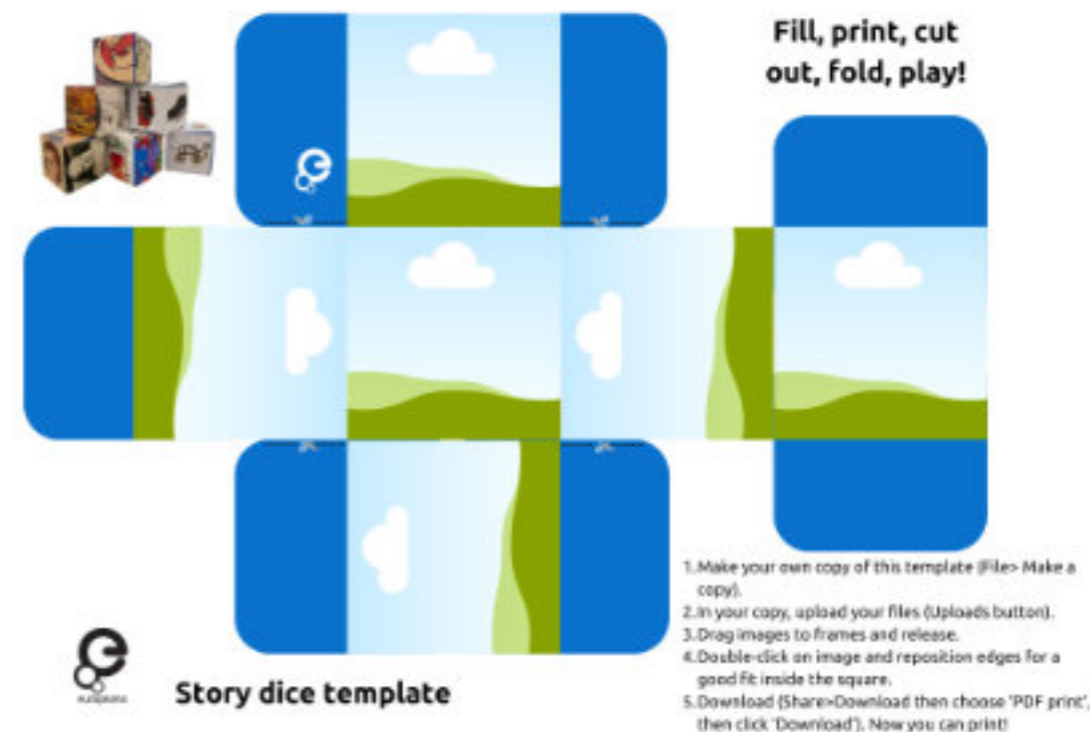
IMAGE 3 Worcester_Sparks_Story_Cubes_3 Image: Story dice and ladybird, Creator: Writing West Midlands, Institution: Writing West Midlands, CC BY-SA

For more support, or to share your creations, please contact Beth.Daley@europeana.eu

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Beth Daley is a novelist, cultural and creative writer and Europeana's Editorial Adviser. She works on engaging a broad range of audiences in Europeana's work and content. She has a PhD in Creative Writing, runs a range of writing workshops and her first novel, *Blood and Water* is published by Hic Dragones in Manchester. A self-confessed story addict, Beth has led various initiatives in digital storytelling with Europeana, including acting as new writing mentor in Europeana's Digital Storytelling Festival Online Creative Residency, and running the Europeana Writers' Room.

Europeana story dice template, Europeana Foundation, CC BY-SA.



Inspiring & Delivering Community Anthology Writing Presentation Report

Fiona Lindsay



FIONA LINDAY spoke at the conference about writing to create community. Here she describes how she presented her ideas and the way that we can all work on similar projects.

My aim while presenting at the 2025 NAWI Inspiring Writing Conference was to demonstrate how I empower voices, build connections, and create meaningful literary collections that celebrate diverse stories and strengthen communities. I sought to demystify the process of creating a community anthology.

By capturing the previously unheard voices of those who aspired to improve their writing and experience the editing/submission process, two of these inclusive groups were given a positive opportunity for publication and platforms to showcase their prose and poetry.

With repeated support from Arts Council England (ACE) and its Grants For The Arts (GFTA), in collaboration with Dahlia Publishing and the Attenborough Arts Centre (AAC) service user groups, and Leicester University (UOL), I edited another anthology with the Scriptorium Writers' Group. Another commissioned community anthology project is proposed, subject to further funding.

Before the event went live, I virtually met fellow practitioner Adam Kammerling, who had lots of practical ideas for engaging workshopers;

serendipitously, he had also facilitated at Leicester's AA Centre, too. I showed an introductory slideshow to indicate the contents of my talk. Then I outlined the proposed content of my short presentation to encourage delegates to plan their own community anthology projects.

The following slide, "Understanding Community Anthologies," was where I explored, in my opinion, what community anthology writing is and its transformative power in literary engagement. In my opinion, community anthologies prioritize inclusion, accessibility, and authentic representation. They provide platforms for emerging writers, marginalized voices, and community members to share their experiences fostering civic engagement and cultural preservation. The slide included a picture of me with the first anthology, called *Family Matters*.

I followed with gentle hints on "Getting Started." This slide and discussion detailed my experience of discovering how anthology writing enriches writers, builds communities, and creates lasting connections. There, I considered some of the benefits and impacts of my projects, with a nudge for delegates to set their own themes to elicit creative writing responses that resonate with their target audience. I described my proposed vision for a working book title, e.g., *Write Up Our Street*.

Then, I talked about the partners who helped me deliver my projects, how I secured them to raise



Fiona Lindsay

funding-in-kind and financial support, and a timeline for raising funds. I partnered with AAC at the UOL and its service users, the Leicester publisher Dahlia Publications Ltd, and UOL students. Delegates could also pair up with local libraries, schools, community centres and writing groups. It was vital for me to create inclusive spaces where writers of all skill levels felt welcome to participate and share their authentic stories. I provided writing workshops and support to help participants craft compelling, well-edited contributions.

Next, I recommended that the delegates ask for a show of interest from past workshopers to re-engage them. To establish clear submission guidelines, including word count, deadlines, formatting requirements, and theme alignment, we liaised with a publisher to understand their house style. My "Writing Techniques for Success" slide hinted at how I collected flash fiction & poetry by prompting the crafting of unique perspectives on common themes, drawing on personal experiences, cultural background, and individual viewpoints that add fresh angles to familiar topics. I recommended that my workshopers start writing compelling scenes that immediately engage readers, using sensory details and authentic dialogue to create immersive storytelling experiences. I thought about recording voices rather than writing for inclusion at this stage.

The use of gentle feedback to steer edits was inferred for revisions. Later, we focused more on the quality through careful revision, peer feedback, and professional editing to ensure the new work meets anthology standards and resonates with diverse audiences.

A "Community Engagement Strategies" slide signposted my ideas, offering opportunities for

inclusive writing and positive publishing. This is what worked for my past projects to deliver an inclusive writing opportunity: providing structured, modelled activities, hosting in-person and online peer feedback sessions, and professional guidance to support creative development, enabling participants to develop their writing. The visiting author's input augmented that activity.

In "Delivering New Stories & Poetry- learn from past projects", I spoke about my second, more ambitious anthology project, producing *Making Our World Better*. That is where I hosted regular workshops that welcomed writers of all experience levels and backgrounds who desired to improve. I attended arts-in-mental-health (AiMH) service user sessions to raise awareness of this opportunity, with mostly positive responses, including poetry. I did this by showing them my previously created anthology.

For the editorial and production phase, I recommended supporting the contributors with making revisions and through the submission process. I gathered submissions and collaborated with contributors to ensure revisions maintained a consistent voice and quality. I collated the anthology, proofread, and formatted it. Then I worked with a local designer/publisher to create professional, appealing book layouts and covers. The use of literature development platforms for advertising championed the work.

After the workshops, I stayed connected with contributors through my website- www.fionalindsay.co.uk. To navigate the publication process, I amplified community voices by building excitement through regular updates and progress sharing. Launch with a community event, coordinate media outreach, and distribute books through local venues, and the publisher was my advice. There is a need to showcase at community reading events, open to all. I checked out local literary events that might host public readings, where contributors could share their work with the broader community. Luckily for us, the 2022 Literary Leicester Festival hosted our second book launch, thanks to Dr Harry Whitehead.

In delivering successful stories, we learn from our past projects. I am thankful to the ACE and GFTA for their support in 2019 and 2022. I edited *Family Matters: An Anthology Of New Writing* and *Making Our World Better*, both published by Dahlia Publishing. There was much in-kind support from Literary Leicester and various poets from Renaissance One, too. We created powerful anthologies at the inclusive Attenborough Arts Centre, celebrating contributors' experiences, diverse adult voices, and social justice themes, and they received recognition. Dr Harry Whitehead wrote: "Even in the darkest of times, the artist glimmers on."

I celebrated contributors' achievements while planning a future anthology project. I edited another anthology with my writing group in Southwell this year. Called *Moments of Grace*, it was self-published.

To reflect on the delivery of an anthology, I shared how, since publishing and championing the output, I have persisted in celebrating. These celebratory events honour participants and build excitement around future showcasing. Holding the anthology in our hands is special. To reflect on the anthology

writing projects, I collated feedback from consulting participants, contributors, partners and reviewers to validate the worth of collaboration through our active learner writing challenge. There were questionnaire responses to absorb for future reference.

It was important to gauge the success of engagement in the writing project process. To acknowledge where we foster wellbeing and connect with writers who want to improve their writing and build their confidence was powerful. By exploring other genres to expand my experience, I am developing picture-book writing skills that help me empathize with learners. I recommended continuing to collaborate. That could be achieved by exploring submission to other anthologies. For example, my prose nonfiction was included in *Telling Tales: Voices from the East Midlands*, published by my local Society of Authors group.

Finally, I advocated that once the project is completed, facilitators should pat themselves on the back and take time for some well-deserved R&R. Also, I was extremely pleased with the 23 delegates who attended our shared session and credited Adam for their engagement. Later, I learnt of Adam's numerous tools to prompt a wide range of creativity and response from YAs, in particular. There were details of playful, broader arts engagement activities to soften the focus on writing.

He and other delegates also recommended improvisation, role-play, and visual doodling to further engage reluctant writers.

Responding to delegates

I'm grateful for the questions left in the chat. I will answer the questions and responses here.

For both presenters, there were six offers of thanks in the chat. We were even called "wonderfully inspiring!" As well in the chat, there were these questions specifically for me: "Any tips for Arts Council or other funding bids for projects of this type?"

My requested email response was: "So, engagement in your project is key. The ACE wants to get the best value for money from your activity, and you need to



show this by highlighting the proposed number of children attending your events, as well as the participants and audience. Also, any further use of that activity in workshops/videos in the future. Plus, I would seek to secure funding-in-kind support as much as possible. Reaching hard-to-reach or vulnerable/isolated audiences is worth emphasising, too." Then another chat comment was: "a great project. Interesting to know whether and how participants have continued to write or be involved in creativity – the legacy of a project like this."

I'm thrilled to note that many of the student contributors have gone on to be published in reputable anthologies and with their own collections. I am in contact with the A in MH service users and know they regularly perform their poetry at a spoken word event at the AAC, called "Word!" Those writers on my mailing list keep in contact and are invited to workshops I facilitate. A few contributors submit to local writing competitions. I could have included some of the contributing flash fiction and poetry if I had more time, but I hoped to supply copies to those interested in the project outcomes.

BIOGRAPHY

Fiona Linday enjoys freelance facilitating with Attenborough Arts, Leicester's lifelong learners. She received ACE grants for *Family Matters* and *Making Our World Better* community anthologies. Her collection of stories and poetry is *Count Our Blessings*. Recently, she edited *Moments of Grace*, Creative Nonfiction & Poetry by Scriptorium Writers and Guests.

REFERENCES

Edited by Linday F. (2019). *Family Matters*, Dahlia Publishing Ltd.

Edited by Linday F. (2022). *Making Our World Better*, Dahlia Publishing Ltd.

Edited by Linday F. (2025) *Moments of Grace*, Scriptorium Writers Group & Guests, Moorleys.

The (Un)Finished Memoir: Process As Inspiration For The Aspiring Memoir Writer

Harley Ryley



From her NAWE Conference presentation, HARLEY RYLEY introduces exercises designed to expose, and capture inspiration from, the life-writing process.

In his 2012 introduction to the genre, Courser writes, "for better or worse, we are living in an age of memoir" (2012: 142), and if memoir's 21% share of *The Sunday Times'* 50th anniversary list of 100 bestselling books (2024) is anything to go by, the age has yet to wane. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, after a period of Significant Life Change in my early 30s, I too found myself armed with grand literary delusions and a terrible memory, setting out to write a memoir.

MEMOIR AS A FINISHED PRODUCT

Many of the memoirists whose fame endures today were published during the so-called "memoir boom" of the 1990s, like Frank McCourt with *Angela's Ashes* (in at number five on *The Sunday Times* list) and Mary Karr with *The Liars Club*.

This boom, though not unique in memoir's history, is often marked as a turning point for the form due to the significant increase in memoirs written by normal people and the greater freedom writers experienced in exploring tragic subject matter (Yagoda 2009: 243).

A sibling genre emerged during the same period, the memoir writing handbook, which gave detailed advice for aspiring writers on how to write memoir, straight from the pens of authors who'd successfully done it.

The handbooks share many features with their fiction-focused counterparts, urging writers to show not tell, asserting the importance of a unique voice and exploring how to shape plot from your life story. There is, of course, one additional piece of advice, unanimously echoed across all handbooks: the memoir writer must tell the truth, at all costs. Karr, in *The Art of Memoir*, is clear, if you have a bad memory, you should, quite simply, "give it up [and] get a real job" (2015: 28).

Though perhaps discouraging for me and my terrible memory, this advice makes sense in the context of the memoirs in vogue at the time, perhaps best explained by another handbook writer, Cohen, who describes memoir as "a story you remember that ties together a series of life events into an understandable and glittering package" (2014: 138).

What Karr and Cohen are advocating for is the archetypal 90s/00s boom memoir, where the memoirist is the definitive authority on their life, a reliable narrator, weaving an infallible narrative that stands up next to the literariness of fiction. Memoir as a finished, "glittering", product.

MEMOIR AS (UN)FINISHED?

However, memory, the very stuff that memoir is built from, simply does not operate in such a neat and glittering way. Indeed, the narrative detail and fictional techniques these handbooks call for is often beyond what we're realistically able to remember (Yagoda 2009: 109).

This places us in a writing conundrum. Writing today, with the looming possibility of a journalist publishing an exposé on the real truths behind your writing (as happened recently to number 37 on *The Sunday Times* bestseller list, Raynor Winn with *The Salt Path*), increasingly memoirists must find ways to reconcile the fallibility of memory with the memoir imperative to tell ‘The Truth’, all while producing a compelling, publishable narrative.

Contemporary memoirists have responded to this challenge by expanding what we mean by ‘memoir’, taking the glittering package and introducing layers of self-reflexivity which expose the writing process. In *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*, for example, Maggie Smith tells both the story of her divorce and the story of writing it, weaving the two threads into her poetic and fragmentary narrative. She directly references her writing process – “I’ve been testing out so many metaphors in this book, trying to find the perfect imagistic shorthand for this heartpunch of an experience” (2023: 170) – and draws attention to what she chooses to leave out, challenging standard writing advice. “There were tears in our house at bedtime” she writes in one chapter, “is it enough to tell you this, or do you want me to show you? Reader, ask yourself: Why would you want to see someone else’s children crying?” (215).

By doing so, she invites the reader into a dialogue with her story. This is what I would call an “(un)finished memoir”, ‘un’ parenthesised to highlight the paradoxical nature of these narratives: they are finished in their unfinishedness. This process-led approach invites multiple versions of the truth to emerge, rather than making claims to The Truth.

Jenn Ashworth does similar in the opening to *Notes Made While Falling*. She says: “A beginning is a cut in the onward flow of things. It is a lie too: we section out the story, slashing away what came before and after.” (2019: 7). This exposes the writer’s decision-making process, that the ‘beginning’ of a memoir will always be an artificial starting point, because it comes amid a life still being lived.

It is an example of what Couser calls the fictive element of memoir writing, because whatever we write is a reconstruction from memory, not a perfectly mimicked replication (2012: 74). In a later chapter, Ashworth weaves two timelines, the present, on a train to give a talk at a literature festival, and the past, about her father and maternal grandfather’s factory work when she was young (2019: 35). This mimics how memory works, writing the interplay between the self who is remembering, now, and the links the brain makes to past remembrances.

Again, we might call this text “(un)finished”. While this is a completed, published, version of the story, the text itself makes clear that this is by no means the only way it could have been told.

“Now,” I thought, “this is the kind of memoir I’d like to write”.

Though both Ashworth and Smith employ many of the handbook techniques to tell compelling, narratively sumptuous, scenic and detailed stories, the “(un)finished” memoir approach allows the writers to explore additional ways of interacting with their stories, to adopt different roles within their own

narratives. Two key roles are that of ‘rememberer’ and of ‘researcher’.

In the role of rememberer, the memoir writer acknowledges within their text that they are writing from imperfect memory. They draw the reader’s attention to non-linear connections, like Ashworth’s literary festival and factory-working relatives, identify contrasts between ‘now’ and ‘then’ and relay non-visual experiences, such as bodily feelings, which cannot be told through scenic detail.

In the role of researcher, the memoir writer invites the reader into a dialogue with their text by showing them the writing process, drawing explicit attention to the narrative choices made, like Smith’s multiple tested metaphors or Ashworth’s choice of where to start. A memoir which allows the writer to fulfil different roles within their narrative allows for inspiration not only from the past, at a safe, glittering distance, but also from the life ongoing.

So, how might we embody these roles in our writing? For advice on how to write your reliable narrator, I will defer to the countless memoir writing handbooks which cover this material far more comprehensively than I could: Cohen’s *The Truth of Memoir* (2014); Karr’s *The Art of Memoir* (2015) and additionally Zinsser’s *Inventing the Truth* (1999), which includes reflections from multiple boom memoirists, like Frank McCourt and Annie Dillard.

For the remaining roles, here are some quick exercises to help us embody the roles of rememberer and researcher.

STEPPING INTO DIFFERENT ROLES

To adopt the ‘rememberer’ perspective, we need to treat our memories as material, and interrogate them from our position today. In his book on the psychology of autobiographical memory, Kotre describes an experiment in which he considered all the places in his memory connected to a particular object, the titular “white gloves” (1996: 9-10). The exercise is to trace the “lineage” of the memory, to think of all the things, people and places that would remind us of that object.

Exercise 1: Pick an object or event from your life that few people know about. Write a brief paragraph outlining your initial memories of it. Now, make a mind-map or a list of all the connections to this item in your memory. Ask yourself: who knows about this object or event? What general knowledge do I have relating to it? Where is this thing recorded? What happened as a result? How was I changed by it?

Generally, this process unearths countless connections between the object and the writer’s life, different paths you might take in your memoir writing, both illuminating and challenging the initial perspective. A variation of this is to interrogate the material of your memory based on what you don’t remember, which can similarly create new connections.

Exercise 2: Choose an unclear memory, something you wish you could remember but simply don’t. Make a list of all the things you don’t remember. Details, like what colour your clothes were, who else was there and what they said. What do you learn about yourself from what is missing? Try this with a



Harley Ryley

few different memories and see if you can spot themes. What are your memory blind spots?

To become researchers of our own lives, we can begin to interrogate our process instead of our memories. It will start to become quite ‘meta’ (think: memoir about writing a memoir), but if you bear with it, these exercises can bring new insight into our writing selves and add texture and depth to our narrative voice. If, like me, you have an untrustworthy memory, these activities can also help make sense of incomplete memories on the page, and bring that incompleteness into the story, instead of editing it out.

Exercise 3: If there are things you don’t want to write about, try writing about why that is. Don’t tell us what you’re avoiding, focus on the reasons why. At first, this is simply for your own eyes. What are your fears and hesitations?

Exercise 4: Try to observe yourself in the writing process and write down the observations. This takes practice. Sit down to write a scene. Pay attention to your thoughts before, during and after you write it. Try to capture them as they come up. It could be things like “I’m not sure if this is what actually happened” or “it makes me think of another occasion when”. Try not to force your mind, let it wander, and capture the wanderings.

So much of writing memoir is about the person writing now, reflecting on their life experiences.

Positioning yourself as a researcher of your own life allows you to consider your motivations, your fears and your process in a way that enriches your own storytelling, but also the reader’s experience. Whether you choose to leave these reflections in your final narrative, to leave it “(un)finished” or you edit

them out, to make it glitter, your text may well be more expansive as a result.

WRITING THE “(UN)FINISHED” MEMOIR

So, though I am certainly not calling for an end to the glittering memoir form the handbooks encourage and that has proliferated during this ongoing memoir age, I am offering a provocation to memoir writers to expand the roles we play in our work.

To introduce the messiness of the writing process onto the page, and to let it bring light and shade to our narratives. The (un)finished memoir might allow us to say to our readers: “I don’t know all the answers yet, and I might never know them all, but I’m taking you with me as we try to find them out”.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the National Association of Writers in Education for hosting the conference presentation upon which this article was based. This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/R012733/1) through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

BIOGRAPHY

Harley E. Ryley is a Creative Writing PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis will develop an innovative approach to memoir which exposes language constructs, challenges concepts of truth and unwrites genre rules. She is also Business Manager for, and runs writing workshops with, The Writers Workshop in Sheffield.

REFERENCES

- Ashworth, J. (2019) *Notes Made While Falling*. London: Goldsmith’s Press.
- Cohen, K. (2014) *The Truth of Memoir: How to Write about Yourself and Others with Honesty, Emotion, and Integrity*. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books.
- Couser, G.T. (2012) *Memoir: an introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Karr, M. (2015) *The Art of Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kotre, J. N. (1996) *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Smith, M. (2023) *You Could Make This Place Beautiful: A Memoir*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- The Sunday Times (2024) ‘The 100 bestselling books of the past 50 years’, *The Sunday Times*, 16th August. [Availableonline](#).
- Yagoda, B. (2009) *Memoir: a history*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Zinsser, W. (1999) *Inventing the truth: the art and craft of memoir*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

The Ethics of Interviewing in Creative Nonfiction: Impact of Interviewees' Withdrawals on a Project's Outcome

Dr. Olga Kenton



DR OLGA KENTON spoke at the NAWE Conference about the ethics of interviewing people and the problems that interviewees can create.

Imagine that you have spent a few years on a project. You have conducted dozens of interviews. Your manuscript is finished and submitted to an agent or publisher. Then suddenly you receive an email from your project's participant, "Please remove me from your work." What would you do?

Drawing on my PhD project completed at the University of Birmingham (UoB), this paper explores the ethical and legal aspects of participants' withdrawal from a creative project, and what, if any, impact it has on the project's outcome.

While this topic deserves more than a single paper and should be explored through the lenses of copyright law and ethics, I seek to answer the following questions:

What is essential for a project that involves interviewing people?

What is important about the consent?

Does consent guarantee an automatic protection to the author and participants?

Dealing with participants' withdrawals at the different stages of the project. The intention of this paper is to create an open dialogue on the ethics, morals, and legal aspects of creative projects that involve interviewing people.

INTERVIEWING AS A CREATIVE NONFICTION TOOL

To understand what challenges the interviewing pose on any creative nonfiction project, it is important to first consider the role of interviewing in creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction (also known as "new journalism") originated in the United States in the 60s (Gutkind 1997: 8). Currently it is seen as an umbrella term that defines many types of writing, from memoir to narrative history (Gutkind n.d.). Creative nonfiction writers/researchers use different approaches to gather information, yet one of the techniques that allows one to create intimate stories and "understand other people's worlds from inside out and to portray people as they understand themselves" (Harrington 2007: 229) is interviewing.

The process varies by recording method: note-taking, active listening, or by audio recording. Gerard (1996: 74-5) explains that the preferred method of recording the conversation is "a question of philosophy as of practice." Regardless of the methods, creative nonfiction writers/researchers "record conversations as an effective technique to capture the spoken word in a form as people communicate in everyday life" (Caulley 2008: 435). As such, interviews provide the author with the authentic first-hand material, allowing the preservation of interviewees' manner of speech.

Furthermore, Gerard (1996: 55) states, "Creative nonfiction is always about people." It is indeed about people, yet arguably this term ("people") involves both parties – the author and participant, who should be both equally protected. As such, before any interview begins, what needs to be considered is whether the interviewee and interviewer know their rights and obligations towards each other, and whether these "relationships" are protected legally. Wilkerson (2007: 176) emphasizes the importance of "securing a subject's permission and cooperation as it is a matter of law and ethics." In most of the cases the subject's permission usually is covered by the consent that "is essential to research involving human subjects, serving as a vital safeguard for participant autonomy and safety." (Carr, Niftulaeva and Parfenova 2024: 199).

THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERVIEWING

Interviewing, however, is not just part of creative practice – it is also deeply ethical. Smith (1992: 98) correctly states that scholarship on interviewing mainly deals with the techniques and style of interviewing, assuming that "the majority of potential problems can be avoided."

Of course, the "difficulties" are rare, or at least, are not widely discussed in academic circles and beyond. Yet, it does not mean that creative nonfiction writers/researchers undertaking projects that use interviewing should not consider unexpected outcomes. Participants' circumstances can change suddenly.

So, it is reasonable to state that interviewing is a complex multidimensional process requiring balance between creativity, law, and ethics. Matthews (cited in Gerard 1996: 71) notes, "Interviewing is a transaction in which both sides want something." Undoubtedly, interviewing involves at least two

parties, who enter the interview with their own reasons and intentions. Generally, we want to know about other people's lives, their desires, struggles and triumphs; as well as many of us want to share our stories. Smith (1992: 99) suggests that during the interview a "researcher constantly makes decision about the next question."

What is more is that once answers are collected, the creative nonfiction writer/researcher decides what to use and what to omit, arranging answers in the final form with their artistic goal in mind. Caulley (2008: 436) confirms, the interviewer "does not use all the conversation captured during the research." Typically, they choose only captivating information – something that will intrigue the reader.

Such a selective, artistic approach to the recorded data is, perhaps, one of the distinctive features that separates creative nonfiction from other research areas that also rely on data, such as oral history, narrative ethnography, and anthropology. Yet, what broadly brings them together is adherence to the same set of principles outlined in the Journalistic Code of Conduct: transparency, fairness, accuracy, privacy, and consent (NUJ n.d.). However, the Oral History Society (n.d.) states that interviews are treated as a shared, co-created testimony, often granting participants the copyright on their recorded words that they can review and even restrict.

Considering the above, before conducting interviews, the creative nonfiction writer/researcher should outline their approach to the project, how they will address possible challenges, and their responsibilities.

CONSENT

The next critical element underpinning this ethical framework is consent. "Research ethics committees often seek proof of consent having been properly sought and given by requiring the completion of a written, possibly signed and, in some cases, independently witnessed form." (Iphofen 2021: 30) Indeed, the signed consent is a mandatory requirement of any research institution, including the UoB that is outlined in UoB Code of Practice for Research (2025) and Code of Ethics (2016).

Yet, does the consent form offer ample protection to both parties involved in the interview? Is it even possible to foresee and document every potential complication? The simple answer is no. Of course, consent has its limitations. Interestingly, Carr,

A screenshot of the project's consent.

Федеральное государственное учреждение Центра антропологического знания, драммы, анимации и танца Университета Бирмингем	Department of Film and Creative Writing School of English, Drama, American and Canadian Studies University of Birmingham
Соглашение на участие в творческом научно-исследовательском проекте «Тихие голоса русской иммиграции»	Consent Form "The Silent Voices of Russian Immigration" Research Project
Я, _____ _____ (полное имя и фамилия участника), понимаю, что меня попросили принять участие в интервью,	I, _____ _____ (participant's full name), understand that I am asked to participate in the interview that forms part of Olga Kenton's



Dr. Olga Kenton

Niftulaeva, and Parfenova (2024: 200) add, “the low efficacy of informed consent is that subjects simply do not read consent documents.”

Furthermore, the Department for Education (n.d.) emphasises that some participants may need a different approach regarding consent. The reasons that may prevent people signing the consent or taking part in the research are illness, temporary inability to understand the consent, being under the age of 16, have low literacy levels, disability or other conditions that prevent them from reading.

As such, the consent form in creative projects is a multifaceted document, requiring careful consideration and guidance from the researcher’s institution or the legal advisor.

However, even legal advisors cannot always anticipate all potential risks that may arise during or after the project. Smith (1992: 99) explains, “Ethics committees are not present in the interview situation so that in granting ethical approval they are in fact recognizing the intent of the research proposal rather than the actions themselves.”

As it stands, UoB Ethics Committee’s guidance (n.d.) clarifies that the level of detail required by consent depends on the project’s objective and the anticipated participants.

The consent form for any project that utilizes interviewing as a “creative tool” and in which data collected during the interviews becomes a core foundation of the creative nonfiction writer’s/ researcher’s material, should include the explicit information on the following matters:

participants should contact the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher in writing if they wish to read the story based on information collected during the interviews;

whether or not the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher will provide the completed story to the participant upon its completion;

how the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher will deal with participant’s request to amend the story;

at what point the participant can withdraw from the project and at what point the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher secures their right to use the data collected for the purpose of their creative project.

While a prerequisite of the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher is that they adhere to the truth and accuracy in presenting a story, it is debatable whether they should give their sources a right to read it prior to the publication.

For context, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (1999) suggests, “Ethical considerations in interviews involve respecting participants’ privacy and confidentiality, as well as ensuring that they are fully informed about how their information will be used.” Clarke and Granger (2021), however, advise, “Do not let your source be your editor.”

While many journalists and creative nonfiction writers state “the rule in interviews was that they were on the record – meaning the material could be published – unless otherwise discussed” (Kantor, Twohey 2019: 10). Accordingly, any such exception (“the otherwise”) should be clearly defined and recorded in writing. If the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher enters an iterative process of sending drafts to participants for review, this may delay completion of the project.

More importantly, it can invite participant to intervene in ways that compromise the writer’s/ researcher’s editorial autonomy and the integrity of the narrative representation.

Accordingly, the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher should retain editorial control but exercise it within ethical and legal parameters that are stated explicitly in the consent form.

This tension also raises the question of how far participant review prior to publication can be accommodated without compromising the creative nonfiction writer’s/ researcher’s editorial control.

As for “the right to withdraw”, typically in the fields of ethnography, anthropology and oral history participants maintain their right to withdraw from the project at any point. “This emphasizes the voluntary nature of consent” (Iphofen 2021: 31–2).

Furthermore, Balkin, Kollerup, Kymre et al. (2023: 6) add, “In an ethical research encounter the participant should not be exposed to harm, nor should they feel taken advantage of, either during or after the event.”

Yet, as mentioned, interviewing for creative purposes involves two parties. Hence, while the participant should be protected from any harm during or after the event, as should the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher. Therefore, in-line with the UK Research and Innovation (2024) recommendation, “Some projects give a date after which participants cannot withdraw consent or ask for data destruction.” Furthermore, in the field of creative nonfiction, a primary consideration becomes what harm will the withdrawal(s) have on the project. Journalism University (2025) explains that ethical rules of interviewing should work for both parties, “it’s

about making conscious choices to respect the person across from you and maintain the integrity of your work.” As such, it may be challenging for the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher to sustain a project’s integrity if the editorial control of their artistic creation is passed to the participant.

THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

In addition to the ethical dimension, creative practice is also shaped by legal constraint: as Gerard (1996: 194) notes, “writing carries consequences under the law.” In the UK context, legal regimes such as the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and Data Protection Act 2018 may be relevant where a project involves interviewing participants and handling personal data. So, while the legal dimension can feel peripheral to the creative impulse for creative nonfiction writer/ researchers, it remains integral to responsible practice. In projects involving human participants, a well-designed consent process should clarify permissions and expectations in ways that copyright law alone does not. It should mitigate risk and support the management of relationships with interviewees both contractually and ethically. For this reason, creative nonfiction writers such as Gutkind and Gerard emphasise the value of obtaining specialist advice before publication, recommending consultation with “someone who knows the intricacies of the law” (Gerard 1996: 195).

CASE STUDY

The above legal and ethical frameworks provide context for the real-world challenges I encountered during my PhD project. In 2018, I enrolled at the UoB to complete a PhD in creative writing. My project’s objective (*The Silent Voices of Russian Immigration*) was to interview as many Russophone immigrants to the UK as feasible and to use their interviews to create creative nonfiction profiles that would be intermingled with my memoir. It took approximately a month to prepare the required documentation.

At the time, there was scant guidance on drafting consent forms for creative projects, so I created one from scratch for the UoB Ethics Committee approval. Six months later I was granted approval and began interviewing the participants who had given consent.

The process of conducting interviews took just over two years (2019–21). My viva was in January 2024, and I submitted my thesis to the UoB Library Services for storage in the e-thesis repository under embargo in March 2024, as I was seeking publication at that stage. In August 2024, I began looking for potential agents or publishers.

It was at this point that I was unexpectedly contacted by the participant “X” who requested to read their story. Participant “X” was interviewed in 2020 and made no request to read the story prior to August 2024.

Later that day I received an email stating they were dissatisfied with how the story was presented and requested a rewrite. I asked them to specify, in writing, what they wanted to change and to identify any factual mistakes. This request was ignored. An exchange of emails followed, and participant “X” asked that I exclude their story from the published work and stated they wanted to withdraw from the

project completely. That was an outcome I absolutely had not anticipated. Of course, the first point of contact was my lead supervisor, internal examiner, and head of the Ethics Committee, who then redirected me to the university’s Legal Services.

PARTICIPANTS’ WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PROJECT: PROCESS, IMPACT, OUTCOME

It is impossible to consider all situations that may occur during the project, or why people may have a change of mind about the consent or the project itself. It is also difficult to advise how one should behave when people involved in your project behave in unanticipated ways. Kohne (cited in Smith 1992: 98), explains,

“Understanding why people behave as they do and make the decisions they make helps you not only to accept their right to determine their own destinies but also to assess your own reactions and to determine your own behaviour.”

People may decide to withdraw from the interviewing process during the various stages. And the impact of their withdrawal would differ, depending on when their withdrawal happened. Withdrawals often happen during the initial stage when the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher is sourcing the participants. In my experience, potential participants contacted me expressing their enthusiasm for the project. Yet, when I emailed them the consent to sign, they refused. Some of the participants would come back to me saying, “I want to participate in your project, but I don’t want to sign anything.” Generally, at this stage, the creative nonfiction writer/ researcher deals with all sorts of reasons why people don’t want to sign the documents. So, you’re left with a binary choice: try to persuade them to sign up, by explaining that this is for both their and your protection or move on. Regardless, the harm to your project is minimal. You just need to keep searching.

The second stage is when people sign up but then opt to withdraw from the mid project or sign up only to vanish. It’s frustrating, of course. The outcome is the same – keep searching. The third stage is when people change their mind after the project is completed (or nearer completion). In my experience, this is a less common outcome. Generally, if you’ve been working with people for a certain period, it’s clear that they are invested in their participation. In my case, the participant requested to read their story after the doctoral thesis had been submitted to the library. Their initial request was not to include their story in the book I wanted to publish, then they wanted to completely withdraw from the project.

What happens at that stage is that, as an author, you experience all sorts of emotions, from frustration to disbelief. However, what remains important is to realize that from the moment you receive such a request, your project becomes a legal case. And you need to seek legal advice from your institution’s legal services, or an independent solicitor specializing in the field. However, as publication deadlines loom, the opportunity of waiting for a legal resolution can also prove problematic. In this situation, one obvious solution is to replace one piece of material with a piece of previously unused material. Of course, this requires having more material (i.e. interviews) than it is possible to include in the book, meaning that some

participants would be excluded from the project, which also creates another ethical dilemma for the creative nonfiction writer/researcher. Besides, such replacement is only possible if the creative output of the story remains intact.

At the time of writing this paper, my case is still open, yet I have received some reassurance from the solicitor. Currently, having reviewed all required documents, the solicitor confirmed that the ownership of the ideas and material in the PhD, including anything the participants contribute to it, belongs to me. This means that I hold the legal rights to my PhD thesis, and everything related to it, and can keep the participant's chapter in my PhD. However, on the ethical side, I have faced a moral dilemma – should I include this story in the book or not? I decided not to include it, given that I knew the participant was clearly unhappy and didn't want their story to be published.

To conclude, the consent form is not a shield, but the start of an ethical relationship with the participant. It is an area that should be discussed by professionals in the fields of creative writing, copyright law, and ethics. Researchers/creative nonfiction writers as well as participants should be protected by clear guidance framed by both the law and ethical considerations.

BIOGRAPHY

Olga Kenton is a writer, an early-career researcher, and a Fellow of Advanced HE. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Birmingham, where she currently teaches in the Department of Modern Languages. Her latest publications are *The England We Know: Russian Voices Abroad* (Academica Press, 2025) and the co-authored textbook *Russian Language for Postgraduate Researchers: Intermediate to Advanced* (Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2025).

REFERENCES

Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (1999) *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice*. Available online. Accessed: 15 December 2025.

Balkin E. J., Kollerup M. G., Kymre I. G. et al. (2023) 'Ethics and the Impossibility of the Consent Form: Ethnography in a Danish Nursing Home' *Journal of Aging Studies*. 64, 1–8. Available online. Accessed: 15 December 2025.

Carr C. T., Niftulaeva A., Parfenova D. (2024) 'Words, Words, Words: Participants Do Not Read Consent Forms in Communication Research' *Communication Research Reports*. 41 (4), 199–209. Available online. Accessed: 15 December 2025.

Caulley, D. N. (2008) *Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring: The Techniques of Writing Creative Nonfiction* Sage Publications. 14 (3), 424–449. Available online. Accessed: 15 December 2025.

Clarke N., Granger, J. (2021) Should I let the source read my article before publication? *JournalismUK*. Available online. Accessed: 6 November 2025.

Department for Education (n.d.) *Gaining Informed Consent*. Available online. Accessed: 17 December 2025.

Gerard, P. (1996) *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*. Long Grove: Waveland Press.

Gutkind, L. (1997) *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Gutkind, L. (n.d.) *What is Creative Nonfiction?* Available online. Accessed: 23 November 2025.

Harrington, W. (2007) 'Beginning in Narrative' in M. Kramer and W. Call (ed.) *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide* from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University. New York: Plume.

Iphofen, R. (2021) *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. European Commission, DG Research and Innovation. Available online. Accessed: 23 November 2025.

Journalism University (2023) *Reporting Techniques: Navigating the Ethical Terrain of Journalism Interviews*. Available online. Accessed: 25 November 2025.

Kantor, J., Twohey, M. (2019) *She Said*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

NUJ (n.d.) *Code of Conduct*. National Union of Journalists. Available online. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/rules-and-guidance/code-of-conduct.html> Accessed: 23 November 2025.

Oral History Society (n.d.) Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical? . Powys: OHS Available online. <https://ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/> Accessed: 23 November 2025.

Smith, L. (1992) 'Ethical issues in interviewing' *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 17 (1), 98–103. Available online. Accessed: 12 December 2025.

UK Research and Innovation (2024) *Consent*. Available online. Accessed: 6 November 2025.

University of Birmingham (2016) *Code of Ethics*. Available online. Accessed: 23 November 2025.

University of Birmingham (2025) *Code of Practice for Research*. Available online. Accessed: 23 November 2025.

University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (n.d.) *Guidance on producing participant information sheets and consent forms*. Available online. Accessed: 15 December 2025.

Wilkerson, I. (2007) 'Playing Fair with Subjects' in M. Kramer and W. Call (ed.) *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide* from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University. New York: Plume.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988. Legislations.gov.uk. Available online. Accessed: 18 December 2025.

Data Protection Act 2018. Legislations.gov.uk. Available online. Accessed: 18 December 2025.

Oral History Association (2022) *OHA Principles and Best Practice*. Available online. Accessed: 17 December 2025.

Raising the Voices and Visibility of Unpaid Family Carers Through Writing and Poetry Film

Shelley Tracey



SHELLEY TRACEY on how the *Writers in Residence* project gave carers in Northern Ireland opportunities to develop their writing.

My presentation at the NAWE 2025 conference described the process and outcomes of a writing project in for unpaid family carers, supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. "Exploring Writing and Creativity with Unpaid Family Carers: Developing 'Writers in Residence'" focused on creating opportunities for carers to express themselves, to enhance their writing skills, to collaborate with other carers and to recognise their strengths and resilience.

The title of one of the project workshops was "Breathing Room," acknowledging the importance of creative time out for carers. The

term "Writers in Residence" recognises that the lives and personal ambitions and many carers are proscribed by their caring responsibilities. It also acknowledges their creativity and the potential of their homes as creative spaces.

Fifteen carers, all female, took part in 18 writing workshops and 45 individual mentoring sessions between November 2023 and October 2024. Carers also received 48 weekly series of writing prompts via email.

Dozens of pieces of writing emerged from the project, including poems and stories, reflections and pieces of life writing.

Carers wrote about their caring experiences, various aspects of nature, their wishes and visions, people and places which were

important to them, friendship, support and memorable experiences.

This writing included a range of literary forms, such as sonnets, ghazals, free verse, concrete poems, flash fiction, life writing, ekphrasis, parodies, haiku, haibun, manifestoes, found poems, couplets, anaphora, list poems, and collaborative pieces such as renga and centos.

While many of the poems and prose pieces created during the project focused on personal subjects, others reflect the connections between the carers and their mutual support.

In this extract from one of the prose pieces, the writer identifies what carers need:

"We need people who understand, who can hold us, who know what we're going through. What we can't do without is peer support and spaces to share our experiences."

The workshops "The Great Carer Writing Bee" and "Togetherness" explored collaboration and mutual support.

Peer support was the main theme of two workshops in June 2024. In the first session, we designed a writing workshop focusing on this topic.

Carers participated in creating writing prompts and facilitating the workshop which took place two weeks later.

Responses to the "Writers in Residence" project included acknowledgements of the personal benefits of writing, as well as a sense of belonging to a supportive writing community:

"Writing has given me a space to get to grips with the difficulties we are facing."

"I know the benefit of being able to write down words on paper and the release that can give. Also, the companionship of working with other carers and their support."

"During this process I have been able to explore memories, and to acknowledge and share frustrations and losses involved in caring alongside others who understand, support and encourage."

Some of these losses and frustrations are captured in the following poem:

I Used to Be...

*I used to be funny...
now I am morbid*

*I used to be an engineer ...
now I am a secretary*



Shelley Tracey

*I used to be an advocate ...
now I am a broken bottle at the base of the brick wall*

*I used to be friendly ...
now I am too tired*

*I used to be someone with dreams of travel and learning ...
now I am dreaming of peace and sleep*

*I used to be independent ...
now I am intricately connected*

*I used to be someone who designed complex data systems ...
now I am someone who does drudgery in panic*

*I used to be someone who was capable ...
now I am flying by the seat of my pants*

By Lia McNeilly

This poem conveys effectively the personal costs of caring and how the poet's life and identity have changed since she became a carer. The poet also collaborated with the other writers in composing the following group piece about some of the other costs of caring:

The Cost of Caring (extract)

By the Northern Trust Carers' Writing Group

- 1. Struggling to hold down a full-time job whilst also being a full time Carer.*
- 2. Giving up your job/career because your caring responsibilities are encroaching on your job.*
- 3. Losing an income within your household and having it replaced with £81.90 per week.*

4. Caring is not a 9-5 job, it does not give you a lunch break, weekends off or annual leave. It is 24/7 365 days a year.

5. At the minimum of 35 hours a week Carers allowance works out at £2.34 per hour.

6. By caring for our loved ones at home we are saving the Health Service and Government hundreds of thousands a year.

7. If additional caring support is needed the Carer ends up paying for this additional support, from £81.90 a week.

8. The long-term mental health and wellbeing of the Carer suffers. (1)

The list above reflects the profound impact of caring on carers' quality of life. It also indicates the unacknowledged contribution which unpaid carers make to the economy.

The carers involved in the "Writers in Residence" project presented this piece of writing, as well as others created during the project, at a *Carer Equality* event in June 2025 organised by the Northern Trust, when the carers read their work to other carers and professionals from the Trust. The aim of this event was to raise the profile of unpaid family carers and identify their achievements and needs.

This article proposes poetry film as another method for recognising carers' contributions, challenging their invisibility and giving them a voice. After the "Writers in Residence" project ended, I took part in a poetry film making course with Poetry Film Live.

This involved making my own poetry films and learning more about this growing field of practice.

Making and exploring poetry film enables me to combine my writing with my photographic practice. It also allows me to pursue my interest in the relationships between images and writing. The acts of planning and making poetry films offer insights into the processes of creativity. They also give me scope for creating spaces to include disadvantaged groups and individuals in having their say.

A recent Major Arts Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has given me the opportunity to extend my experiences of poetry film. One of the questions informing this work is whether poetry film might offer opportunities for the voices of unpaid family carers to be heard. I am addressing this question by creating poetry films based on carers' poems composed during the Writers in Residence project. Completed films will be shown during Carers Week in June 2026 and on other platforms.

My poetry filmmaking practices are based on my learning from a course with the poetry filmmaker Helen Dewbery and her book, *How to*

Make a Poetry Film. My understanding of poetry film and the relationship between image and word draws on the following statement: "By harnessing the power of the text and translating it into a visual form, a good poetry film creates a unique and engaging experience for the viewer where neither the words nor images would exist so satisfactorily without the other." (Helen Dewbery, Poetry Film Course notes, 2025).

I recently made a poetry film called *Carer*, based on a poem by one of the writers involved in "Writers in Residence." I showed this film at the start of my NAWE presentation in November 2025 to raise awareness about the complexities of carers' duties and the pressures and stresses which they experience.

Carer

*It gets fitted in
whatever it is
The welcomes
The goodbyes
The visitors
The visits
The lunches
The brunches
The teas
The church events
The birthdays
The funerals
The TV shopping
The outfits
The returns
The cooking
The cleaning
The washing
The drying
The groceries
The bills
The oil deliveries
The MOTs
The doctors
The dentists
The audiologists
The ophthalmologists
The oncologists
The surgeons
The nurses
The radiologists
The equipment
The pain
The falls
The ready prescriptions
The lost appointment letters
The lost phone numbers
The lost teeth
The lost words
The curtains opening
The curtains closing
The arranging
The always
The nevers
The opinions*

*The advice
It all gets fitted in
whatever it is*

By Jules Graham

The list format of the poem conveys carers' endless responsibilities and tasks. I emphasized these in the film through pacing, the use of imagery, the soundscape and the colour palette. I decided to enhance the idea of the repetitive tasks which carers need to complete by using a series of repeating images.

The film presents a rapid series of activities and tasks to convey how challenging and stressful it can be to be a carer, with all the duties and responsibilities, and too little time in which to complete them. The film is brief, only 1 minute and 40 seconds long, but it includes over 70 images, most of these coming towards the viewer, allowing little breathing space. The intention of this is to show how overwhelming caring can be.

I include hands in many of the images in the film to show that caring is "hands on," and to emphasize the extent of compassion and human contact involved in caring. The theme of hands recurred throughout the writing created during the "Writers in Residence" project, as in this extract from a poem by Stephanie O'Neill:



[These are the hands...]

*These are the hands that get you up in the morning
help you to the bathroom and wash you down.
These are the hands that wipe your face
and moisturise your hands.
These are the hands that make sure you've a drink
And make sure you're not alone.
These are the hands that do your shopping
And make sure you get healthy meals.
These are the hands that help you to the toilet
Because who else would do it for you.
These are the hands that expect nothing
other than to know you are safe
These are the hands of every carer
Without whom they'd all be lost.*

The image below appears in the film at the end of each phrase:

This image represents the carer as hands on a steering wheel. She is faceless, to convey the loss of identity which can come with caring. At the same time, the positioning of her hands on the wheel suggests that the carer is in control of the caring situation, as pressurised as it might be. The image also reflects the amount of time which carers spend travelling to medical appointments and carrying our caring tasks.

The image includes the colours pink and black, which are features of the colour palette of the film. The pink reflects tenderness, caring and compassion, while black symbolises the presence of pain and death. The colour palette of the film also includes white, representing the contrasting aspects of life and illness, the latter reflected in images of pill packets. The fourth colour is green, to evoke hope and growth and the importance of the natural world. I chose these colours to capture the full emotional and practical range of caring, with all its contrasts and complexities.

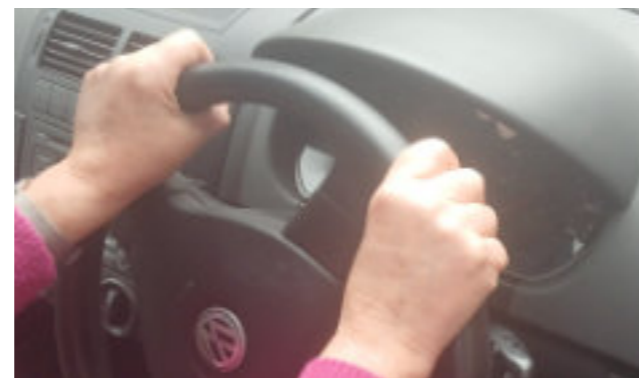
My collaboration with the poet who wrote *Carer* in designing and making the film included recording her voice and discussing the choice and sequencing of the images.

Some of the photographs in the film were taken by Jules Graham herself, based on the chosen colour palette for the film. This was one of the key images which she contributed.

This image, like many of the others in the film, contains elements of nature, implying that illness and caring are part of the natural order of things.

As the poet explained, she created this photograph to represent the multiple layers of caring, including the cycles of life, love, transience and growth. The fence represents the barriers which limit carers, from their lack of time and energy to bureaucratic issues.

In contrast with the rapid succession of images in the rest of the film, there are no images on the screen on only two occasions. The first is when the title *Carer* appears in small type on a black background immediately before the poem



begins. On the second occasion, the line "the lost words" occurs, again on a black background.

These are the only lines of text from the poem on the screen in the whole film.

The intention behind these two black frames with only a few words in a small white font was to emphasize the isolation and losses involved in illness and caring.

The impact of a poetry film comes from its soundscape as well as its visual aspects.

The soundscape of *Carer* consists of three elements: the voice of the poet listing her tasks, traffic sounds in the background every time the image of the hands on the steering wheel appear on the screen, and the sound of water running into a sink at the start of the film before the poem begins, and draining from the sink at the end of it.

I chose the water noises as a metaphor for how much carers have to manage and how energy-sapping this can be.

The traffic sound reflects the carer's immersion in the everyday world as well as that of the more intimate space of caring.

Making the *Carer* film gave me the opportunity to involve the poet and the whole carers' writing group in discussions on creating images and metaphors and on colour, sound and pacing.

We compared poems on screen with those on the page, reflecting on the contrasting features of text and film and the creative processes involved in making film and writing.

These reflections will continue with the selection of another carer's poem for a poetry film.

I end with the suggestion that the acts of making choices and decisions about creative work can enhance carers' agency and opportunities to have their voices heard.

Please email me at shelleyztracey@gmail.com if you would like a link to this film.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Shelley Tracey is a published poet, arts evaluator, creative writing facilitator, writing mentor, poetry filmmaker and photographer, and author of articles on creativity.

Previous roles include Writer in Residence in a Belfast primary school and Literature and Verbal Arts Coordinator for Community Arts Partnership.

Shelley is the recipient of several awards from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, including a Major Arts Award in 2025. Since 2021, Shelley has been engaging unpaid family carers in the Northern Trust area in writing projects.

Shelley also facilitates writing classes for autistic adults and is currently editing a publication by these writers.

NOTES

1. According to The Family Carers Ireland Report:

- 71% of Family Carers feel left out of society.
- 51% are severely lonely since the onset of the pandemic.
- 88% feel the value of what they do is not recognised by society.
- 69% experience barriers in accessing respite.

Source: Family Carers Ireland Report, The State of Caring (2022). [Available online](#).

REFERENCES

Dewbery, H. (2025) *How to Make a Poetry Film: A handbook for poets*. Published by Elephant's Footprint

Poetry Film Live. [Available online](#). Accessed 8 January 2026.

The Joy of Finding a Voice: Writing and publishing with recovering addicts in Great Yarmouth

Belona Greenwood



BELONA GREENWOOD spoke at the NAWA Conference about her experience seeing how writing reaches even the most reticent group attendees.

Great Yarmouth's Herring House Trust is lodged partly in the old family home of polymath and life-saving inventor Captain George W. Manby FRS (1765 – 1854). It is among the most deprived areas in the country and has the highest homelessness rate in Norfolk, with about one in 542 people experiencing homelessness. There is provision for 70 single homeless and it has a high support unit for those trying to live without alcohol or drugs.

It homes the *Lived Experience Collective* who work in the community, and it uses the arts to make a difference. For over two years, a creative writing group has produced original and powerful work in a variety of forms.

I often describe creative writing as the most subtle of locksmiths, opening doors, literally. If a participant is in recovery from drug or alcohol addiction, they can come and take part in the group where the approach to working with creative writing is to open a door on

each person who takes part: to find a writer's voice previously unheard within them.

First arrival can be difficult. There is hesitation, trepidation, doubt. Most participants have had a poor experience of education and look back at school as a place of misery. Many in the group have neurological conditions such as dyslexia and ADHD which impact on how they learn and experience writing and creativity.

Sometimes there are other neurological conditions which impact: anxiety and an emotional barrier to the act of writing triggered by low self-esteem and zero confidence. Poor physical health, pain and exhaustion is often an additional issue. Others can be embarrassed by their spelling and grammar which stops them putting pen to paper.

Almost no one has read an entire book.

To overcome these barriers to creating and to upend the writer's poor view of themselves, we write in a psychologically and emotional safe space and engage in plenty of discussion. We share themes, ideas, and short activities and exercises, some of which are

highly structured to help new participants with the unfamiliar task of trying to find words, imagine, create story.

Each week embodies an element of surprise as we cultivate curiosity of self, the world, and others. If there was a keyword to use in the context of how the participants respond to what we do, it is surprise: surprise by fellow members of the group at what each other can do and individuals at what they have pulled out of themselves and often surprise from people in the wider community who are challenged to examine their perceptions and prejudices of the writers in recovery.

The group has been running for two years. In that time, we have produced booklets of poetry and short prose, an audio verse drama, recorded ghost stories and published a book, *Untitled: Writing from Recovery*. Every step of the process has been co-created with every decision that needed to be taken agreed by the whole group. Although the population of the group can shift, people move on, fall back into addiction, leave because their recovery is complete; a small number of stalwart writers are the backbone of this shared enterprise.

We have worked closely with nature, exploring the rural environment, as well as the urban landscape more closely associated with drug-taking and alcohol. Being in nature, exploring our relationship with it has inspired some exceptional writing from non-writers.

Untitled

I should have listened

The signs were there

The birdsong is gone

The fields are bare

If I would have looked

I would have been aware

The white on the mountain

Creeps down its face

The slow tide has risen

It snuck in unseen

Riding on its war waves

Is Old Man Winter and his wrath

By Russell

It has also led some members to develop and deepen relationships with the natural world, remembering and revelling, leading to spending more time outside, learning more such as downloading and using apps such as Merlin, to help to identify birds.

The book, we published with the support of local, independent Red Herring Press has been a brilliant opportunity to change perceptions and to give those without a voice a chance to be heard. It is the first step in creating space for tangible change on a personal and wider societal level as to how recovering addicts and homeless people are seen.

This desire for a change of perception is central to the book. The blurb on the back written by the group makes clear attitudes they want to address.

Do not read this book if you follow the herd.

Do not read this book if you choose to judge.

Do not read this book of all you see are victims.

Do not read this book if you refuse to believe in hope.

The writing in this book is for open-minded people, for those who seek to understand others, who want to engage with the world as it is and as it could be in all its passion, humour, imagination, truth, pain and creative power.

This book has been written by members of the creative writing group at Herring House Trust, a hostel and recovery unit in Great Yarmouth.

Open this book if you want to be inspired and read the powerful words of people in recovery.

I think the book which has been sold locally to raise awareness is an example of what a powerful tool creative writing can be in changing attitudes of self and of the community. It was important to the group that the book should not just be about lived experience, where the writers would be seen as a condition, dehumanizing, rather than as creative individuals.

Lived experience is on the page, sometimes directly explored, often drawn on in the act of writing other stories or poetry.

The impact on the writers has meant more cultural involvement in other art forms such as painting, designing, etc., as well as attending and taking part in cultural events. Art in all its forms is now more accessible to them.

It has also led to taking part in other learning experiences such as songwriting and local history workshops, as well as participation in national community arts projects, such as *Beach of Dreams*. One member of the group has become a reader.

The creative conversations we have during our sessions are wide-ranging, relevant, and topical. There is a sense of belonging and exploration. Inside the hostel itself, there are books available to those in residence. But before the books came the writing.

Although it is not something easy to measure, using words has increased personal confidence and the more that the writers feel confident in expressing themselves, the more their words can make a change to their individual lives, to their community and to the world outside.

BIOGRAPHY

Belona Greenwood is a scriptwriter, writer and creative facilitator. She received a Norfolk Arts Award for 'Outstanding Contribution to the Arts' in 2018 for her work supporting women writers.

She is adept at co-creation both in creating theatre and publishing. She has extensive experience of working with vulnerable people.

'Be Me. Write Free': the benefits of utilising writing for wellbeing as a form of 'play' inside and outside the secondary classroom

Isabel Caddy



ISABEL CADDY spoke at the NAWE Conference on how creating autonomous, freewriting opportunities for young people in the classroom can develop their confidence and skills as writers.

French author Jules Reynard stated, "Writing is a way of talking without being interrupted" (Goodreads, Inc. 2026). Often, we can write things we cannot bring ourselves to say.

Equally, writing can catalyse reflections on significant happenings, providing space for a conversation with ourselves. As an ex-English teacher who has always turned to writing to navigate emotions,

I believe that a positive impact can be had on the wellbeing of young people if we support them in utilising writing as a method for finding their 'voice'.

I sought to make an offering to schools due to the rise in young people, specifically teenagers, needing mental health support (Mind 2021).

Arguably, with schools now functioning more as community centres, they would benefit from wellbeing practices being embedded into the

curriculum, or student timetables. I have created a series of writing for wellbeing workshops, to be delivered in secondary schools to small groups across six-to-eight-week blocks.

The choice to facilitate workshops within secondary schools as a form of play is underpinned by a desire to champion young people at a time when all around them may feel unstable: "Experts agree that we are experiencing an unprecedented grief pandemic due to the large number of deaths and non-death losses evoked by the COVID-19 crisis, which threatens our understanding of the world and ourselves" (Den Elzin et. al. 2023: 425).

As part of this, society must acknowledge that "living losses may be particularly challenging because they are socially not recognised like bereavement, and have no real resolution or sense of closure" (425). Therefore, British teenagers may be experiencing a "happiness recession" (Booth 2024), feeling like they are living in turbulent times, post-pandemic, with daily news about the climate, cost of living, and mental health crises, for example. As such, writing for wellbeing offers schools a strategy for supporting young people who may be struggling.



Isabel Caddy

Additionally, "some young people recognised the lack of resources in schools and were often well aware of the systemic issues around funding and the prioritisation of academic achievement" (And then 2021: 34) – this should not be another 'crisis' that young people face.

Furthermore, surveys of young people show they "generally do want to be receiving in-person face-to-face support at least some of the time" (5), which fits with a low-cost, in-school initiative like writing for wellbeing. The workshops feed into a 'Well culture' as promoted by the Well Schools initiative; their intention is to ensure schools put wellbeing at the centre of all they do.

Therefore, providing students with space to access wellbeing activities links with their ethos of "a whole school approach that places as much emphasis on wellbeing as it does on academic performance. Well Schools understands that children and young people are more effective learners when they are happy and well" (Hennessey et. al. 2023: 2).

Consequently, even though it's not my primary aim, school leaders should recognise that writing for wellbeing could enhance a young person's academic performance.

Society readily views creatives as therapists (art therapy, music therapy, dramatherapy) who aid people with rehabilitation from a serious illness or addiction. Yet using creativity to support wellbeing, with such a strategy as writing for wellbeing, is a vital tool for everyone to have access to, and to learn how to employ for navigating life's difficulties.

My wish to offer a reflective, arts-based practice in schools aligns with the Arts and Minds campaign (Arts And Minds 2026) and the research they've gathered that acknowledges why schools may no longer be encouraging the Arts: exams "were reformed in 2010 to be 'linear' rather than modular, and to be externally rather than school assessed [...] [which] reduces the emphasis on practice and the importance of the experiential making and performing", (Arts Council England 2018: 5) and

finding that "Extra-curricular time gives way to 'intervention' or revision".

Budget pressures mean that money is less available for visits [...] or for bringing in arts specialists into the school"(5). Changes are required to allow schools to play their part in redefining what is modelled to young people as being of 'worth'.

I have always found it ironic that the one or two hours of afterschool revision for many GCSE students is entitled 'golden hour', and reflect on what such titling suggests to young people about a work-life balance.

In planning for my workshops, I am mindful of the distinction between teacher and facilitator: both impart forms of knowledge, but through different methodologies. In facilitation, I am focused on the process; meeting young people 'where they are'; celebrating their autonomy; and seeking to empower, enable and encourage their voices (where 'voice' is defined as their writing).

Teaching is the delivery of a curriculum, with set objectives, and usually set expectations as to how the work must be approached and completed: the teacher holds the power.

As a facilitator, I make clear to participants that they hold the power in our space. The participants must see me as a "co-explorer, as there is no one right way to approach any work" (Stukenberg 2017: 280).

Here, "work" translates as my planned 'activities': I choose workshop terminology to distance young people from the teacher-speak of 'tasks', 'paragraphs' and 'exercises', to try to assuage any worries.

A few months back, I asked my four year-old what she'd learnt at nursery; she replied, "We do playing, not learning." Such a comment saddened me: I seek to present those verbs as synonyms. This aligns with McLoughin's comments about teaching creative writing: "an element of play is particularly important. Students should be free to take an initial trigger and play with it until it becomes something interesting [...] and something the student owns" (2007: 95).

My activities are constructed on this premise. We "need to allow students the time to think creatively. This society is a society in a hurry [...] [but] Most creative insights do not happen in a rush" (Sternberg 2016: 374). The workshops offer the chance to step outside of 'the busy' of our days – especially a school day that runs at such an intense pace.

I have considered how to create, within the school environment, an optimal physical habitat to nurture creativity while ensuring the psychological safety of my participants.

With regards to setting, Harper recommends thinking "in terms of its function [...] in terms of the emotional importance of surroundings [...] or in terms of the structural properties of these things" (2012: 52).

If I am to foster an 'internal' habitat where my participants feel comfortable to experiment and explore, it is crucial their 'external' habitat feels detached from the traditional classroom, as young

BIOGRAPHY

Isabel Caddy taught English for 17 years: she was Second in Department, new teacher mentor, and coach. She is beginning a PhD, supervised by the Creative Writing and Education departments, to further research writing for wellbeing; to complete her teaching memoir; and to explore the interconnectivity of staff and student wellbeing. She is completing her MA at the University of Gloucestershire in Creative and Critical Writing, before the PhD begins in October.

REFERENCES

Andthen. (2021) *Supporting young people – with a focus on trauma*. [Available online](#). Accessed 27 November 2025.

Arain, M. et. al. (2013) *Maturation of the adolescent brain. Neuropsychiatric disease and treatment*, 9, pp. 449-61, [Available online](#). Accessed 15 December 2025.

Arts And Minds (2026 Arts And Minds: Putting Creativity At The Heart Of The Curriculum. [Available online](#). Accessed 7 January 2026.

Arts Council England (2018) *Time To Listen*. [Available online](#). Accessed 6 January 2026.

Booth, R. (2024) 'Happiness recession: UK 15-year-olds at bottom of European satisfaction league'. *The Guardian*. 29 August. [Available online](#). Accessed 15 December 2025.

Brophy, K. (2007) 'Workshopping the Workshop and Teaching the Unteachable' in G. Harper and J. Kroll (eds). *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 75-87.

Chavis, G. G. (2011) 'Introduction'. *Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 11-15.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014) 'Flow and Education'. *Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Netherlands: Springer Dordrecht, pp. 129-151.

Den Elzen, K. et. al. (2023) Rewriting grief following bereavement and non-death loss: a pilot writing-for-wellbeing study. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 51(3), 425-443.

Harper, G. (2012) 'Creative Writing Habitats' in D. Donnelly and G. Harper (eds). *Key Issues in Creative Writing*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 48-60.

Hennessey, A. et. al. (2023) An evaluation of the Well Schools community whole school approach for supporting teacher and student wellbeing: a mixed-method ecological case study approach. Manchester: The University of Manchester. [Available online](#). Accessed 8 January 2026.

Goodreads, Inc. (2026 Jules Reynard Quotes' [Availableonline](#). Accessed 7 January 2026.

Goodreads, Inc. (2026 Stephen King Quotes' [Availableonline](#). Accessed 5 January 2026.

Kingston-Hughes, B. (2022) *A Very Unusual Journey Into Play*. California: Corwin.

Koenig-Workman, I. (2025 *Cognitive Load Theory*. [s.l.]. The Decision Lab [Available online](#). Accessed 17 April 2025.

McLoughlin, N. (2007) 'Creating an Integrated Model for Teaching Creative Writing: One Approach' in G. Harper and J. Kroll (eds). *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 88-99.

Mind (2021) *Not making the grade*. [Available online](#). Accessed 15 December 2025.

NeuroLaunch editorial team. (2025 'Cognitive Flooding: Navigating the Overwhelming Rush of Thoughts and Emotions', *NeuroLaunch*, 14 January, [Available online](#). Accessed 17 April 2025.

Sternberg, R. J. (2016) 'Teaching for Creativity' in R. A. Beghetto and J. C. Kaufman (eds). *Nurturing creativity in the classroom*. 2nd Edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 355-380.

Stukenberg, J. (2017) Deep habits: Workshop as critique in creative writing. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 16(3), pp. 277-292 [Available online](#). Accessed 5 January 2026.

Symons, J. and Hurley, U. (2018) Strategies for connecting low income communities to the creative economy through play: two case studies in Northern England. *Creative Industries Journal*, 11(2), pp. 121-136.

Embedding Ethics in Creative Writing Teaching

Alexia Casale



ALEXIA CASALE presented at the NAWE Conference on provocation — how ethics should be embedded in creative writing teaching.

This practice-focused article briefly outlines the argument for embedding ethics in creative writing teaching, then explores a range of questions teachers can ask of themselves and students to promote deep, active learning across levels of study.

In creative practice, the capacity and ability to act ethically is more important than advanced theoretical knowledge. Not only does this approach save the need to find time in busy programmes to teach ethics, but it recognises that ethics are fundamental – good creative practice rests on an ethical foundation that mediates complex and sometimes contradictory challenges in a context characterized by uncertainty. As such, ethics should be an ongoing touch-point instead of a specific, discrete concern.

Scholars have recognised the importance of active learning since the earliest days of Developmental Psychology and the formal study of pedagogic practice. Piaget claimed that to tell children something was to prevent them from discovering it for themselves, while Bloom's *Taxonomy* is predicted on the idea that as learning becomes more active and embedded, it becomes deeper and more lasting.

Practical, authentic tasks support active, embedded learning and enable learners to innovate and create

not merely regurgitate – this is why most creative writing programmes focus on exercises, prompts, and workshopping.

Embedding ethics in authentic, active learning is as simple as drawing out the ethical implications inherent in almost all dimensions of creative writing

The simplest way is by identifying the core ethical elements underlying the aspect of craft or practice being explored in a specific lesson or task.

For instance, asking students to write about a real event (especially one in living memory) provides opportunities to discuss ethics regarding characterisation (will your protagonist be fictional or a real person?), plot (which aspects of the story will you tell and which will you leave out?), and theme (how will you frame the story?). Even if higher-level issues are not explored in the following discussion (e.g. what elements of a true story should you feel free to change as a fiction writer?), there is rich scope at a purely practical level to challenge students to think deeply about a range of ethical dimensions.

When framed through the lens of the potential harms unethical storytelling can do, even small children can grasp ethical concepts – and why they matter.

What if someone wrote a story about what you did this morning and said it was true but the story was



Alexia Casale

about you stealing your best friend's favourite thing? How would that make you feel? Do you think it's OK or do you think it's wrong for someone to write a story like that? What if the person didn't say the story was true?

For older students, the questions might move from 'If something bad happened to you, how would you feel about someone writing a novel about it? What would you want them to do and not do in terms of research and how they write the book?' to 'How about if someone wanted to write about one of your grandparents? Would it be different if it was a deceased great-grandparent?'

Discussions of this sort can tease out questions about different sorts of harms (e.g. if the people involved in a 'true story' is still alive and/or their loved ones are), and what can mitigate harm (e.g. research). Critically, it necessarily opens the door to discussions about ethical research, especially if you then set your students the task of writing a recent 'true story' while being mindful of how they'd feel if someone were writing about them/their family.

The issues become more vexed and complex at higher levels of study where publication is usually a possibility if not an overt goal.

A useful task involves pairing students and asking them to tell each other a story about an upsetting but non-traumatic event they experienced as a child, then writing a story based on their partner's account. The mutual vulnerability and mutual power experienced in the role of 'writer' versus 'subject of the writing' gives students direct insight into both the challenges of being responsible for telling someone else's story (including how that person might react to the telling) and the challenges of being written about.

This sort of task provides an excellent 'hook' to explore the principle of informed consent at an age-appropriate level of complexity.

Naturally, such tasks also open the door to explore not just the range of methods and types of data that

writers might work with for different stories but how to take a critical approach to evidence. A useful task involves giving students a piece of second-hand reportage about a famous historical event and asking them to write a story inspired by it, then giving them a first-hand account and asking them what they would do to change their initial draft. Would they merely add details or would they think again about how different people experienced the same event – and what factors might make different people choose to tell very different versions of the same story?

Examining an event where there are no first-hand accounts from one or more entire groups of the people involved helps to demonstrate not just issues of bias and the importance of positionality, but also how power interacts with ethical concerns, including by determining what evidence is preserved and who gets to tell a specific story.

Contextualising ethical principles through their practical application demonstrates that just as writing is a process, the ethical considerations that underpin it are similarly dynamic, involving different elements at different stages, many of which need revisiting over time.

Each encounter with ethical challenges enhances knowledge and skills, especially when reflective practice draws explicit lessons from on-going experience.

Ultimately, what matters most when it comes to ethics is not good intentions at one point in time, but good behaviour across time.

As students engage progressively with activities with explicit ethical dimensions, so it becomes easier to facilitate richer theoretical and philosophical discussions about the underlying principles. From 'How do I write this story the right way?' we come to 'What is the 'right' way?' Asking the bigger questions empowers students to develop a personal stance that unites moral values with professional practice.

Creative practice is characterised by 'grey areas' and uncertainties. In a context where most elements are subjective rather than objective, and there are few straightforwardly 'right' or 'wrong' answers, ethical practice provides a framework to structure practice such that the odds of getting it 'right' are increased and the risks of getting things 'wrong' are mitigated.

In accredited learning, the embedding of ethics in creative writing teaching takes on additional dimensions vis-à-vis quality assurance standards, and the governance and policy frameworks that motivate and check compliance. In Higher Education, most programmes have accredited intended learning outcomes relating to transferable skills and discipline-specific employability knowledge.

A practical understanding of ethics – and concurrent experience-based skills in how to act ethically – embed an authentic grasp of how to align behaviour with professional and personal values as well as professional standards.

To be ethical (rather than just to know about ethics) involves skills in research, problem-solving, risk

management and mitigation, critical thinking, and more. This is rich territory for boosting employability and demonstrates just how much value embedding ethics in discipline-specific learning brings with it.

In Creative Writing, tasks and practical activities that build on each other scaffold how ethical practice offers a foundation for creative practice. Just as writing involves conceptualising, development, drafting, solo editing, editing with feedback and more, so ethics plays a role in mediating different challenges and concerns at different points.

Critically, different ethical considerations adhere when working with an agent and/or publisher: a key element of boosting employability through embedding ethics involves helping students understand and parse how the publishing industry tackles ethical issues.

A helpful task involves asking students to identify a common ethical theme in key publications like *The Bookseller* or *Publishers' Weekly*, then to examine the same theme as explored in discussions on social media, book-blogs and/or review sites like Goodreads.

What ethical issues is publishing considering, and what issues is it ignoring? Is the debate rounded or partial? Are there differences in how publishers, agents, authors, bookseller, librarians, teachers, readers and other stakeholders approach the same ethical issue? How does publishing currently tackle different ethical challenges, and what are the pros and cons (practical and inherent)?

For instance, what are the tensions in 'sensitivity reads', and how should the roles of sensitivity reader, author and publisher be mediated when there are no professional standards to bring to bear? When publishing treats sensitivity readers as a panacea, what is ignored and what are the consequences?

This is rich territory not just for exploring ethics but the challenges of a creative career requiring negotiation between artistic practice and the pragmatic reality that publishing is a business.

Giving students the opportunity to hear from published authors about their ethical stances, the ethical challenges they've faced and surmounted, and the continuing professional development they've undertaken to enhance their practice, is invaluable in helping students grasp the foundational nature of ethics in a creative career.

Other good ways to embed ethics include through activities involving literary criticism. Take a book like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, then challenge students to consider its ethical dimensions. Why did he call it a 'non-fiction novel'? Can a 'novel' be 'non-fiction'? How does this framing speak to Capote's ethical stance?

Alternatively, why not look at *The Salt Path* and the book's original press and publicity, then the press and publicity (including recent documentary) about the likely falsehoods?

What are the ethical considerations inherent in the work, and what are the considerations that emerge specifically from the story being promoted as true?

What does 'true' mean here? To what extent should 'truth' be framed as a moral and/or ethical duty of the author?

For teachers looking to convey broader considerations, *13 Reasons Why* is a useful option. Does the book respond to the extensive literature on writing responsibly about suicide and self-harm? What does close reading reveal about specific failings and/or successes? What research should an author do when writing about issues like mental health struggles, and to what extent should this impact what they write and how they write it?

Ethics is a field of questions with few absolute answers, especially when it comes to creative writing. Ethical practitioners question, learn and reflect as a means for striving towards the most ethical behaviour they are capable of at any point in time.

CREATIVE WRITING ALMOST ALWAYS INVOLVES ETHICS

The argument that creative writing teachers have a duty to embed ethics relies on the assumption that ethics are relevant and important in all creative writing. As this article shows, this is easy to demonstrate when it comes to any moderately complex narrative, but even most smaller works involve at least some ethical issues, whether about what is written, how and why, or what impact it has on readers and, through them, the wider world.

It seems unlikely that any undergraduate Creative Writing course nowadays could fail to examine issues of representation, particularly in terms of writing inside/outside lived experience. Here there are craft considerations, industry considerations, and readership ones: underpinning them all are ethical considerations, whether this is ever made explicit or not. However, this should always be explicit. In order to make informed choices as writers, we need to understand everything at stake.

Even small children can grasp the basic ethical considerations concerning representation if these is presented in questions like 'How would you feel if someone wrote a story describing you in a way that was mean or untrue?' While it is progress that publishing is taking issues of representation seriously, the fact that it is doing so primarily on an ad hoc basis in response to loud, public controversies has meant that instead of a rounded, serious consideration, debates and solutions are often partial and shallow.

Representation is a vexed field. Inaccurate representation does not just offend but can feed into systems of marginalisation and oppression by reinforcing false narratives, stereotypes and misinformation (Cosgrove, 2009). However, a partial conversation neglects the fact that just as there is an ethical duty to strive for 'accurate', 'non-harmful' representation – in full recognition of how complex it is to determine what that means in practice – there is a concurrent ethical duty to represent real-world diversity.

In 1988, Emily Style introduced the idea that fiction provides readers with 'mirrors and windows': 'mirrors' in the sense that writing can reflect our

selves and our realities, and 'windows' in that it can provide a window onto other people and their lives. Rudine Sims Bishop expanded on Style's work in 1990 by arguing that writing can also provide "sliding-glass-doors": a way to imaginatively step into another person's shoes and gain a vicarious experience of other lives. For fiction to provide mirrors, windows and sliding-glass-doors to all reader, with all the concurrent implications for enhancing empathy for ourselves and others, it must be diverse.

Neuro-imaging studies substantiate claims that reading enhances empathy through vicarious, imaginative experience: in fact, it demonstrates that reading is one of the most effective means we have of boosting empathy. However, the literature also demonstrates that not all writing is equal in this regard. This raises thorny ethical questions. Do writers have a duty to try to maximise the extent to which their work enhances empathy? Does this vary depending on the nature of the writing involved?

Ethics provides a framework for striving to represent well while simultaneously striving to represent diversity in recognition of the complex challenges of writing both inside and outside our lived experience. 'I want to write a book with a visually impaired protagonist, but publishers might object because I'm not visually-impaired myself: what should I do?' is the type of question students regularly pose.

However, if we help them discover better questions, we can guide them to make choices that unite craft and artistry, industry understanding, and their own values. If we can empower students to ask questions like 'Why do I want to write this book and how can I proceed in a way that will satisfy my artistic impulses and not limit the likelihood of publication?' we simultaneously empower them to take ownership of their ethical duties and the development of a personal ethical stance.

Alongside this, we must empower them as independent learners through enhancing their understanding of research as a means to deliver on their values.

By MA level, we can tackle even more complex questions about genre and form.

Do writers of historical fiction have a duty to be truthful about the facts? What facts can be changed without this being unethical? What is 'fact' and what is interpretation of fact?

- If a novel positions itself as historical, as opposed to alternative history, does this shift the writer's ethical duties?
- If writing fantasy as opposed to historical fiction, are there ethical duties regarding whether elements of real-world oppression are replicated or not?

At higher levels of study, particularly postgraduate research, there is mileage in examining a range of ethical frameworks, from critiques of ethnography to narrative ethics (Dicks, 2023, offers a helpful summary), and from how creative writing can contribute to mental health and wellbeing to the ethical duties inherent in biography and memoir.

While most universities now provide researcher development training at PhD level (as required by the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the Vitae framework, the UKRI Good Practice Principles in Recruitment and Training at Doctoral Level and the Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training), there are significant disparities between institutions regarding the degree to which general ethics training is explored through a discipline-specific lens.

This impacts whether PhD students in Creative Writing are required to explore ethical considerations at all if their work does not require ethical approval. As a result, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is common for ethical issues to be raised at examination.

Often this relates to fictionalised elements of the student's life or their family's history. For instance, there are ethical implications when an author purposefully names a character after a family member (in one example, the protagonist's brother was named after the writer's brother, only the fictional brother had committed suicide and the real brother was still alive).

Similarly serious ethical issues are raised when a story reveals things about a real person that other members of the family were not previously aware of (this often involves issues of domestic violence or child abuse). What rights do other people in the family have in respect of such situations? What if a family discusses the planned creative work and agrees a specific approach then someone changes their mind? Students as writers and researchers need to leave room for discovery and development. Equally, family members may change their minds about giving consent after seeing the creative work for the first time.

Examining common unintended consequences of these sorts, and mitigating the risks for all involved, is an ethical duty: a PhD by creative practice is a research degree and, as such, ethical obligations apply, albeit they present in discipline-specific ways.

Just as students have ethical duties, supervisors have commensurate duties to support students in wading through the murky waters of creative ethics; when publication is a possibility, they should also consider if they have an additional duty in respect of ensuring students understand the potential legal implications.

Moreover, when dealing with auto-ethnographic methods, life-writing or deep reflection on traumatic experiences, the PhD student becomes a research participant. The fact that consent is implicit in continuing with one's own work does not vitiate the ethical duty that consent be informed: if it is implicit, it cannot be meaningfully informed.

Even when universities support students to consider ethical matters, such as how to mitigate mental health risks when mining traumatic experiences for research, consideration often stops there, even though there are likely unintended consequences that merit exploration. For instance, supervisors and students should discuss how to protect the student's wellbeing in the context of exploring real, traumatic events from a critical perspective: even if there is a degree of therapeutic purpose, this may conflict with

the requirements of PhD study in terms of rigour. Parsing these complex matters will not produce clear answers, but the fact of exploration is the ethical duty.

These are complex matters with few right or wrong answers, except that it is wrong to undertake research, including creative practice research, without engaging with the relevant ethical consideration.

CALL TO ACTION

Empowering students to embed ethical principles in their creative practice is a core responsibility for teachers of creative writing. It also offers active, authentic opportunities to boost employability, including by introducing students to research concepts that will empower them as lifelong independent learners able to actualise their values across all dimensions of their creative practice. Collectively, ethical knowledge and skills provide a framework for negotiating the vexed relationship between creativity and business while maintaining artistic, professional and personal values. Ethical practice as a foundational part of creative practice is the ultimate 'virtuous circle'.

For those looking for a way to quickly and easily start to embed ethics in their teaching, here is a simple call to action:

- Identify 1-3 tasks that will embed ethics learnings through practical experiences.
- Identify 1-3 principles or elements to tease out in discussion, and a follow-on exercise for each.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Alexia Casale is an author of Middle Grade (Bloomsbury), Young Adult (Faber), and adult crime (Viking/Penguin Random House) fiction, as well as a Reader at Bath Spa University, where she leads the MA Writing for Young People (MAWYP) and MAWYP Online. Her portfolio career takes in dramaturgy and script-consulting in theatre, film and TV, as well as specialist non-fiction editing, with a focus on violence against women and the prevention of torture. She has a particular interest in how fiction can enhance empathy and support the embrace of human rights.

REFERENCES

Bloom, BS, Engelhart, MD, Furst, EJ, Hill, WH, and Krathwohl, DR (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Volume I: Cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay Company.

Casale, A (2025). Research and Ethics for Writing Inside/Outside Your Lane. NAWA Conference 2025, 7-8 November 2025.

Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2019). Universities UK, launched 2019. [Available online](#). Accessed 12 January 2026.

Cosgrove, S. (2009) *Ethics of Representation for Creative Writers, Pedagogy Critical*

Approaches to Teaching Literature Language Composition and Culture. 9(1). DOI: 10.1215/15314200-2008-021

Dicks, D (2023) Finding the Value in Teaching Ethics to Writers. *Writing in Education*. 9, 20-31.

Piaget, J (1972) *Play and Development: A Symposium with Contributions by Jean Piaget, Peter H. Wolff and Others*. Piers, MW (ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Sims Bishop, R (1990) *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors. Perspectives: A Review Journal of the Cooperative Services for Children's Literature*. 6(3), ix-xi. [Available online](#). Accessed 12 January 2026.

UKRI (2024). *Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training*. January 2024. [Available online](#). Accessed 12 January 2026.

UKRI (2022). *Good practice principles in recruitment and training at a doctoral level*. UKRI. 11 January 2022, updated 31 January 2024. [Available online](#). Accessed 12 January 2026.

Using Creative Writing for Social Good: The Act of Creative Writing and Story Telling as a Tool for Positive Social Change

Emma McKenzie



EMMA MCKENZIE presented at the NAWE Conference on how creative writing practice can be used to instil positive change and help people to build personal connection and compassion.

Literature holds the possibility of having a profound impact on individual lives. It opens a space for us to share and discuss ideas, whilst also holding up a mirror to the culture and societies that we engage with. In the book *We are What We Read* (2025), Vybarr Cregan-Reid conveys his journey into reading, following a challenging start in life to eventually becoming a university professor.

Part memoir, he describes the profound impact of reading: "With stories the present becomes your present. Your body dissolves and your feelings of delight, disgust and desire are dictated by the ink on the paper and not by the materiality of their surroundings" (Cregan-Reid, 2024, p. 106). He discusses how literature has changed his life and the influential impact that a story has on society.

In his inaugural lecture Cregan-Reid (2025) cited works such as *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, as leading the way in creating literature that informed

social change. Stories such as these convey our human experience and give a voice to inequalities and inadequate systems. Ultimately these works speak to the people and raise awareness of issues adding an important weight to highlight social injustice and the need for change in society.

More importantly reading, sharing and creating stories have a huge impact on how we think and feel about ourselves and our place in the world, helping develop our perception of other people's experiences and our shared humanity.

In more modern times we have seen the work of Margaret Atwood fictionalise truths and workings of modern society in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 2017). *The Handmaid's Tale* is famous for portraying a dystopian world in which women are segregated in society depending on their status and ability (or not) to give birth. "Since its release in 1985 Margaret Atwood has been asked the same question about *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'How did you come up with this stuff?' Her answer has always been the same, that the terrifying events of the novel all have their precedents in some of the darkest chapters of world history." (Atwood, 2019).

Atwood first began thinking about writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1981; she states that it began with the question "what if" (Atwood, 2019). Atwood goes on to state that she was "tired of having people say 'it can't happen here.'" The novel was born as a reaction to events of the world that she did not intentionally research. They were events she stumbled across in Newspapers and magazines culminating in her own clipping collection of harms against women in society.

In an article written for the BBC, Armstrong (2018) describes the impact of *The Handmaid's Tale* since it was published discussing that it has become a symbolic point of reference in protests for women's rights and flashpoints of government policy.

In challenging times art can speak to the public in a way that statistics cannot. By developing characters that are relatable the writer has the power to instil compassion and empathy and to develop new ways of thinking. I find it intriguing that many of the people I work with carry very powerful stories about themselves, sometimes stories that have been placed upon them by other people such as care givers or educators. These stories can have a profound impact on how someone thinks and feels about themselves and their place in the world. By writing about it they are suddenly given an opportunity to step outside themselves and to begin to develop a new more positive narrative.

USING CREATIVE WRITING AND LITERATURE WITHIN PRACTICE

I became fascinated with the craft of writing at a young age. I loved creating poetry and stories and would often use writing as an escape into my own fantasy world, or to unpack the confusing space of the adult world. Peter Sansom writes in his opening introduction to *Writing Poems*, that creating poetry is finding the true voice of a feeling and that "It is that voice which allows us to explore, order and make sense of our lives" (Sansom, 1994).

For me this use of the written word goes beyond poetry, not only has it helped me to explore my own life, but it has given me an important tool to share with others. "Writing is a means of evoking positive memories and of enabling the production of something valuable from the imagination, which can provoke appreciation from other group members. Writing is also a means of articulating difficult feelings and unhappy memories and transmuting them into a form that makes them possible to confront" (Phillips, Linington, & Penman, 1999, p. 168).

The use of creative writing has been integral to my career as a health professional, to support the re-storying of individual identity, and the use of creative writing in group work and recovery settings.

This unfolded during my training in health care at the age of eighteen when I enrolled in a degree programme in occupational therapy. I had the idea of using my creative skills in health care settings to support people recovering from life changing illnesses. Training in mental health support was a complex and confusing undertaking.

On the one hand we were heavily influenced by the clinical environments in which the treatment was

being delivered. This type of setting leans into the medical model, with a focus on 'fixing something', just as in a physical health condition such as cancer. On the other hand, I quickly discovered that the majority of patients coming into mental health care had experienced major trauma or challenging life events that had led them to become unwell and were directly linked to their social situation or the environment in which they lived. This trauma could re-surface at any time. Medication was able to relieve some symptoms, but a lot of emphasis was also placed on psychological therapy and support and helping someone to come to terms with life events and situations.

Literature was a useful way to support me in getting to the heart of the matter. Books such as *Girl Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen (1993) helped to unpack the complexity of mental health experience. Kaysen also raised the debate between what she refers to as 'brain' and 'mind'. On the one hand she is being given tablets to 'cure' a depression, on the other hand she is scheduled for psychological therapy, which leaves her questioning – which is it – brain or mind that is having the impact on her ability to function in the world.

Kaysen also raises the perception of the care giver and the power of language in hierarchical relationships between health care professionals and patients. As a woman who had a boyfriend and previous relationships, and not yet married, she was described in her medical records as promiscuous and points out that this language would not have been used to describe a man within the same context. Situations such as this where a person is labelled as something can have a huge impact on their individual story and how they perceive themselves, creating a damaging and limiting personal narrative.

The writer Nathan Filer also started his career as a health professional, training as a psychiatric nurse before becoming a writer. Filer has also spent time investigating what it means to become mentally unwell. Filer's first novel *Shock of the Fall* was the fictitious story of a man named Matthew Homes coming to terms with the death of his younger brother.

Matthew Homes also has a diagnosis of schizophrenia. The story unpacks the trauma of the past as well as how Matthew Homes is now defined in the world by his illness.

Filer, like me, has also grappled with the definitions of mental health illness and the impact of trauma on health, he went on to write a non-fiction account of mental health called *This Book Will Change Your Mind about Mental Health*. He writes: "Too many young children endure horrific upbringings, and we know that physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and bullying substantially increase the risk of the child growing up to suffer from psychosis" (Filer, 2019, p. 152). The experience of mental health illness is directly impacted by personal trauma and deeply affects our identity and narrative of ourselves, it also reflects that issues such as inequality, poverty and abuse have a profound impact on the psyche and are some of the most significant factors that tip an individual into a mental health experience.

Since my training a lot of research has been done into the impacts of trauma and social and environmental



Emma McKenzie

factors on mental health. We now have terms such as 'Trauma Informed Care' which outline an emphasis on not what is wrong with a person, rather what has happened to a person in their lives, and the impact on their ability to function within society. "This shift in perspective and practice implies a significant adaptation in how mental health patients are understood and cared for by helping professionals" (Butler, Critelli, & Rinfrette, 2011, p. 178).

New perspectives draw on ideas such as the Stress Vulnerability Model which highlights that each individual has their own personal capacity to deal with stress, and depending on life circumstances, may be more vulnerable depending on what has happened to them in their life (Goh & Agius, 2010). This model allows the therapist to unpack the background story and consider approaches to increase coping strategies and resilience whilst also re-shaping individual identity tackling issues such as low self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth. I have been lucky enough to use this approach as a focus in my work over the last ten years.

In 2014 I was seconded from the NHS to work for a project called Converge at York St John University (www.yorksja.ac.uk/converge). Converge offers high quality educational courses run by university students and graduates and open to anyone in the community aged 18 or over with a lived experience of mental health illness. Converge gives the opportunity to access short high-quality courses led by university students and graduates in subject fields that run across the campus.

The majority of courses are in the arts, but Converge also run courses in spirituality, philosophy and subjects such as sport when there is scope to do so. Over half of the courses are now taught by people who have used the service and have been discovered to have a previous career or talent relevant to the learning community. Converge does not focus on illness or diagnosis, it allows people the opportunity to begin a new narrative, one that acknowledges the challenges that they have faced in the past, but also speaks of hope, aspiration and future.

When someone with lived experience joins Converge, they become a student, not a service user or patient, but a person accessing interesting courses. One of the first Converge students that I worked with was a man named Jamie. Jamie was referred to me by the community mental health team. Jamie had suffered significant trauma and abuse in his early years and had also experienced a traumatic bereavement as an adult. This had resulted in a deep depression which had caused him to isolate himself at home for a number of years.

Jamie had been accessing the community mental health team for over ten years, but he described the support as more of a tick box exercise ensuring that he was staying safe, rather than a focus on the future. It took six months for me to get a meeting with Jamie and for him to build the confidence to speak with me, this happened through a series of email exchanges before he eventually agreed to meet me.

When we discussed the possibility of coming into the university to take part in an educational course Jamie told me that 'places like that, weren't for people like him.' He felt that he had been written off by society due to his mental health condition and the challenges that he had faced in life. He felt stigmatised by being on benefits and that people were judging him.

We eventually met in a local cafe just to gently discuss what we offer at Converge. Instead of using standardised medical assessments and tick boxes we began by sharing stories. We discovered that we shared a love of art and creativity. We also shared stories of growing up in the 1980s and some of the cultural influences on our lives.

Following this meeting Jamie agreed to meet me at a quiet time on the campus and enrolled not only in a gentle art class at Converge, run by a tutor who had also come through his own mental health journey, but he also joined a nature based creative writing class that I was running as part of an eco-therapy project at a local nature reserve.

Participating in the nature-based writing class gave Jamie the opportunity to connect with others and to re-build his confidence. Writing about the natural world enabled Jamie to look beyond his own story and to share ideas and creativity with others in a safe space. The class also sparked Jamie's curiosity in the natural world and got him out of the house. Gradually he built his confidence and re-found his hope for a future. Jamie's personal narrative changed. He was accessing courses, developing new relationships and thinking about opportunities.

Jamie's story demonstrates that: "If we tell stories that emphasize only desolation, then we become weaker. If we tell our stories in ways that make us become stronger, we can soothe our losses and ease our sorrows. Learning how to re-envision the stories we tell about ourselves can make an enormous difference in the ways we live our lives" (Denborough, 2014, p. vii).

Jamie went on from this class to join a theatre course and to share stories on stage and today is employed as a peer support worker, using his story to help others on their recovery journey. He is also working towards a degree in Fine Art. Re-storying his life gave Jamie the ability to see beyond the past and to recover his identity. Being around others who were

moving forward in their personal journeys gave Jamie the vision of what was possible, and an anchor point for a new story.

Building on this narrative I now want to highlight why creative writing in group work was such an important tool in Jamie's recovery journey. The eco-therapy creative writing class initially started in the winter of 2014. It was inspired by the fact that many of the patients I worked with became unwell over the dark winter months and struggled with isolation during the winter season. I decided to set up a group at a local nature reserve with the aim of using creative writing to explore the beauty of nature during the dark winter months.

The first course that ran took place over ten weeks and was called *Winter Solace*. Each week began with a theme aligned to winter with the aim of connection to nature and social engagement.

Each week the creative writing class began with a walk around the woodland as an opportunity to discuss the theme of the session and to make observations. The class then returned to the centre to sit around a log burning stove and write. The class content would take the form of four main tasks, a warm-up, two core activities and a wind down task. We would often end with a poem or interesting excerpt of literature linked to the theme.

Over the coming weeks the class connected as individuals and began engaging and responding to nature. I was surprised to find that the people who had attended, not only wrote stories about the natural world, but also delved into experiences from their lives that I had not heard before. I got to know the attendees on a whole new level beyond what I knew of their illness narratives.

Another surprise was a student turning up and saying: 'I tried walking with my family at the weekend, but they just don't walk like you do.'

I asked them what they meant by this. They explained that through doing the weekly creative writing exercises they had begun to properly engage with and interact with the natural world, something which they had begun to journal about. Their walks were now filled with curiosity and questions, looking outwards not inwards.

Their family, probably rushing from A – B, were not used to this sudden change and the person noticed a significant difference in how they had interacted previously as to how they were engaged in nature following the class. The class was so successful that one lady who had been admitted to hospital over the winter months during almost every year of her adult life was able to remain at home and has done so each year since.

Building on the success of the class, I continued to run courses across the seasons, drawing on many different points of research and literature to inform the theme of each session. In an article by Usherwood and Toyne the power of sharing literature is discussed. Just as in the class that Jamie accessed, the research completed on shared literature highlighted "instances of how reading informed their understanding and appreciation of their local community and indeed, the world." (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002, pp. 38-39)

Returning to the writing of Cregan-Reid – discussing Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*, I was able to use works such as this to discuss our disconnection to nature and to re-ignite curiosity in the natural world. The following paragraph is the opening to *Under the Greenwood Tree*:

"To dwellers in a wood, almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze, the fir trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality." (Hardy, 1957)

Literature such as this gave me the opportunity to discuss the changes in connection to nature and the way that we interact with landscape in our daily lives, highlighting our diminishing knowledge of plants and species. This was a powerful tool and literature such as this helped to foster new knowledge, encouraging my students to go out and engage with the environment in a way that they hadn't done so before. Many often commented on how much this helped them to transform their wellbeing, and also to help them to be more thoughtful about their environment. It gave them the ability to connect with other people with shared interests and values.

Ultimately the eco-therapy nature writing class had a dual effect of improving participants' connection to nature, but also reduced their isolation, helped raise important issues to nature and gave them the ability to find purpose and meaning in their lives by connection through a shared interest in the natural world. Usherwood & Toyne, (2002, p. 39) discuss that coming together to explore stories can help lead to a more democratic society by fostering connection and understanding of each other and our values.

USING CREATIVE WRITING AND LITERATURE TO SUPPORT A BIGGER SOCIAL CHANGE

It is this final point which has led me to complete a research study in the form of a practice led PhD in Humanities – Creative Writing, in which I am using autoethnographic writing to create a fictitious novel about the world of mental health care. My aim is to raise awareness of the need for humanity and community as an integral part of mental health prevention and care in the future. My research was inspired by a visit to Trieste in Italy during 2018 to learn about their revolutionary mental health system. "The current service in Trieste is the produce of cultural and political movements that centred around the plight of people who are mentally ill and successful de-institutionalisation over the past 50 years." (Sashidharan, 2022, p. 52).

In Trieste I found that there were only two hospital beds for acute mental health illness which were situated in the main district hospital. The mental health hospital had been famously abolished in the 1970s by psychiatrist Franco Basaglia who "implemented his vision of anti-institutional, democratic psychiatry. The Trieste model put the suffering person – not his or her disorders – at the centre of the health care system. The model, revolutionary in its time, began with the "negation" and "destruction" of the traditional mental asylum

(‘manicomio’). A novel community mental health system replaced the mental institution.

To achieve this, the Trieste model promoted the social inclusion and full citizenship of users of mental health services” (Portacolone et al, 2015, p. 681). I discovered that the whole mental health service was integrated into the city. The focus of the service was on prevention and humanity, allowing people to access mental health support quickly when they needed it in small community based ‘recovery houses’.

The atmosphere was relaxed, the people that we spoke to were well supported. We ate lunch in a community run restaurant that supported people who had struggled with mental health issues to get back into employment. We visited a textiles workshop that had been created for similar purposes. The services felt hopeful and meaningful, people were seen at home in the main part but could also choose to stay at the recovery houses overnight should they need to.

Mental health didn’t escalate to crisis point; the focus was on the human experience and problem solving to stop the triggers to becoming unwell in their tracks. Mental health illness and treatment had been re-storied to a much more positive outcome. The story of Trieste chimed in with the work I had been doing at Converge, where the focus has become about what is possible for an individual, rather than limitations. It also highlights that when people become unwell in their mental health, they are currently swept up into a system that focuses on medical issues but does little for the human spirit.

A clinical ward environment strips a person of access to the things that affirm their identity; For example, home comforts, access to a pet or a loved one, our favourite clothes and possessions. Allowing people to re-focus on human connection, to problem solve issues early on in a mental health experience and have access to quick care can avert a crisis of mental health escalating into a requirement for a hospital admission.

As a health professional I wanted to raise awareness across our society of the need for a different approach to mental health care and treatment. This form of teaching and use of creativity to instil change is something that Maxine Greene has written extensively about. She states that in using creative practice within her work she hoped to “stimulate a kind of silent conversation that may move readers to discover what they have to say once they attend to their own situations, to the actualities of their lives” (Greene, 2000, p. 2).

In her article “Understanding the Role of Art in Social Movements and Transformation”, Melody Milbrandt writes: “In contemporary democratic societies the arts not only function to maintain social traditions and describe the world, but also often explore issues of social justice, identity and freedom. Most artists and scholars agree that the arts alone cannot change society; but the arts give voice to individual collective needs that motivate and sustain social movements.” (Milbrandt, 2010, p. 8).

Beginning with auto-ethnographic research, in which I wrote accounts of my experiences working in a variety of mental health services and also my

personal experiences of supporting a close family member with a severe and enduring mental health condition, I began to layer up re-occurring themes and stories that mirrored each other and contributed to a wider picture of mental health illness.

I have supported this research by delving into the history of mental health care in the West, personal memoirs and accounts of mental health treatment dating back to the beginning of the establishment of asylums, to modern day memoirs and other writers’ fictionalised accounts of mental health establishments. I built the reoccurring themes into a fictional novel as my creative practice part of my research to begin an important conversation about the type of environments and systems that we are placing people in when they are at their most vulnerable.

One of the key features of the fictitious novel that I am creating is that it is written using the second person perspective. This means that the reader has no choice but to inhabit the protagonist of the story, thus not allowing them to ‘other’ the person experiencing the mental health issue.

One of the most surprising discoveries early in my PhD was that I was writing accidental folk horror. When I started looking at the novel that I was creating I realised that the stories playing out in my text fitted the story tropes of folk horror which are discussed in detail in Adam Scovell’s book *Hours Dreadful Things Strange* (2017). Many mental health hospitals are isolated from mainstream society, set in their own grounds, and set apart from local towns and cities. They follow strange rules unique to the setting. People are cut off from their families and close relationships during the acute phase of admission. Strange and uncanny things, sometimes against a person’s will, happen within these environments.

Writing in this way brought my attention to how challenging medical environments are for the human spirit. As a writer focusing on bringing a hospital environment to life through the senses, it highlighted to me some of the visceral challenges of a ward such as the extreme noises, followed by deafening silences. In an article titled “Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary”, Tom Rice discusses the soundscapes of hospital environments.

Although focusing on physical health hospitals, the sensations and experiences that he describes are transferable to mental health hospital settings. He writes of the patients’ experiences: “The repetitive electronic noises served as a constant reminder of their own illness and that of others around them. One man recalled a time when the beeping had merged strangely with the sobbing and wailing of a woman in the bed opposite, creating a bizarre contrast between the noise of a machine and that of a human suffering. The sound added a frightening drama to his situation, making him conscious of his vulnerability in the presence of technology, his exposure in a domain of scientific interest.” (Rice, 2003, p. 8)

CONCLUSION

Writing in this way has been a form of narrative medicine, something established by Rita Charon, “a

medical doctor, and professor of internal medicine with a PhD in English Literature at Columbia University in New York (2001,2006) (Rasmussen & Sodemann, 2024, p. xvi). Charon harnessed the power of storytelling within medical environments to use narratives to create compassion and empathy between patients and medics. “Narrative medicine attempts thereby to develop physicians’ skills in creating a trusting relationship between physician and patient by paying careful attention to what patients say about their illness and suffering or to what they hesitate to say or partially omit” (Rasmussen & Sodemann, 2024, p. xvii).

Exploring narratives and narrative theory “can help us to identify the failings of current mental health care settings. This includes not only relationships between staff and patients, but also the systems and environments that impact on these relationships. For example, mental health care environments are littered with examples of binary opposition that highlight the power imbalance between patients and staff” (McKenzie, 2024, p. 121).

Following in the footsteps of writers such as Nathan Filer, who are using their clinical experience within the humanities I hope to use the practice narrative medicine to continue to contribute to raising awareness of mental health illness, its causes and the way our society responds to a psychological crisis, to support the development of the imagination of society in doing things differently in the future. The writer Gillie Bolton states that: “Writers [...] just happen to be brave people who are willing to voyage into uncharted waters” (1999, p. 226). Bridging the gap between education and health care I hope that my approach will be adopted by others to inspire the use of creative writing and shared literature for positive social change, with new stories such as the work in Trieste and innovation in practice coming to the forefront of care.

BIOGRAPHY

Emma McKenzie is a writer and health care professional based in York, UK. Emma is currently studying for a practice led PhD in Humanities / Creative Writing. Emma has a special interest in autobiographical writing and nature-based writing and has used creative writing throughout her career in mental health care.

REFERENCES

Armstrong, J. K. (2018, April 04th). Why The Handmaid’s Tale is so relevant today. [Available online](#). Accessed December 2025.

Atwood, M. (2017). *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Vintage Publishing.

Atwood, M. (2019, September 08th). Margaret Atwood on the real-life events that inspired The Handmaid’s Tale and The Testaments. [Available online](#). Accessed December 2025.

Bolton, G. (1999). *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Butler, L. D., Critelli, F. M., & Rinfrette, E. S. (2011). Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health. *Directions in Psychiatry*, 31(13), 197-210.

Cregan-Reid, V. (2024). *We Are What We Read*. Hull: Biteback Publishing.

Cregan-Reid, V. (2025, May 06). Inaugural Lecture - York St John University. York St John University.

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. New York & London: W. W Norton & Company.

Filer, N. (2019). *This Book Will Change Your Mind About Mental Health*. London: Faber and Faber.

Goh, C., & Agius, M. (2010). The Stress Vulnerability Model: How does stress impact on mental illness at the level of the brain and what are the consequences? *Psychiatra Danubina*, 22(2), 198-202.

Hardy, T. (1957). *Under The Greenwood Tree*. London: Macmillan.

Kaysen, S. (1993). *Girl Interrupted*. United States: Turtle Bay Books.

McKenzie, E. (2024). Narrative and the Mental Health System: Removing Horror from Mental Health Experiences and Environments. In A. J. Rasmussen, & M. Sodemann, *Narrative Medicine: Trauma and Ethics* (pp. 115-128). United States: Vernon Press.

Milbrandt, M. K. (2010, March 15). Understanding the Role of Art in Social Movements and Transformation. *Journal of Art for Life*, 1(1), 7-18.

Phillips, D., Linington, L., & Penman, D. (1999). *Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Portacolone, E., Segal, P. S., Mezzina, R., Scheper-Hughes, N., & Okin, R. L. (2015). A Tale of Two Cities: The Exploration of the Trieste Public Psychiatry Model in San Francisco. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry An International Journal of Cross-Cultural Health Research*, 39(4), 680-697.

Rasmussen, A. J., & Sodemann, M. (2024). Introduction. In A. J. Rasmussen, & M. Sodemann, *Narrative Medicine: Trauma and Ethics* (pp. xv-xxix). United States: Vernon Press.

Rice, T. (2003). Soundselves: An Acoustemology of Sound and Self in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. *Anthropology Today*, 19(4), 4-9.

Sansom, P. (1994). *Writing Poems*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books.

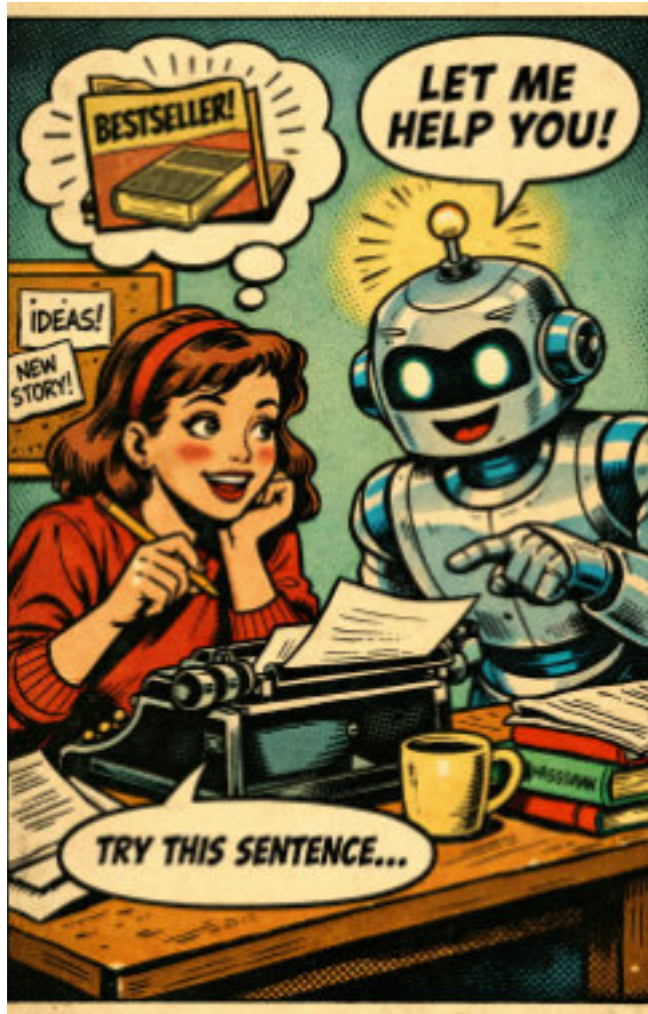
Sashidharan, S. P. (2022). Why Trieste Matters. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 220(2), 52 - 53. doi:https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2021.149

Scovell, A. (2017). *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. Liverpool: Auteur Press.

Usherwood, B., & Toyne, J. (2002, March). The value and impact of reading imaginative literature. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 34(1), 33-41.

The Creative Writing with AI Unworkshop

Sarah Gibson Yates



SARAH GIBSON YATES proposed at the NAWE Conference that whatever we think of generative AI, engaging with tools creatively and critically can offer new ways for thinking about creative writing.

In this paper I present the pedagogical ethos and framework behind the Creative Writing with AI Unworkshop that was delivered in the NAWE conference 2025, with my fellow researcher into writing with generative AI, Dr Amy Spencer. I also draw parallels between the creative writing prompt and the generative Artificial Intelligence chatbot prompt, offer a selection of writing exercises to try, and explain how Graeme Harper's notion of the 'unworkshop' (2017) unlocks new approaches to writing with technology with students in the classroom.

The Creative Writing with AI Unworkshop is a research-informed experimental writing practice that

centres on devising writer-centred AI prompts to increase our understanding of what AI can and cannot do when it comes to creative writing and help us make better-informed choices about whether to use generative AI in our daily practice. When applied to the classroom, these exercises help young people think and write creatively with AI, helps them to navigate the use of AI in their everyday life and encourages them to make better-informed choices about whether to use AI within their own writing.

It also builds confidence in using AI chatbot tools critically and a better understanding of their own writing process, developing their own voice. More broadly these exercises also improve writer/student writer AI literacy, something that is increasingly demanded of us in everyday life.

The Creative Writing with AI Unworkshop was born of recent British Academy-funded research into screenwriting with AI where I experiment with generative AI models in writing a short drama screenplay in response to the Hollywood screenwriters strikes of 2023. I wanted to find out whether fears that AI would soon be taking writers' jobs was true or if we were all being overly persuaded by the marketing launch campaign promises. It turned out both these things were true.

ChatGPT (for instance, other chatbots are available) is arguably pretty good at writing a certain type of action driven genre-based screenplay but falls down when prompted to generate complex characters, write dialogue with subtext, emotional nuance or counterpoint, and resorts to easily won structurally predictable endings that fail to illuminate anything unexpected, ambivalent or new about the story's themes or situation.

I found Harper's notion of the unworkshop after this British Academy work, when researching about how to frame creative writing with AI as a pedagogical approach creative writing with technology. Harper uses the unworkshop to name a deliberate move away from the classic creative-writing workshop model, where the class critiques a student draft in order to 'fix' it or push it toward publication, in favour of a class reorganized around the writer's experience and process. This is key to understanding the value of exploring writing with AI.

In the unworkshop the focus shifts to what each student is encountering as a writer (questions, risks, habits, blocks, discoveries), rather than the group acting as a panel of evaluators of the text.

Evaluating the text is a valuable part of the process of exploring writing with AI. Much can be learnt about the AI's grammatical ticks and predilections by doing

so, prioritizing intellectual curiosity and student agency over the usual expectations of 'traditional academic coursework'. Workshop routines offer new insights both to individual writing process and working with AI chatbots.

Furthermore, the unworkshop approach enables a conversation to grow around how we as writers and teachers design the conditions for writing, foregrounding strategies over genres/products, less 'produce a short story/poem that fits the model' (McCoy 2017 pp tbc) and more learn adaptable strategies for making imaginative work, regardless of form. This is exactly the ground I've been treading over the past nine years within my PhD (2021) and in my recent experiments screenwriting with AI.

The creative writing prompt is a well-honed and beloved tool of generations of writers and teachers of writing to generate ideas or text, or as we creatives prefer to refer to them - ideas. Ideas that may become the beginning of stories... short or long.

In part this prompting comes into ideation process. I have written more about this in a blog article "Writing with AI is Like Catching a Fish" (Gibson Yates, 2025). The idea of the prompt is now irrevocably attached to AI having entered global popular usage as a way to generate content (text, image, audio) from the latest breed of AI models. Two widely-used AI prompt design engineering systems/frameworks you may already be aware of are, the 'PREPARE/EDIT' edit system (Fitzpatrick 2023) widely adopted in UK education sector, and the CREATE framework and prompt structure (Birss 2023) which via dissemination on LinkedIn Learning videos has been widely adopted by the marketing and business communities.

While these frameworks are useful, particularly as a first wave of response to AI, helping individuals and organisations to adapt existing workflows in these sectors, the motivations, workflows, aims and objectives of creative writers are different.

Creative writers need a more open and flexible prompt system that allows for creativity, serendipity, imagination and space for the lived experiences of the writer, which is why I developed a new framework as part of my research, the Screenwriting with AI Framework (SWAIF) that centres the writer's positionality and imagination.

You can find more about this framework in my *Screenwriting Journal* article referenced below. I am adapting this for fiction which I will publish about in the future. Meanwhile I wanted to devise an immediate way of putting some of the lessons learned from screenwriting into a broader creative writing prompt system and these exercises combined with the unworkshop approach have garnered some valuable results so far.

WHY USE AI FOR CREATIVE WRITING? WHAT TYPES OF STORIES WORK BEST FOR AI?

Whatever we may think of generative AI, engaging with AI tools creatively and critically offer new ways of thinking about and doing creative writing. However, whenever I suggest that we are now going to play with AI as part of a writing exercise a ripple of mixed responses ricochets across the room. All

completely understandable. Some are anti-AI, some are surprised they're being encouraged to use AI in a classroom, seeing it as a cheat machine, some are cautious uncertain about the experimental/play space their being invited to co-create. Approaches that are sadly not often encouraged in school education environments.

Most, thankfully, are curious: about the process (how is this going to work? how is this going to be 'creative?'); the outputs (will they be any good, will people just think I'm being lazy), the why? (Why are we doing this? what will we learn/gain? What different stories might we tell if we co-author with AI?).

All important questions we discuss and carry through. I often ask student to note some of these first responses to measure against how they feel later, after the exercises.

Let's have a look at some of the prompting exercise, but first, full disclosure: these exercises were developed with Chat GPT 5.0 and tailored in response to tests where I evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the exercise from my perspective as a (human) writer, and my experience teaching writing to undergraduate students. The re-aligned exercises explore the synergies, differences and limitations between two text generation methods referred to above: the traditional creative writing workshop prompt and popular AI prompt engineering methods.

I usually run these across the three most widely used generative AI chatbots; ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Claude Sonnet, and invite students to compare results. But have also stipulated the use of one chatbot which works effectively to compare how the chatbots respond differently or similarly to the same prompt.

The focus of this activity is an experimental, play-based exploration of AI as a creative collaborator building on the creative writing inspiration prompt, guided by an ethos that moves beyond traditional 'write an opening line/passage/logline/scene' exercises to discover unexpected ways AI can unlock creativity.

Session Structure Opening (3 minutes) Reframe the Tool

I usually begin by giving a lay person explanation of how AI chatbots or Large Language Model's work. There are lots of video explainers online. Choose your favourite or choose a method that suits you. Then I go to position AI not as a replacement or shortcut, but as:

- A provocateur that challenges your assumptions.
- A mirror reflecting your creative blind spots.
- A collaborative improvisation partner.
- A way to short-circuit your internal editor.

Exercise 1: The Constraint Generator (12 minutes)
Focus: Ideation & Creative Constraints
The Unworkshop Twist: Instead of brainstorming freely, use AI to create impossible constraints that force lateral thinking.

Process: Participants share a genre or story seed (2 min)
Ask AI: "Give me three absurd but specific constraints for this story that would normally make it unwritable" (3 min)

Examples: "Write a thriller where nothing bad happens." "Tell a romance entirely through grocery lists." "Create a mystery where the detective is always wrong."
Writers choose one constraint and freewrite for 5 minutes, embracing the impossibility
Quick share: What surprised you? (2 min)

Key Insight: Constraints unlock creativity by eliminating obvious choices.

Exercise 2: Character Archaeology (12 minutes)

Focus: Character Development
The Unworkshop Twist: Build characters backward from artifacts rather than forward from traits.
Process: Ask AI to generate "5 mysterious objects found in a stranger's apartment" (2 min)
Choose one object and ask AI: "What are 10 contradictory conclusions someone might draw about the owner?" (3 min)
Writers select 2-3 contradictions that intrigue them
Freewrite: A scene where this character's contradictions collide (5 min)
Pair-share insights (2 min)

Key Insight: Characters built from contradictions feel more human than those built from consistent traits.

Exercise 3: The Theme Excavator (10 minutes)

Focus: Theme & Subtext
The Unworkshop Twist: Discover theme through interrogation rather than declaration.
Process: Writers briefly describe a story they're working on or imagine (1 min)
Prompt AI: "Ask me 5 uncomfortable questions about what this story is really about" (2 min)
Writers answer one question honestly in their notebooks (3 min)
Prompt AI: "Based on this answer: [paste], what themes am I unconsciously exploring?" (2 min)
Reflect: Does this change how you see your story? (2 min)

Key Insight: AI can identify patterns we're too close to see.

Closing Integration (9 minutes) Reflection Prompts (Solo Writing - 5 min):

Which exercise made you most uncomfortable? Why might that be valuable?
What did you discover that you couldn't have found without AI as a partner?

What's one "unworkshop" approach you'll steal for your own practice?

Group Debrief (4 min):

Volunteers share one unexpected discovery
Facilitator emphasizes: These exercises work because they disrupt habitual thinking. AI is most valuable when it surprises you, not when it confirms what you already know.

If there is time, you can add:

Exercise 5: The Voice Disruptor (10 minutes)

Focus: Voice & Style
The Unworkshop Twist: Find your voice by deliberately inhabiting wrong ones.
Process: Writers have a paragraph of their own prose (or write one quickly) (2 min)
Prompt AI: 'Rewrite this in the style of [choose: a nature documentary, a passive-aggressive email, a sports commentary, a prayer, assembly instructions]' (2 min)
Read both versions.
Prompt AI: 'What did the rewrite reveal about what's missing or hidden in the original?' (2 min)
Writers note one element to steal back for their authentic voice (2 min)
Quick shares (2 min)

Key Insight: Voice is found by knowing what it's not.

CONCLUSION

I plan to run more of these workshops in the future, developing the exercises, but so far, overwhelmingly, I have found students and seasoned writers alike, curious and awakened to the possibilities of AI for developing their writing when guided to work with it in this playful and experimental way.

Feedback from the workshop focussed on how when using these exercises AI produced unexpected, weird or uncannily accurate responses. It proved to be a way to get out of your way and write the thing you want to write as well as learn new insights into the forces guiding your writing.

The Theme Excavator (exercise 3) particularly, yields intriguing responses. Participants and myself have been surprised by how insightful and even psychologically accurate the uncomfortable question analysis is and how much closer it gets you to the real themes behind the work.

Personally, I have found writing with AI chatbots to be more than a useful writing parter and sounding board, I find it aids overall writing momentum and suggests new ways of telling stories and more than this, the process suggests new stories, as new connections and new possibilities arise from the process.

Just as Harper's unworkshop aims to galvanise workshop attention to practice and process of creative writing, what each student is encountering as a writer (questions, risks, habits, blocks, discoveries), these AI co-created exercises aim to shift the writing process from a focus on judging the syntactical or grammatical features of a manuscript output to a process-centred, student-directed studio for exploring how writing happens (with and without AI).

While the outputs may be flawed and present ethical issues for publication, as a process they provide insight into how the writer's writing happens. As a writer and filmmaker fascinated by our postmodern relationship to technology and to nature within the shifting ontological sands of the Anthropocene era, I can't help being curious to explore the storytelling potential of this new technology. Asking, how should we writers, and storytellers, approach AI? What are the benefits of co-creating with AI and what are the costs?

As storytellers situated in societies, surrounded by technology embodied in brains and bodies and feelings, we have the skills (and duty) to not only describe what it feels like to be alive now in this moment but to imagine what the future might hold.

By letting ourselves imagine, experiment and play within process-driven creative environments (including new technology-driven environments) our imaginations and the stories that come forth from that imagination can help others see our future and even inform how governments, technologists, psychologists, computer and neuroscientists answer some of the pressing problems facing society today.

There are a lot of reason to not write with AI – the lawless extraction of public data by billion dollar Big Tech companies being one, the environmental impact of cooling the massive server farms required to process LLM data, extraction being another – but it is my hope that I may have provided one or two reasons why we should explore and might benefit from experimenting with AI, for ourselves and students for whom AI will be a big part of their future world, for the insights offered here.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sarah Gibson Yates is a filmmaker, writer and researcher within the Centre for Media, Arts and Creative Technologies (MACT), Senior Lecturer and Course Leader for BA Film and Media at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research explores the impact of new technologies on storytelling and filmmaking for co-creation and more-than-human empathy generation within the era of posthuman thought and the Anthropocene. Her most recent British Academy-funded project investigates collaborative co-authoring writing practices with generative AI for screenwriting.

REFERENCES

Birss, D. 2022. *CREATE* pdf.

Fitzpatrick, D. 2023. *The AI Classroom*.

Gibson Yates, S. 2021. *Writing digital culture into contemporary realist young adult literature: a novel and exegesis*. Unpublished PhD.

Gibson Yates, S. 2025. Writing with AI is Like Catching a Fish, *The Writing Platform*. [Available online](#).

Gibson Yates, S. 2025. Exploring intimacy through hybrid screenwriting with generative AI: towards a postdigital co-creative screen practice. *Screenwriting and AI: Emerging Theories, Modes and Practices*. Turina, R and Gee, M. eds., Special Issue of *The International Journal of Screenwriting*, Eds. Gee, M. and Turina, R.

Harper, G. 2017. The unworkshop. Ebook pp-25-35. eds, Clark, M.D., Hergenrader, T. and Rein, J. eds., *Creative writing innovations: breaking boundaries in the classroom*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

McCoy, K. 2017 *Breaking Boundaries: revitalising Creative writing in a digital age*. Ebook pp- xx- xx. eds, Clark, M.D., Hergenrader, T. and Rein, J.

eds., *Creative writing innovations: breaking boundaries in the classroom*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Selective recommended reading on AI writing and fiction:

Benny the Blue Whale by Andy Stanton
According to Alice by Sheila Heti
My Child the Algorithm by Hannah Silva
12 Bytes by Jeannette Winterson
1 the Road by Ross Goodwin
Pharmako-AI by K Allado-McDowell
Hallucinate This!: an authorized autobiography of ChatGPT by Mark Marino
A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content by Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

Creating Space for NHS Voices – Creative writing with Frontline Healthcare Workers in the NHS: How emergent collective poems establish new ways of evaluation

Siobhan Campbell and Mel McEvoy



At the NAWE Conference, SIOBHAN CAMPBELL and MEL MCEVOY explored the insights, obstacles, and potential results of a creative writing project co-developed with NHS frontline healthcare workers.

This paper investigates outcomes arising from a co-designed creative writing intervention developed in collaboration with NHS frontline healthcare professionals.

Situated within the theoretical framework of communities of practice and dialogical engagement (Wenger, 1998), the project employs creative writing as a reflective and generative mode with potential for reimagining clinical practice.

Through co-creative processes, based both on creative expression and critical reflection, outcomes emerge that are simultaneously artistic and epistemological.

Collaboratively authored poems function as a form of multi-layered dialogic, producing an embodied evaluation that leads to insights about process and practice.

STAFF WELLBEING IN THE NHS

A growing body of research highlights the significant psychological and emotional toll experienced by NHS healthcare workers. Staff report symptoms of compassion fatigue, severe anxiety, disrupted sleep, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Staff support teams acknowledge that they are under-resourced and under pressure, with limited capacity to provide preventative interventions.

Could creative writing practice offer a suitable, replicable, and low-cost approach to supporting staff wellbeing? Could an intervention be co-created with healthcare practitioners themselves to form the basis of a practical toolkit for sustained use?

In building this inquiry, the current team includes Professor Siobhan Campbell and Dr. Sally Blackburn Daniels from the School of Arts and Humanities and Professor Zoë Walkington from the School of Psychology and Counselling, all at The Open University, along with retired Nurse Consultant and poet Mel McEvoy and research leads at North Tees NHS Foundation Trust.

After preparatory work to establish agreed ways of working, the core research team, recipients of two Creative Arts in Health awards—including the Bright Ideas in Health award for innovation in staff wellbeing, developed and delivered a creative writing programme in collaboration with NHS participants.

THE CREATIVE WRITING INTERVENTION

From September - November 2024, we facilitated two six-week long creative writing workshop series, offered online and in person. Participants received information sheets, consent forms, and demographic questionnaires in advance and they completed the Ohio University Brief Resilience Questionnaire at the beginning and end of the programme to track changes in self-described wellbeing. Formats allowed for comparative data collection: one face to face in the daytime, the other via Teams in the evening.

Each workshop introduced participants to a sequence of writing exercises. No prior writing experience was required, yet several participants had maintained personal journals, and one was previously published. Facilitators, using prompts and examples developed by Campbell, encouraged multiple interpretations. This open, playful structure fostered an environment that invited participants to share their writing, cultivating a sense of agency and mutual recognition.

Following Trust promotion and information sessions, 21 individuals signed up and of these, 16 participants attended between 1 and 6 sessions. Continuity was maintained through email circulation of workshop materials for those unable to attend.

Overall, 10 participants attended face-to-face while 6 joined online. These represented nine different sections of the Trust including physiotherapists, a technician, nurses, doctors, a paediatric consultant, Chaplain's office, catering staff, senior managers, and clerical support.

Despite challenges posed by irregular working patterns, participants demonstrated strong engagement and commitment. Some attended in person on their days off; others requested materials for independent work. This adaptability highlighted both the accessibility and perceived value of the intervention.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK AND OUTCOMES

Qualitative feedback indicates the workshops provided valuable opportunities for reflection, self-expression, and interpersonal connection. Participants described an 'openness, [an] ability to write [about] how I felt and feel now,' and 'an outlet for the inner world' that enhanced awareness of self and environment. Others emphasised the importance of 'thinking time' and 'listening to the very rich work of other participants.'

Participants reported benefits in both creative skill development and wellbeing. One wrote, 'I was able to explore my creativity and for it to be an avenue of expressing my thoughts,' while another noted, 'I learned so much by the content of the workshops, the writing everyone did and read out.' The facilitators, Mel McEvoy and Dr. Sally Blackburn-Daniels were described as 'a great support,' providing 'interest,

encouragement, and guidance' throughout. Dr. Blackburn-Daniels was instrumental in the design of the evaluation framework and the collection of the qualitative data.

Indeed, both Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Zoë Walkington (who acted as participant-observer) developed insights into the overall reflective-affective processes, writing about these in "Doctors and Verses" (2026). Here, they outline a curiosity "to understand how participants would navigate writing for pleasure or to express/ channel emotions when their writing is frequently scientific in tone" and they describe negotiating the multiple layers of expectation that arise in participatory arts research: "Another challenge was to create a space online which was comfortable, both acknowledging and supporting the boundaries of the participants, even if these boundaries shifted during or across the sessions. Cameras on or off, sharing, talking about the writing process, about the writing produced, or reading the writing produced in response to an exercise were all valid ways to participate."

INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Working closely with staff in acute-care environments generated several insights. First, creative writing interventions can be effectively adapted to suit the diverse schedules and emotional needs of NHS personnel. Second, participant feedback is directly informing the refinement of writing exercises, ensuring they align with NHS culture and practice.

The findings from this project suggest that shared creative writing can re-establish community connection in surprising ways and can provide new ways of fulfilling the 'arts in health' agenda of the all-party governmental committee by generating new ways of evaluation.

Building on these, the research team aims to develop a co-designed Creative Writing Toolkit to embed narrative and reflective practices into everyday healthcare settings. Such an approach contributes to the broader concept of narrative health (as described by Rita Charon, (2001), supporting wellbeing and offering sustainable models of creative reflection.

THE CRITICAL-CREATIVE NEXUS OF 'COLLECTIVE POEMS'

As part of presenting at NAWE conference, this paper's authors invited listeners to have the experiential moment of listening to poems which emerged via the project.

We present them here with some accompanying critical thoughts.

The first piece, *The Hospital Lift: The Weight of Words*, offers a critical-creative entry point to the project's wider argument that creative writing can itself function as a mode of evaluation within participatory practice.

Written by Mel McEvoy in the collective voice of the hospital lift, a liminal space through which all staff, from cleaners to consultants, pass, the poem enacts the processes this research explores: noticing and transforming the affective residues of working in healthcare.



Siobhan Campbell (top) and Mel McEvoy

The poem invites readers to experience how writing can mediate between the personal and institutional, translating the emotional weight of everyday encounters into shared imaginative understandings.

Mel McEvoy, speaking from his own lived experience, introduces the poem thus:

I know health care work is very stressful. There is a high emotional impact on staff for the work they do which is rarely explored or addressed. There is no forum. Work related stress causes sickness and burn out. This research initiative attempts to explore this difficulty and promote wellbeing. Creative Writing improves staff's ability to self-reflect. It is self-reflection in action. It helps staff put their emotions into words and consequently they can articulate what they feel. It has a double effect: promoting staff wellbeing leads to healthier staff who deliver better care.

Through writing we attempt to find the meaning in all manner of experiences and situations. The ability to find meaning in a situation is unique to humans.

Through finding meaning we can acquire purpose. It is a life skill. It is about taking time for yourself. It is like having a Spa Day but instead, for your mind. Some writing can be very beautiful and passionate. Some, when done well, invites us into the actual experience of another person so that we share in the experience of life at a deeper level. It can help bring an inner world out into the open, to bear witness to your own unique experience. This poem is in the voice of the Hospital lift.

The Hospital Lift: The Weight of Words

I daily waltz around the thoughts in people's minds. Staff enter into my domain numerous times during their shift,

some uneasy about starting one, others drained from just finishing.

Everyone carries their own weight of narratives, adding to this continuously.

If I listen attentively, I can hear laughter from joyful moments,

the slow wail of sorrows still lingering, the excitement of achievement,

the harmony from choices made and regret over others not taken.

Over the last few months something different has been happening

to the raw material of internal dialogues of some who have entered in here.

My metal sheets feel some are distinctly lighter, even rising unaided.

Some staff have revisited their own past or are wrestling with their present

running again on the sands of childhood barely touching my floors.

Others with a pen for a torch have explored darker corners

and found meaning waiting for the opportunity to whisper quietly.

They've become familiar with certain buttons on their own lifts

travelling up and down the floors of their own lives.

Triggered by prompts of sentences to reflect on who they are

their doors hesitate and become reluctant to close at times.

Particular memories make them nervous, almost closing

but then suddenly opening again without warning

and finally easing together by the choice of compassionate words.

I wanted her to find some space between emotions

but someone she knew opened me up and she stepped out.

I caught a few squashed words as my doors closed.

She couldn't talk. She was late for the Creative Writing Workshop.

She had to stay in Endoscopy because of the sudden death of her patient.

In her hand on a page, feelings found friends with certain phrases

and seeing her truth united made her feel much lighter.

In *The Hospital Lift: The Weight of Words*, the speaking voice, located in the emotional core of the hospital, becomes an observer of the "weight of narratives" carried by staff. The poem materialises the idea of creative writing as a critical framework: the lift's rhythmic movements between floors echo the recursive motions of reflection that underpin the workshops themselves.

The poem offers a form of embodied evaluation with the creative artefact translating qualitative insight into a sensory, interpretive experience that invites readers to participate in the reflective process.

We end with a work which is currently part of the exhibit of creative pieces emerging from this project at "The Writing Nook" – now open at University Hospital of North Tees. All the writers are anonymised but gave permission for their work to appear in the collective poem.

Creating Space for NHS Voices

I can never forget what a ward sister once said to me as a newly qualified staff nurse: I was an empty space devoid of anything useful. For thirty years her words have accompanied me in everything I have done on the wards. She refuses to leave, even when I wave cards from patients, degrees, and Master qualifications at her.

-
The hospital makes me want to do my best, but part of it slipped through these hands when I couldn't keep my husband alive while I waited for the paramedics to arrive. My day job was to prevent arrests. For months when I arrived home I was scared of the light switch.

I struggled to tell myself my own story, but my body remembers certain feelings. In one workshop session I found a portal there on the page was my 'Southsea', the very place my bones remembered sliding down the Spinnaker Tower squealing.

-
As a child, the only place I felt seen was in my uncle's garage where I hammered and mended things all day long, a den my heart learnt to dance in. Even though it was always cold, I was always warm.

He asked my opinion about things from my eleven years. I was too afraid to talk to my father - to him I was invisible.

You are the only Consultant available and there are so many digital systems to complete that all want the same information. Fingers padding keyboards, sucking limited time instead of seeing vulnerable patients and families. Plucked from the ward for their agenda, you might be asked to attend a random emergency management meeting. No choice, refusal could result in a disciplinary. Blank faces stare back when you ask who is going to be available if a child hits crisis?

I was abused as a child, but I never let it limit me, even though my emotional life is a map constructed from this experience. I have lived on the edge of fear and despair in this uncertain world. So clinical mayhem always feels familiar. Nothing rarely happens that I can't manage, because I am a citizen in the country of the unexpected.

-
I am here, hiding my face on Zoom. I travelled nearly six thousand miles away when you asked me to recall sounds from my childhood. I heard the monsoon batter the large leathery leaves outside. From my window, I followed the gush of water down the mountain gullies until, on the periphery of hearing, an ambulance rushes along Stockton High Street heading to North Tees' A&E.

-
When I heard the poem 'Wild Geese' I felt I was seen from above. Mary Oliver was telling me to let go of all the roles I inhabit and juggle. Mother, Sister, Wife, but there is someone

in me that is none of these,
and my voice from childhood
keeps calling me to spend more time with her
and never let go of what we once had.

-

I knew the time for the writing session was
approaching.
I walked towards the computer,
out of the cloud that is my life.
The dishes, moaning to be washed in the sink.
The mouth of the washing machine agape,
hungry for the kid's uniforms.
The house is always my mess.
The kids are arguing over the remote control
and a thought picked me up
and carried me into this time for myself.
A time to look in the mirror that is me,
that will make me feel better
than any new facial care products,
better than dresses from Del Core.com
or a holiday in the Canary Islands.

-

Working in Clinical Coding,
codes that represent what people are suffering from.
I have spent my whole life
decoding who I am.
I have myself on a video cassette,
I am dressed in a pretty party dress with flowers
and a bow in my hair on the dance floor.
Twenty minutes later I am on the same floor,
changed into trousers and a waistcoat.
The change of clothes was all I could do
to make me feel a better sense of self.
I have always been looking for my proper coding.

Once the door is closed behind,
I emptied the pockets of my scrubs,
one by one, like I've been kidnapped in my own house.
A salad of tourniquet, empty packets, .

a pen that's not even mine, syringe, and more packets
came out and were shoved to their specific corner.

The scrubs were adorned with splotches of bile,
specks of blood and most likely excrement,

so I took them off like a moulting snake.

-

I usually stare at the field through the window,
but this time sparkly lights come to view.
Christmas came early this year.
The lights went up on the 31st of October,
and they were there for a reason.
Coming to and from work in the dark gets to the soul

--and sparkly lights dispel all the blues away.
Now, it's time to unwind and forget
about Mrs. X who's just been told she had cancer.

We believe this work shows how co-created writing offers new ways of understanding the emotional and epistemic dimensions of healthcare. Where a participant recalls the imprint of a ward sister's words—"I was an empty space devoid of anything useful... even when I wave cards from patients, degrees, and Master qualifications at her", the writing reveals the persistence of professional shame and the fragility of recognition within hierarchical systems.

Other sections articulate the complex intersections between professional identity and personal loss: "The hospital makes me want to do my best, but part of it slipped through these hands when I couldn't keep my husband alive". We see here creative writing's particular function in opening discursive spaces in which emotional labour can be voiced and validated.

Creating Space for NHS voices also considers the processes of writing. Participants describe rediscovering memory, agency, and sensory connection: "In one workshop session I found a portal... my 'Southsea', the very place my bones remembered." Here, writing becomes both method and metaphor for self-reclamation. Others note how the act of writing can generate a temporary release from domestic or professional overload: "A thought picked me up and carried me into this time for myself... better than... a holiday in the Canary Islands." This self-reflexivity demonstrates how the workshop space enabled participants to reframe the everyday as a site of creative possibility.

The poem enacts imaginative evaluation via imagery that resonates more powerfully than conventional analytic summaries might. Some participants critique systemic pressures: "You are the only Consultant available and there are so many digital systems to complete", while others translate professional experience into existential reflection: "Working in Clinical Coding... I have spent my whole life decoding who I am."

The poetic form thus becomes a mode of inquiry capable of capturing what might otherwise remain ineffable: the textures of vulnerability, resilience, and imagination that underpin everyday practice.

Creative Writing for Psycho-social support of frontline healthcare workers is a project which has established new ways of considering Creative Writing Interventions (as Campbell terms the overarching project), via: (i) establishing identification of lived experience and emotion emerging from the workplace which might normally go unexpressed and unacknowledged, (ii) generating a new way of reflecting on the processes of the writing workshop itself and (iii) resulting in an imaginative creatively-critical evaluation of findings which may have purchase on future actions due to its ability, in a cascading effect, to capture the imagination of others.

Having launched "The Writers' Nook" exhibit, with many visits daily, we also see how this work dovetails forward into initiatives such as the staff book-club and the leave one/take one bookshelf for staff at the nook itself.

The direct feedback from exhibit visitors to the writing, to the accompanying podcast, and to coverage in the local media has begun to foster new relationships where arts committees of University Hospitals Tees and NHS workers can work alongside each other and OU Creative Writing researchers to further co-design what will hopefully be a continuing creative writing intervention to support frontline healthcare professionals.

BIOGRAPHY

Siobhan Campbell, Professor of Poetry and Creative Writing Practice at The Open University works with NGOs, charities and the NHS to support and research the impacts of Creative Writing practice in recovery. She has six collections of poetry and is widely anthologised in UK/Ireland and the USA, including in *Vital Signs: Poems of Illness and Healing*.

Mel McEvoy is from Liverpool. An NHS nurse for over forty years, he was a Nurse Consultant in Palliative Care for 24 years. Mel has a MA in Creative Writing from the Open University. Currently researching wellbeing and creative writing for health professionals. He has two books of poetry: *An Emptied Space*, Mudfog Press (2012) and *Wading into the Light*, Red Squirrel Press (2022).

REFERENCES

Blackburn-Daniels, Sally and Zoë Walkington. (2026) 'Doctors and Verses: Talking through what we learned running creative writing workshops', in Rosemary Golding and Catherine Pestano (ed.), *From the Heart: exploring health, wellbeing and creativity* (Durham: Ellipsis Imprints), in press.

Charon R. (2001) The patient-physician relationship. In 'Narrative medicine: A model for empathy, reflection, profession, and trust'. *JAMA*; 286(15):1897-902. doi: 10.1001/jama.286.15.1897

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

So bad, it's good: using cliché and collaboration to make metaphor less scary

Anna Polonyi



ANNA POLONYI shared a series of exercises on imagery at the NAWE conference, which centred on playfulness and the possibility of failure.

I don't understand poetry. I just don't get it. It's not my thing. How often have you heard people say things along these lines?

Of all the genres of creative writing, poetry is often the one perceived to be most obtuse, rarified and inaccessible. As the academic Amber Regis put it, poetry has an image problem.

Having facilitated workshops in a wide range of settings, including with non-native English speakers and the general public, I've noticed an odd pattern: if I ask a group who does not usually engage with poetry to Write a Poem, they almost inevitably produce something stilted, formally conservative, and smacking of bygone school days.

If I ask the same group to, say, write in response to a prompt without explicitly flagging the outcome as a Poem, they produce texts full of intriguing, vivid poetic intensity and potential. Poems come into being, but not if it is directly aimed at.

There are a number of reasons why this may be the case, but what's most interesting to a practitioner, I would argue, is figuring out what this means for crafting writing prompts and exercises.

In certain popular card games, like Hearts, there's an alternate way to win the game.

If you know you don't stand a chance, you can secretly switch tactics and 'shoot the moon': you collect as many penalty cards as possible, rather than avoid them. In other words, if you play appallingly enough, you can, in fact, win.

The following exercises are all geared towards shooting the moon in poetry.

The idea is to flip an expectation commonly found in writing classes: the assumption that you are here to produce something "good", a piece of text that strives to integrate commonly received writing advice, that demonstrates literary prowess and even good taste. What happens when rather than try to write well together, we aim to write poorly, even terribly, as a group?

CLUNKY METAPHORS

In 2007, *The Washington Post's* Style Invitational held a humorous writing titled the Bad Simile and Metaphor Contest. The list of finalists went viral, with many people erroneously attributing them to actual images found in high school essays.

By starting with this list, students can reflect on what unspoken rules these images are breaking. Like investigators on a crime scene, they can piece together how, exactly, the killing of good metaphor took place.

The poet Ocean Vuong's idea of metaphor as detour is helpful here: "A metaphor is a detour but that detour better lead to discoveries that alter/amplify the meaning of what is already there." Thinking about the pleasure of the scenic route is an intuitive way to understand the powerful workings of metaphor.

As an example, this analogy is deliciously bad because the detour it takes us on is of considerable length, to the point that we've forgotten our original destination by the time we get to the end of the line: "Long separated by cruel fate, the star-crossed lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like two freight trains, one having left Cleveland at 6:36 p.m. traveling at 55 mph, the other from Topeka at 4:19 p.m. at a speed of 35 mph."

The line, "He was as tall as a six-foot-three-inch tree," helps illustrate the idea of a transformative element: the detour of metaphor is "worth it" as Vuong puts it, only if it provides something new. If A is too close to B, then we haven't learned anything new about A.

Finally, a line like "The hailstones leaped from the pavement, just like maggots when you fry them in hot grease," introduces the idea of tonal consistency: hailstones are cold, hot grease is, well, hot. This creates a dissonance that makes us laugh but fails to convey anything new about the hailstones. In other words, there's a secret correspondence between A and B, to borrow a term from Baudelaire, and the pleasure of metaphor is that it unveils this hidden kinship.

This activity ends with the students jotting down a few bad analogies of their own, in the outrageous style of the ones provided by *The Washington Post*, around the theme of love.

CLICHÉS

We all have our own, intuitive understanding of what cliché is, and we arguably all expend some energy avoiding falling into it. In my graduate program, it was one of the most damning things you could say about someone's work. People new to writing are perhaps less concerned with this issue, but you'd be surprised by the number of participants who discover they have strong feelings about hackneyed, clichéd language when we do this exercise. The aim here is to do a kind of light detox, and get us thinking about the power of figurative language.

Step 1. Brainstorm and collect common visual or linguistic associations with love (ex. red roses,



Anna Polonyi (illustration by Fanny Beury)

cupids, Valentine's Day, wedding dresses, eyes with heart shapes for pupils, sunsets on beaches). Invite phrases and sayings around love as well (ex. 'love is blind').

Step 2. Invite participants to venture their own definitions of what a cliché is. I like to go back to the etymology of the word, derived from the French, to describe the sound a printing plate makes when making several copies in quick succession.

So, whoever first said "love is blind" was brilliant. But then it got repeated a trillion times, and we all know what happens to a photocopy of a photocopy. In this sense, clichés are like black holes: they are formerly powerful stars that have since collapsed and tend to suck all the energy out of a sentence.

Step 3. We are now ready to draft the Bad Love Poem. The challenge is to use as many cliché and terrible similes as possible to make it not just bad, but terrible.

Something fascinating happens when you not only give permission, but actively encourage participants to write poorly. First of all, it turns out writing poorly on purpose is actually quite challenging. It forces your hand to be inventive in ways you may not expect. In other words, shooting the moon opens up avenues of creativity by lowering the stakes and encouraging experimentation. By removing the pressure to produce something good, we circumvent our inner critic. And by explicitly encouraging the production of something bad, we are actually working *with* our inner critic. For once, that sour puss is having a blast.

COLLABORATIVE SIMILIES

This exercise is adapted from *Discovering the Writer Within: 40 Days to More Imaginative Writing* by Bruce Ballenger and Barry Lane. I recommend running it as

Stimulating Texts for Found Poetry: A Register-Based Exploration of Writing Inspiration

Yuka Nakai



a collaborative exercise, with participants swapping papers between steps.

Step 1. Fold a piece of paper in two. On one side, list 5 abstract concepts (ex. truth, democracy, love).

Step 2. Hand to neighbor, make sure they do *not* see your list. Write 5 random concrete things, that is, things you can see or touch or hear (ex. fog, dirty socks, rust).

Step 3. Pass on the paper again. Match up the lists randomly, using the following format, then add an explanatory sentence:

Abstract noun is like *Concrete Thing*. + Explanatory sentence.

ex. Love is like rust. It grows on you when you're not looking.

This exercise demonstrates the pleasure of discovering the hidden correspondences I mentioned earlier; If A is too close to B, it falls flat. If A is too far from B, it's a contrivance.

But there's arresting insight to be gained by bridging just the right amount of distance. Fun fact: a version of this activity, known as "Forced Connections" is also used as a brainstorming technique for non-literary purposes, specifically in M.B.A. programs and among entrepreneurs.

To conclude, a common adage in pedagogy is to teach by example. While this certainly has its merits, I have found that teaching by *counter*-example opens the door to levity and risk-taking in a way that can benefit students of poetry immensely. So the next time you're teaching poetry and you register resistance, consider applying these activities and leaning in to the corny and the sap.

BIOGRAPHY

Anna Polonyi is a French-American-Hungarian writer and poet. She holds an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and teaches with the Iowa Young Writers' Studio and Ecole Centrale de Nantes, a French engineering school. She is the co-founder of Nantes Writers' Workshop, a summer intensive course.

REFERENCES

Regis, A. (2013) Why do students fear poetry and how can they access it better. *The Guardian*. [Available online](#). Accessed December 19, 2025.

The Style Invitational (2007). Week 120: Simile Outrageous. *The Washington Post*. [Available online](#). Accessed December 19, 2025.

YUKA NAKAI spoke at the NAWE Conference looking at what texts inspire students to write poetry.

Found poetry has been explored as a creative pedagogical practice that invites writers to reshape existing languages into new meanings (Prendergast 2006; Bulter-Kisber 2002). Found poetry begins with an existing text. Writers select and voice words from diverse sources to create new poems.

Because words already exist, writers can begin more easily and attend to meaning-making rather than generating language from scratch. They may also feel that previously unspoken thoughts are being expressed through the selected words as poetic inquiries (Leavy 2020).

For reluctant writers, this approach lowers the barriers to expression and provides an initial opportunity to use poetry to make sense of the world.

For teachers and learners unfamiliar with writing or teaching poetry, engaging in a creative process with reduced anxiety is particularly valuable (Dymoke,

2016; Nakai 2025).

Despite the widespread use of this practice, little attention has been paid to how different types of source texts, such as scientific, philosophical, or narrative writing, may influence the nature of poetic transformations.

Consequently, when teachers experiment with found poetry in classes or workshops, there are no established indicators that help identify the kinds of text that may be particularly inspiring for writers, and practitioners often rely on intuition and rules of thumb. Grounded in this problem awareness, this study explores the types of texts that stimulate poetic re-seeing and how their language shifts when transformed into poetry.

This study focuses on the meaning-making process. In found poetry, writers work with an existing language and shape it by choosing, arranging, and sometimes repeating words. This is both an artistic and a cognitive act. It sharpens attention to rhythm, pattern, and nuance and highlights how language shapes thought.

As Leggo notes, poetry invites us to experiment with language and create, know, and engage creatively and imaginatively with experience (Leggo 2008, p. 165). When writers reconstruct a given word, they do not simply write about what they have observed. As Gombrich (2000) suggested, they begin to see what they can write (Gombrich 2000). Language reform can prompt a shift in perception and create opportunities to observe and understand differently. This study refers to this shift as a poetic transformation.

Given that such poetic transformation occurs, which kinds of source texts most effectively inspire it, and how does their language change when rewritten as poetry? This study aims to explore how different types of source texts stimulate poetic transformation and how their language shifts when rewritten as poetry.

METHODS

Analytical Lens

To examine how writers transform existing languages into poetry, I draw on Halliday's notion of the register, which provides a framework for describing how meaning varies according to a text's contextual configuration. Halliday modelled the context of a situation through three interrelated dimensions: Field, Tenor, and Mode (Halliday and Hasan 1985; Wan et al. 2023; Matthiessen 2015). This framework makes it possible to observe how the meaning, stance, and textual organization shift when a source text is rewritten as a poem.

Field: what is happening (social activity and subject matter)

Tenor: who is involved (relationships, roles, and stance)

Mode: how language is used (the channel and organization of the message)

A register is therefore understood as a set of meanings associated with a particular type of situation. This provides a way to trace how the situational context changes when the source text is revoiced. When writers select, rearrange, or omit words from an existing passage, they reconfigure the contextual features that shape their meanings. This study examines how these changes unfold across genres.

The analysis also incorporates an additional evaluative construct, which I refer to as poetic transformation. This term describes shifts in meaning, stance, or structure that emerge during the rewriting process. Poetic transformation captures how writers reorganize linguistic materials to prompt new insights or ways of seeing.

As such transformations vary in extent and intensity, I examined them through the dimensions of Field, Tenor, Mode, and extent of restructuring.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

I conducted a workshop with forty-eight student teachers enrolled in a primary teacher education course in Japan on 19 May 2025. The sessions were held in Japanese with participants who were native

speakers of Japanese. Each student used a digital found poetry application that I co-developed with the late Dr. Sue Dymoke (<https://foundpoetry.net>; Nakai 2025). The system stores the source text, words selected by the user, and the completed poem, making it possible to compare linguistic features before and after transformation.

For the workshop, I selected eight short Japanese texts representing a wide range of genres. These included a scientific explanation for why humans dream, a promotional text introducing a magazine feature on scary picture books, an encyclopedic description of nebulae, a theoretical essay on picture books, a reflective personal essay about humidifiers, a travelogue set in Alaska, a sociocultural commentary on fandom, and an automated junk email.

All were authentic materials, chosen to represent differing linguistic textures and relationships between writers and readers.

Students selected one of these texts in the application and created a poem by choosing and rearranging the words on the screen. The session lasted 90 minutes the standard length of a university class in Japan.

In total, forty-seven poems were saved in the system. After the workshop, students were informed that their poems might be analyzed and presented as part of research dissemination, and consent was obtained. Nine were drafts, and one was excluded because the author did not grant permission for its use.

Consequently, 37 completed poems were included in the final analysis. All analyses were conducted using R version 4.4.1. My focus was on the process of transformation from source text to poetry.

ANALYSIS DETAILS

To analyze how language was transformed from source texts into poems, I developed a detailed codebook based on Halliday's theory of register. Both original excerpts and the student's poems were coded for Field, Tenor, and Mode.

For Field, referring to the social activity or domain of meaning represented by the text, I adopted these categories: *expounding, reporting, recreating, sharing, exploring, enabling, and doing* (Matthiessen 2015). Tenor was coded into five levels ranging from "objective" to "intimate," based on how the relationship between writer and reader was expressed through personal pronouns and stance. Mode was assessed across five categories according to how the text was organized and realized in written form, ranging from prose-like explanatory language to fragmentary or poetic composition.

To capture the extent of the linguistic transformation, I incorporated a four-dimensional measure of Poetic Boldness: reordering, addition or omission, voice shift, and structural shift. These dimensions assessed the extent to which each text was reshaped.

Each poem was assigned a unique ID and coded manually. Before analyzing the full dataset, I conducted a three-step process to develop and refine the codebook. First, Field, Tenor, and Mode were defined using clear boundaries, key indicators, and

illustrative examples.

I also defined the four evaluative dimensions of Poetic Boldness (reordering, addition or omission, voice shift, and structural shift), each rated on a scale of 0 to 2. Second, a pilot calibration was conducted.

About ten poem–source pairs were randomly selected and coded for testing. The areas of uncertainty were recorded and definitions were refined accordingly. These pilot cases served as reference points for the subsequent coding.

Finally, during the main coding phase, the sample order was randomized to reduce bias and fatigue, and the number of items coded per day was limited. For each poem, I left a brief note summarizing the main transformation (e.g., "compressed explanatory prose into a collapsing image linked with sound").

An intra-rater reliability check was also conducted by re-coding 30% of the data after one week. Agreement reached 88%, indicating satisfactory reliability. These processes ensured consistency and transparency across qualitative coding.

EXAMPLES OF POETIC TRANSFORMATION

Poem Examples

This section presents four examples illustrating how students reshaped source texts during the workshop. All poem excerpts presented in this article are English translations of poems originally written in Japanese. Each example illustrates how the linguistic and contextual features of the original text were reorganized to produce new meanings and forms of engagement.

Example 1. From Encyclopedic Description to Narrative Animation

A star

written by student A

(source: "Nebula" Atlas: Kids' Space Encyclopedia by Junichi Watanabe)

A gaping hole opened in the night sky.

A star died long ago,

Scattered across the spiral galaxy.

A new star giving off light.

In the spiral galaxy's cradle,

The Milky Way's hammock.

Flitting here and there, looking happy.

The source text provides factual descriptions of nebulae written in an impersonal scientific tone. In the poem, these descriptive fragments are reorganized into a loose narrative of a lively star moving through space.

The Field shifts from *expounding* to *recreating* and the Mode moves from prose to a poetic structure built using short lines and spatial arrangements.

Emotional coloring emerges through the addition of happiness, which reframes the cosmos as a dynamic, affective world.

Example 2. From Promotional Persuasion to Lyrical Ambivalence

A beautiful picture

written by student B

(source: Peeking into the World of "Scary Picture Books" in MOE September 2021 Issue)

A picture drawn seductively,

beautiful and precious.

A darkness lurks in the picture you glimpse.

A terror making us yearn to reach out.

Once you find it, there is no way back.

Feeling that something lies.

With reverence, I am going on.

The promotional tone of the original text encourages readers to explore the scary charm of picture books. In the poem, the persuasive stance is transformed into a reflective and lyrical voice, expressing the magnetic pull of fear and the way terrifying beauty draws us in, through the word "reverence," a term students rarely use in writing.

The Field shifts from *recommending* to *sharing*, and the Tenor becomes more intimate and contemplative.

The poem retains a sense of attraction and unease, but reframes it as an internal movement rather than an external call to action.

Example 3. From Automated Digital Language to Playful Narrative

Internal Security System

written by student C

(source: Verification Request for Account Security from email inbox)

Unusual activity was detected on May 14, 2025.

Information restrictions have been placed

in accordance with our security standards.

We would like to expel internal irregularities

via our security system if you need.

Now, everyone together,

3, 2, 1...

Sneeze cannon...firing!

The source text is a phishing email written in formulaic, automated language. Its original Field is *enabling*, prompting the reader to take security actions. The student retains this mechanical phrasing and reorganizes it into a playful sneezing scene.

As a result, the Field shifts toward *recreating*, and the Mode moves from procedural prose to a line-based poetic form. The Tenor also changes from impersonally bureaucratic to collaborative and humorous.

This example demonstrates that even a deceptive or algorithmic digital language can become material for creative reinterpretation.

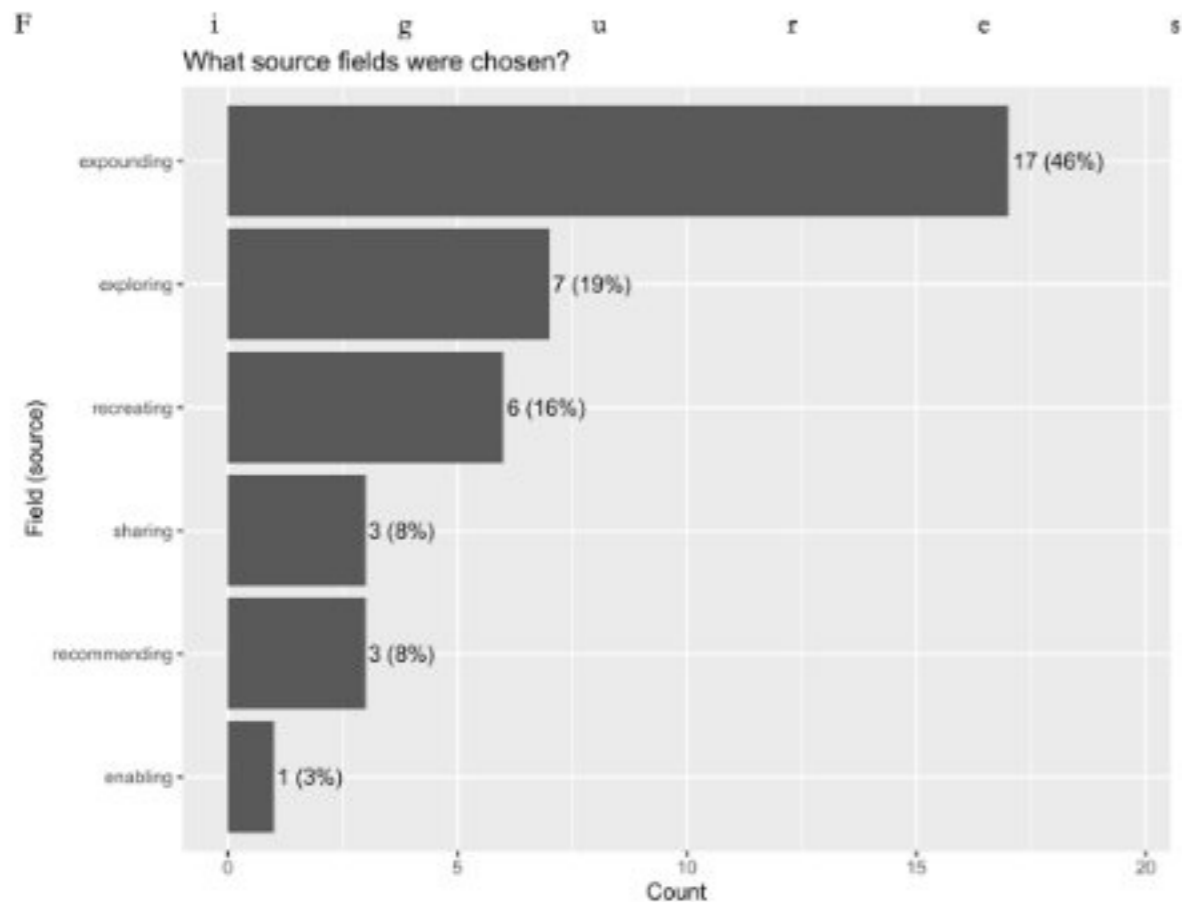


Figure 1

Example 4. From Descriptive Nature Writing to Introspective Solitude

Alone
 written by student D
 (source: the opening line from *Into the Forest*)
 This milky world,
 I tense my body and refuse.
 The morning sea,
 The mirror-like surface too,
 The song like a small bird too,
 The bald eagle too,
 The humpback whale which should be out in the vast
 ocean too,
 Passing right before my eyes.
 Vanishing into the mist.
 Why am I here.

Source text offers sensory descriptions of the natural environment. In the poem, these images are internalized and reorganized into a new scene centered on the writer's solitary perspective.

Although the focus shifts from observing the outer world to articulating an inner state, the field remains within *recreating* since the poem constructs a reimagined world shaped by the writer's stance.

The repetition of "too" reinforces the sense of distance, and the final question frames the poem as an exploration of solitude.

SUMMARY OF TRANSFORMATIONS

These examples demonstrate how the students worked with different genres to produce distinct poetic transformations. Scientific and encyclopedic texts became narrative or expressive, promotional texts became reflective or introspective, automated digital language became material for playful storytelling, and descriptive prose became a vehicle for emotional or existential exploration.

In all cases, the students engaged in the linguistic affordances of the source texts while reorganizing them to create new resonances.

PATTERNS OF POETIC TRANSFORMATION

Field: From Expounding and Exploring to Recreating and Sharing

The most frequent source texts selected by students were *expounding* or *exploring* (Figure 1). This reflects the composition of the teaching set, which included scientific explanations of dreams, encyclopedic descriptions of nebulae, and reflective essays on picture books and fandom. Although the numerical distribution reflects availability, the nature of the subsequent transformations provides insights into how students engaged with these Fields.

IMAGE: Figure 1. Source Fields Chosen

Figure 2 presents a heat map of the standardized residuals from a chi-square test, examining how the Field of each source text shifted in the students' poems. Blue indicates transformations that occurred more frequently than expected, red indicates transformations that occurred less often than expected, and white indicates transformations

that occurred roughly as expected.

IMAGE 2 Figure 2. Field Shift Standardized Residuals

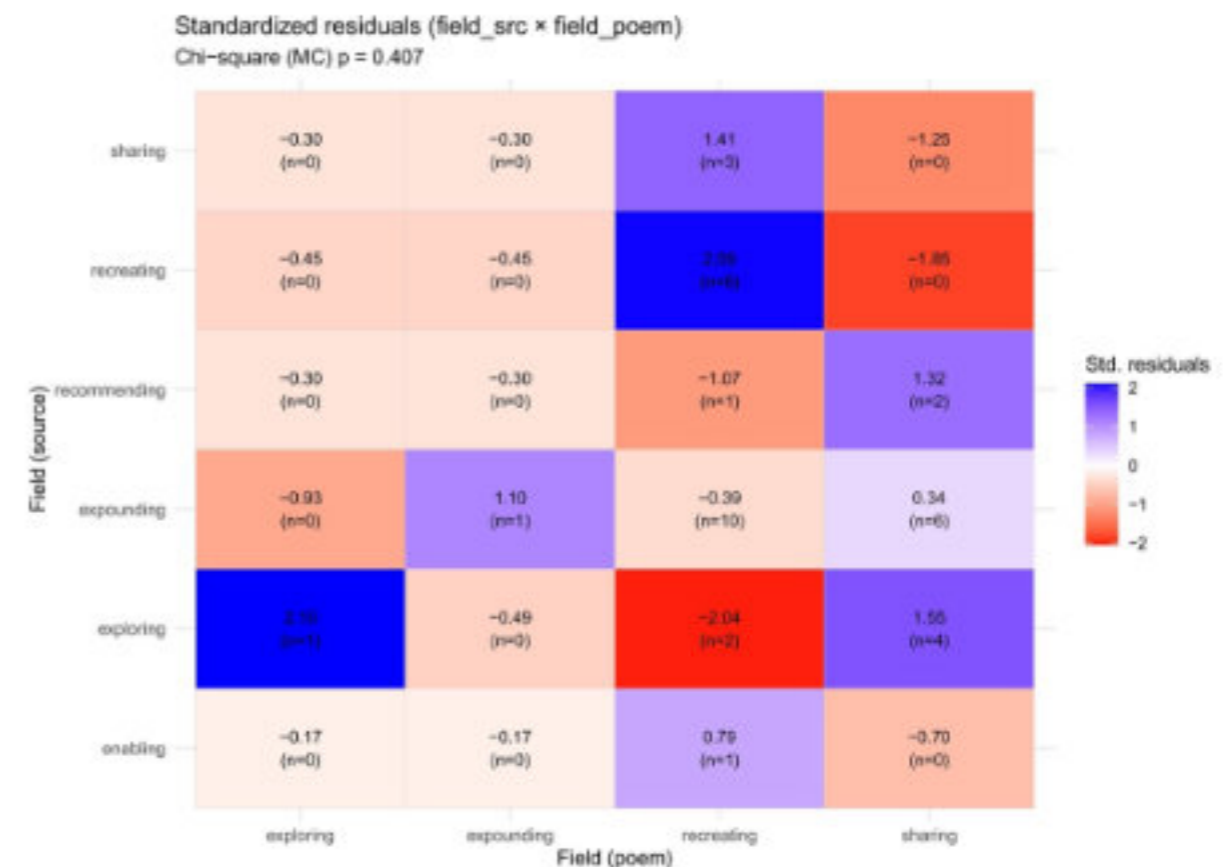
A recurring pattern was that *exploring* texts, which often present tentative or reflective claims, shifted toward poems that emphasized *sharing*. In Japanese, such exploratory writing commonly uses epistemic markers such as "it might be" or "could it be that," inviting the reader to consider possible interpretations. When transformed into poetry, students frequently internalize this open stance and express emotional connections or personal reflections. This shift corresponds to a movement from thinking toward feelings and conceptual exploration toward interpersonal expression.

By contrast, the explanatory texts showed a different pattern. Although many students chose these texts, the shift from *expounding* to *recreating* occurred less frequently than expected. Students were able to transform explanatory language into imaginative scenes, as illustrated in the nebula example; however, this pathway required more active restructuring.

This pattern suggests that although explanatory texts can inspire creative reinterpretations, they do not automatically lead to recreative transformations.

Texts that were already narrative or poetic in tone, such as the nature writing in *Into the Forest*, tended to remain in the *recreating* category. These texts provided affective imagery and a strong sensory orientation, and students often emphasized these existing features rather than extensively altering the

Figure 2



meaning.

TENOR: ASSIMILATION AND DISTANCIATION IN VOICE

Changes in Tenor reveal how writers repositioned themselves in relation to the source text. Many poems showed an upward shift, indicating increased emotional involvement (Figure 3). This was common when students worked with objective or external genres such as *expounding*, *enabling*, or *exploring* texts.

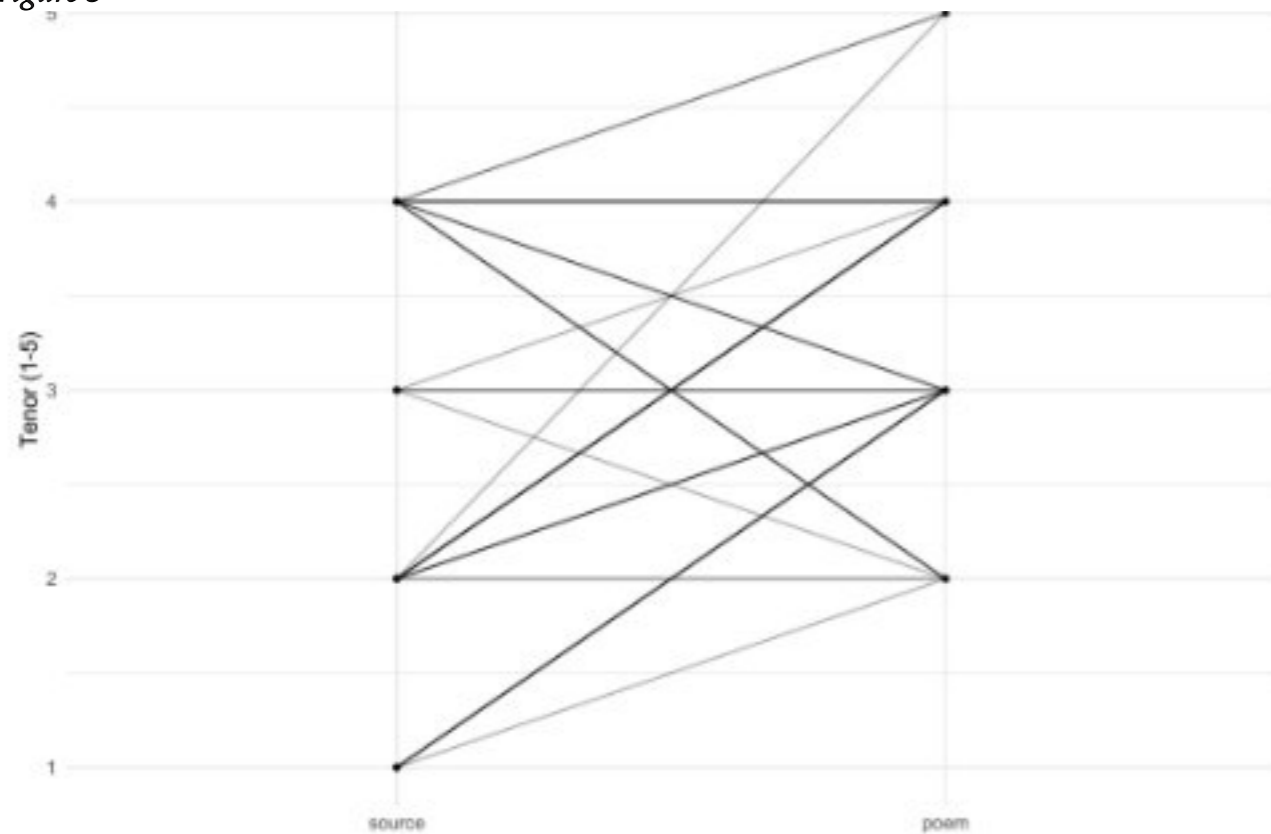
Writers added sensory language or personal pronouns to transform distant statements into expressions of empathy or introspection. This process aligns with what can be called poetic assimilation, in which the writer makes the text personally meaningful, akin to what Ricoeur calls "appropriation" (Ricoeur 1981).

Figure 3 (SEE OVERLEAF). Tenor Shift (1-5: Objective→Intimate)

A smaller number of poems exhibited downward or stable Tenor shifts. These often originated from texts that already had emotional or relational orientation. Instead of intensifying feelings, writers stepped back from their emotional tone and engaged with structure, rhythm, or sound. This process created a reflective distance, suggesting a form of poetic distanciation in which the writer focuses on the affordances of the language itself, rather than the source text's affective stance.

Together, these patterns show that poetry-writing does not simply increase emotional expression. Rather, it involves the realignment of stance, in which writers either move closer to or deliberately

Figure 3



distance themselves from the original text's voice.

MODE: CONVERGENCE TOWARD POETIC FORM

In all cases, the Mode moved toward the poetic end of the scale. Regardless of the genre, students selected and arranged fragments in ways that foregrounded rhythm, visual spacing, fragmentation, and juxtaposition. Even texts that were originally in continuous prose, such as phishing emails or promotional writing, became line-based.

This suggests that the act of composing within the found poetry tool encouraged writers to reorganize language in ways that emphasized poetic features.

POETIC BOLDNESS: VARIED ROUTES TO CREATIVE RESTRUCTURING

The Boldness Index captures the extent of structural transformation through reordering, addition or omission, voice shifts, and structural shifts (Figure 4).

Poems in the *sharing* and *recreating* categories tended to show greater boldness, albeit in different ways. *Sharing* poems often displayed emotional expansion and voice shifts, while *recreating* poems showed more formal refinement through repetition or reorganization.

IMAGE Figure 4. Boldness by Poem Field

Poems derived from *exploring* and *expounding* texts showed somewhat lower boldness on average, although the sample sizes limited (n=1) strong interpretations. These texts invite selective

transformation rather than extensive reconstruction.

Taken together, these boldness patterns indicate that writers pursued different creative routes depending on the genre. Some transformations rely on emotional elaboration, while others rely on structural or rhythmic experimentation.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that the source text type plays an important role in shaping poetic transformation. Although all texts offered opportunities for creative reorganization, different genres tended to stimulate different forms of engagement.

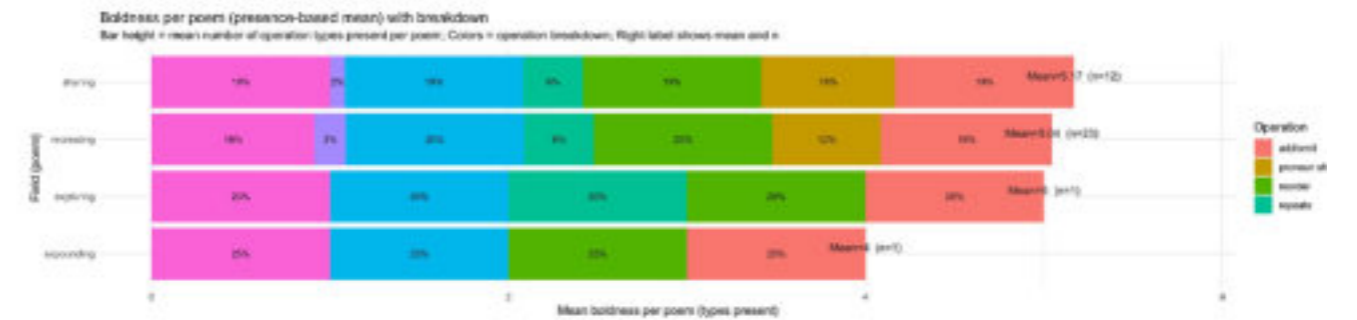
These tendencies offer several insights for educators who incorporate found poetry into their classrooms or workshops.

First, exploratory writing encourages emotional translations. Texts that present tentative interpretations or invite reflection, such as essays in picture books or fandom, prompt students to respond with poems that emphasize connections, feelings, or personal insights.

The open stance of exploratory writing appears to create a space for internalization, allowing writers to move from considering possibilities to expressing how these possibilities resonate with their own experiences.

For teachers, this suggests that reflective or speculative texts may serve as effective entry points for activities that highlight emotional literacy or

Figure 4



perspective taking.

Second, analytical or explanatory prose require active engagement. Scientific explanations or encyclopedic descriptions rarely offered emotional cues, yet students were able to transform them by shifting their focus, reorganizing imagery, or adding affective vocabulary. These transformations highlight the value of found poetry as a tool for helping students work closely with informational texts.

By selecting and repositioning fragments, writers can explore how meaning is constructed and how objective language can be reframed to support imaginative or expressive aims. This process may be particularly valuable in integrated literacy teaching, where reading and writing across genres are emphasized.

Third, texts that already contain vivid imagery or symbolic resonance, such as *recreating*, tend to support refinement of form rather than a major alteration of meaning. In these cases, the poetic potential of the original text was carried into the resulting poem, and the students focused on sharpening the rhythm, pacing, and visual organization.

This indicates that highly evocative texts may support learning activities that focus on noticing and crafting stylistic features.

Fourth, the thematic content of the text contributes to transformation. Topics such as dreams, stars, fear, and human relationships often prompt poems that extend or deepen the source's affective dimension. In contrast, procedural or digital communication, such as phishing emails, invites playful reinterpretations. These contrasts highlight the importance of considering both linguistic and thematic affordances when selecting poetry materials.

Taken together, these findings suggest that poetic transformation emerges through the interaction between the text and writer. Although genre shapes what is possible, it does not determine the outcomes. Instead, it creates a set of affordances that writers can adopt, resist, or reshape.

The variability of responses across the workshop demonstrates that the poetry supports multiple modes of engagement, including emotional elaboration, reflective distancing, narrative reconstruction, and formal experimentation.

This highlights the need for educators to curate texts that offer diverse entry points into creative practices.

A well-selected set may include explanatory texts that invite reinterpretation; exploratory or reflective texts that encourage emotional engagement; or vivid or symbolic texts that support stylistic refinement. Such collections can help teachers design workshops that create spaces for various types of poetic responses and different learner strengths.

Finally, the findings of this study support prior research that treats found poetry not merely as a writing activity but as "poetic inquiry" (Leavy 2020; Prendergast 2006). By reshaping the existing language, learners encounter how meaning is constructed and how shifting stances, voices, or structures can open new perspectives.

This process can support creative confidence and strengthen learners' understanding of how reading and writing interact in literacy education.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study examined how student writers transformed eight different source texts into poems and identified patterns in how genres and textual features shaped these transformations. Although all the texts afforded opportunities for creative reorganization, they invited different kinds of engagement.

These findings highlight the value of selecting varied poetry materials in educational settings. A diverse set of texts can support multiple modes of engagement, allowing learners to work with language analytically, imaginatively, and reflectively.

When students reshape existing words, they not only create poems but also experience how meaning is constructed and how shifting their stance or structure can open new perspectives. This process has the potential to strengthen creative confidence and deepen understanding of how reading and writing interact in literacy learning.

The dataset used in this study was limited to a single workshop and did not include certain genres, such as *doing* or *reporting* writing.

Furthermore, the influence of theme remains unanalyzed. Future work could explore how these additional genres are transformed and how thematic content interacts with register features to shape poetic responses. Expanding the collection of source texts may help identify the linguistic properties that most effectively support different types of creative

engagement.

Found poetry offers a flexible and inclusive approach to writing. By reworking their existing language, learners can discover new ways of seeing and expressing themselves. For educators, challenges and opportunities lie not only in lowering the barriers to creation but also in curating materials that invite this kind of transformation, and in creating environments where learners can explore how language and experience come together through poetic expressions.

BIOGRAPHY

Yuka Nakai is an Associate Professor at Hiroshima University whose work focuses on poetry writing in Japanese language education. She completed her PhD in workshop-based poetry teaching in the UK and has continued to develop cross-cultural approaches in collaboration with the late Dr. Sue Dymoke. Her recent research explores how poetry writing can build confidence in learners of all ages and how digital tools can support inclusive writing communities.

REFERENCES

Butler-Kisber, L. (2002) Artful Portrayals in Qualitative Inquiry: The Road To Found Poetry and Beyond. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. XLVIII (3), 229-239.

Dymoke, S. (2016) 'Integrating poetry-focused digital technology within a literacy teacher education course' in C. Kosnik, S. White, C. Beck, B. Marshall, A. L. Goodwin, and J. Murray (eds.) *Building Bridges* (pp. 59–75). The Netherlands: Sense Publications.

Gombrich, E. (2000) *Art and Illusion*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1985) *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Melbourne: Deakin University Press.

Leavy, P. (2020) *Method Meets Art; Arts-Based Research Practice, Third Edition*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Leggo, C. (2008) 'Astonishing silence: Knowing in poetry' In G. J. Knowles and A. L. Cole (eds.) *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues* (pp. 165–174). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Matthiessen, C. M. (2015) Register in the Round: Registerial Cartography. *Functional Linguistics*, 2–9.

Nakai, Y. (2025) Found Poetry Digital Space: Constructing a Model to Enhance Children's Confidence in Writing and Sharing. *Writing in Practice*. 11, 27–39.

Prendergast, M. (2006) Found Poetry as Literature Review Research Poems on Audience and Performance. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 12 (2), 369–388.

R Core Team. (2024) R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing [online]. Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing. [Available online](#). [7 December 2025]

Ricoeur, P. (1981) *Hermeneutics and the Human sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme. Edited by John B. Thompson.

Wan, Y. N. (2023) Insurance Discourse Analysis: Identifying Register Variables and Generic Stages in English Cross-Border Complaint Calls. *Journal of Language and Communication in Business*. 63, 161–179.

Poetry as a facilitator of conversation in safe spaces

Gill Connors

GILL CONNORS presented at the NAWE Conference about safe spaces and how writing can address trauma.

To understand the concept of a safe space we need to look at the history of the phrase and how it might mean physically and emotionally safe as well as 'safe from' and 'safe to'. Addressing the idea of safe space, Moira Kenney notes that,

In feminist, queer, and civil rights movements an understanding of safe space has developed that is associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment. This type of safe space also encourages "a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance" (Kenney 2001:24).

From this perspective we might see safe spaces as places which keep groups of people safe from both physical and emotional harm, as well as somewhere that those people might feel able to share their experience. This safety from harm, to being able to speak freely, has the effect of empowering those who belong to the safe space and those spaces might be physical or virtual.

Poetry might be viewed as both of these as we can argue that the safe space is the actual writing rather than, or as well as, the space in which to do it, and that the poems, when published in a book that includes others about similar experiences are then in a safe space, the safe space being the book, poetry becoming , in this way a branch of free speech.

There has been a great deal of discussion around the concept of 'safe spaces' and the need for them, especially when we are thinking about safe spaces for women as well as trans women. The idea that there is even a need for safe spaces might be something that hadn't entered the collective psyche because sexism is accepted and even tolerated as something that is always present, as Ruth Lewis et al. have observed.

We think of... the 'wallpaper' of sexism; the backdrop which becomes unremarkable because of its routine familiarity. Like wallpaper that one sees everyday, the gendering of space becomes the norm and, because it is so normalised, becomes unremarkable. (Lewis et al., 2015) .

POETRY IS NOT A LUXURY

So what is it about poetry specifically that can act as a facilitator for conversation? Addressing women and art, Audre Lorde argues that,

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital

necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (Lorde, 2017:8)

When Lorde says this, she is speaking as a poet, as a woman who is a poet and for whom poetry is her first language. For her, poetry is 'a vital necessity', because it is how she thinks and is the medium in which she responds to the world in which she lives with all its discriminations and abuses.

She goes on to explain, 'I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience', (Lorde, 2017:8) making the case for poetry as specific and different to other means of communication.

But what is it about poetry specifically that can make us want to reply to the call of it with our own experience? Gillie Bolton suggests that:

The process of writing required of the poet takes the writer into hitherto unexpressed and unexplored areas of experience, in a way only very skilled psychotherapy/analysis or the other arts therapies can. The writing of poetry can also effectively be used to examine issues the writer knows are problematic but does not want to talk about. (Bolton, 1999)

Like Lorde, Bolton suggests that poetry can enable us to share experiences in a way that no other medium can. Bolton focuses on the therapeutic nature of sharing poetry, whereas Lorde is concerned with the power it can release. She says, 'For each of us as women, there is a dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises,' (Lorde, 2017:7). It is this 'dark place' that Lorde suggests is the source of women's 'poetry as illumination', and she observes that, 'it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.' (Lorde, 2017:7).

This, too, is borne out by the participants of my research group. When I asked them to attempt to define what it is about poetry specifically that allows them to share experiences they hadn't been able to before, some of their answers included:

'I think when you are considering how something is written, especially in detail, it enables the brain to process other, perhaps more traumatic things. Structure acts like a sort of parachute. Perhaps it's the sense of order or clarity which helps.'

'I think that poetry can open doors that otherwise remain closed. I think poetry is an invitation to step

into a different space, more circular than linear, more fluid than rigid where ideas can have a place to flourish.

'I think that the act of writing poetry detaches me from the trauma of the event in that I'm trying to construct a poem that is relatable, and I'm consciously using poetic devices to enhance the poem. This creates some distance.'

'Partly, it is to do with 'telling it slant' and partly because poetry allows me to be, at the same time, gut-wrenchingly honest, which I find healing, yet always retain an element of control over how much of the truth of my past traumas is revealed in any single text. I have become more courageous.'

'Poetry allows a rawness to be crafted into something palatable and, yes, beautiful, which in turn may act as an invitation to talk.'

The idea of poetry affording some kind of space between the poet and the experience they are writing about seems to be clear in these answers, whether the space is achieved by 'telling it slant', or by using poetic devices to blur the meaning a little.

Williams further indicates that poetry specifically is a tool which might be used to voice feelings about trauma and grief that otherwise might be kept hidden.

As with other forms of creative therapy, the shift to poetic means of communication opens a new access point to thoughts and emotions- sometimes with a visionary clarity- otherwise fenced in by inhibition, shame, fear or denial. In bereavement, such a tool may prove a particularly powerful source of release. (Williams, 2024)

This need for speech that is then manifested as writing is what often happens in groups of women when they find themselves among people who have had the same or similar experience to themselves.

As previously noted, in the research I have undertaken through running online discussion forums on the subjects of motherhood, judgement, and on poetry and safe spaces, I have found that sometimes a participant might say 'I have never said this before' or 'This is the first time I have spoken about this' and as well as the solidarity of another's experience, it is the sharing of a poem and the freedom to be allowed to respond to it in their own language that leads a woman to finally speak about something they might have been silent about for years.

The sharing of a new poem that has been inspired by the discussion and the reading of a published poem is often the catalyst to a workshop participant being able to finally talk about a sensitive subject. When bell hooks says

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice. (Hooks, 1986)

she implies, like Lorde that we must vocalise our experiences so that we can share them with others and that 'Talking Back', like Poetry, is not a luxury but a necessity, albeit, one that we have to find the space and the freedom, to be able to practise.

LIGHTHOUSES

When Audre Lorde talks about

the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action (Lorde)

and when Kim Moore references Adrienne Rich by saying

I write a poem which throws a floodlight on my own experience, which lights up the corners of my thinking, which examines my collaboration with these forces. (Moore, 2023)

they are both suggesting that poetry has the power to throw light on to our experience which then empowers ourselves and others to take action, or to speak about a similar experience. This process may be seen in the case of Chanel Miller who in 2015 was sexually assaulted at a frat party she'd gone to with her sister. Her attacker was Brock Turner, an elite swimmer at a private university. Throughout the eventual trial, Miller was continually referred to as 'Emily Doe' and it was not until she wrote her victim statement in the form of a letter to read it to the court and her attacker and named herself that her identity became known. The victim statement was published on BuzzFeed News and went viral on the internet, giving Miller a voice, at last.

In her victim statement published on Buzz Feed, (Baker, 2016) Miller quotes Anne Lamott saying 'Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.'

Telling her story wasn't originally something she did to help others speak about their own experiences; rather, it was to help herself in the healing after her own ordeal. The effect of her writing and making public her victim statement and of the memoir that came after, was a by-product of doing so. She writes:

Although I can't save every boat, I hope that by speaking today, you absorbed a small amount of light, a small knowing that you can't be silenced, a small satisfaction that justice was served, a small assurance that we are getting somewhere. (Baker, 2016)

Miller might not have started out by writing a letter that would 'shine a light' for others to see and help them to share their own experiences, but it has undoubtedly been its effect.

Similarly, Kim Moore and Audre Lorde didn't write their poems with the idea of helping others in mind. Their poems are responses to experiences or traumas of some kind, and how they are received by others is not something that the poet can control.

It is the poem which matters in the beginning, the writing and crafting of something that will effectively show the poet's feelings about something

that has happened to them or someone else. What comes later is another thing. Moore writes,

Performing these poems, reading from creative-critical work is not a consciousness-raising session, and yet I have seen that these poems raise consciousness in both women and men. (Moore, 2022)

suggesting that as well as serving as a way to offer support and comfort to the writer, poetry can also raise awareness of an issue and lead the reader to think in a different way which might be something the poet did not consider when they wrote the poem.

This may be observed in the reception of *An Altogether Different Place* (Davies & Robinson, 2024) a collection in which Rachel Davies and Hilary Robinson curate their shared experiences of living with partners with dementia.

The poems were written at a time when they were both coming to terms with the diagnosis and finding a way through the grief, trauma and guilt that it had occasioned. The idea that a book containing personal poems about dementia might help others in the same or similar positions wasn't one which drove the writing of it, rather, the poems were what mattered to the poets; the fact that they were well written and that they might act as a catharsis for their writers.

Although both endorsements for the book from poets Liz Berry and Jo Bell point out the value of the book for others who might be going through the same 'journey', the authors themselves say that 'it is through poetry that they found a joint space to laugh, cry, find context and write out their experiences.' (Davies & Robinson, 2024)

The cathartic nature of poetry is such that for a poet, to write about an experience in poetry is to 'shine a light' on that experience and show it to others for them to then respond. Should that poem then be shared with others who are experiencing the same or similar trauma, it might encourage them to share their own experience through poetry or poetic means.

CONCLUSION

Poetry can be and is used to facilitate conversation within safe spaces about sensitive subjects and as a tool to help process trauma or grief. Poetry specifically, can be used to write about trauma because of the way we can change meaning through the nuance of poetry so that sensitive or difficult subjects might be 'hidden' within a poem. While we might not set out to write a poem as therapy for others, it may become used as a therapeutic tool when it is read by those who feel that it speaks to them and their own experience.

Safe spaces can be created by poetry, but it is important that within those spaces we are aware of the very individual experiences of all the inhabitants. One person's trauma is not the same as another's and it is important to recognise that culture, race and sexuality can all effect the way someone responds to trauma.

Some writers have said that within the lines and language of a poem is a space that feels safe enough to share what has previously felt too problematic

with meaning and message hidden within a poem whilst still allowing the writer to say what they want and allowing them to be able to speak about something that they might find difficult. In this way, poetry is able to facilitate safe spaces and through the reading and responding to it, a poem itself can be the space in which a sensitive or difficult subject can be discussed.

BIOGRAPHY

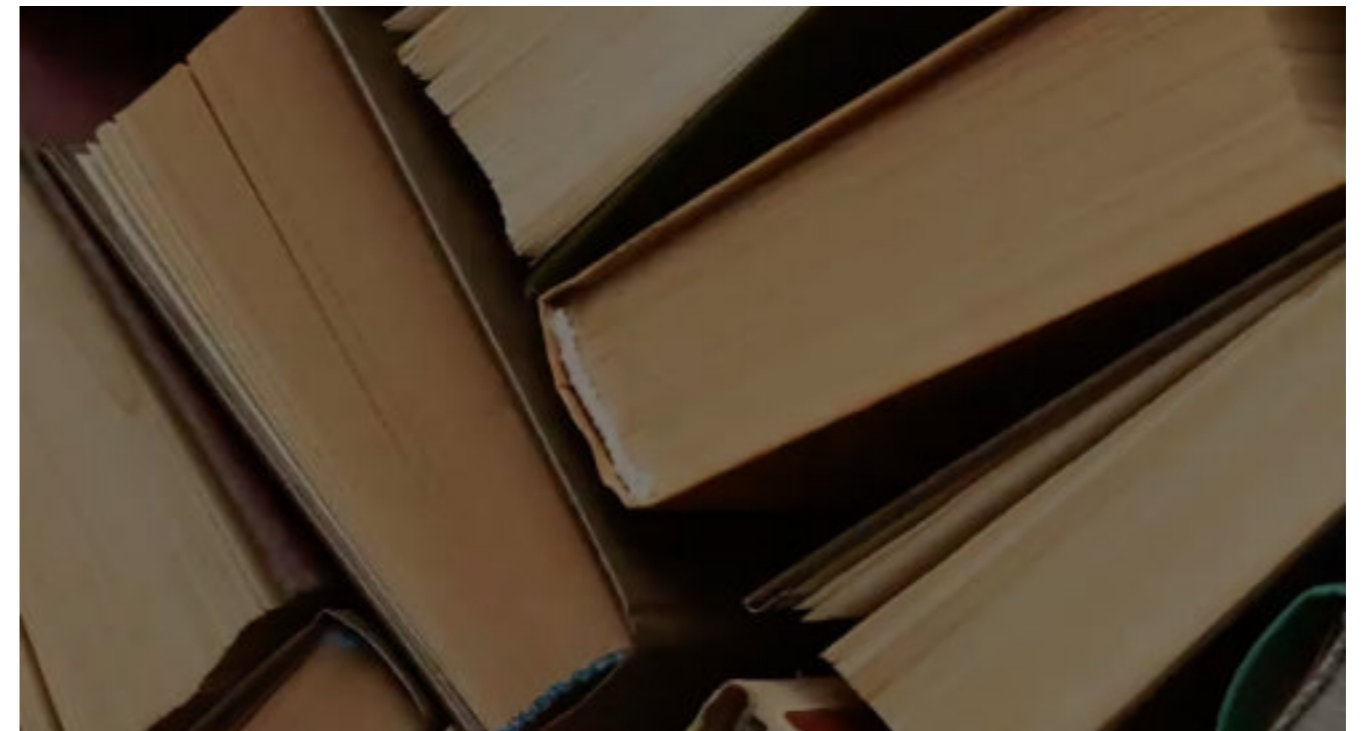
Gill Connors is a published poet and workshop facilitator from North Yorkshire. She has published two poetry collections with Yaffle Press: *Tadainma* (2019) and *A Small Goodbye at Dawn* (2022). her PhD research at Leeds Trinity is on the links and parallels between sixteenth and twenty-first century women.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Alcoff, L. (1991). The Problem of Speaking for Others. *Cultural Critique*, 20(20), 5–32. [Available online](#).
- Alma, D. (2018). *#MeToo : rallying against sexual assault and harassment a woman's poetry anthology*. Fair Acre Press.
- Baker, K. J. M. (2016, June 3). *Here's The Powerful Letter The Stanford Victim Read To Her Attacker*. BuzzFeed News. [Available online](#).
- Bates, L. (2014). *Everyday sexism*. Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Griffin.
- Black, S., Kennedy, R., & McCann, H. (2020). Echoes and Silences: #MeToo's Reverberations. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 35(105), 239–243. [Available online](#).
- Boyd, A., & McEwan, B. (2022). Viral paradox: the Intersection of "Me Too" and #MeToo. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). [Available online](#).
- Burke, T. (n.d.). *HOME*. Justbeinc. [Available online](#).
- Burke, T. (2021). *Unbound*. Headline Publishing Group . 9781472292339
- Churchill, C. (2019). *Top girls*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. (Original work published 1982)
- Coaston, J. (2019). *The Intersectionality Wars*. Vox; Vox Media. [Available online](#).
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. [Available online](#).
- Davies, R., & Robinson, H. (2024). *An Altogether Different Place*. Beautiful Dragons Press.
- Diamant, A. (2017). *The Red Tent*. Picador. (Original work published 1997)
- Febos, M. (2016, December 14). *The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act*. Poets & Writers. [Available online](#).
- Febos, M. (2021). *Girlhood*. Bloomsbury.

The Use of Questions and Silence as Feedback on Creative Writing in the Narrative Coaching Process

esme mills



Guerreo, L. A. (2015). Front Matter. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 43(3/4). [Available online](#).

Guerrero, L. A. (2012). Birthing the Warrior: Poetry as Illumination. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 40(3-4), 306-310. [Available online](#).

Higginbotham, J. (2013). *The girlhood of Shakespeare's sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence*. Edinburgh Oxford University Press.

Hooks, B. (1986). Talking Back. *Discourse*, 8(Vol 8), 123-128. [Available online](#).

hooks, bell. (2000). *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*. New York ; London Routledge. (Original work published 1984)

hooks, bell. (2014). *Ain't I a Woman*. Routledge.

IVORY, H. (2024). *Constructing a Witch*. Bloodaxe Books.

Kenney, M. (2001). *Mapping Gay L.A.* Temple University Press.

Lambert, G., & Bilkau, R. (Eds.). (2020). *Bloody Amazing*. Dragon/Yaffle.

Lewis, R., Sharp, E., Remnant, J., & Redpath, R. (2015). "Safe Spaces": Experiences of Feminist Women-Only Space. *Sociological Research Online*, 20(4), 1-14. [Available online](#).

Lorde, A. (2017). *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press.

Marcus, J. (1978). Art and Anger. *Feminist Studies*, 4(1), 68. [Available online](#).

Miller, C. (2019). *Know My Name: A Memoir*. Viking.

Moore, K. (2020). *Poetry and Everyday Sexism*. Seren.

Moore, K. (2021). *All The Men I Never Married*. Seren.

Moore, K. (2023). *Are You Judging Me Yet?* Seren.

Moore, N. (2015). The Realism of 'The Angel in the House' Coventry Patmore's Poem Reconsidered. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43(1), 41-61. [Available online](#).

Otto, W. (1992). *How to make an American quilt*. London Pan Books.

Patricia Hill Collins. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge.

Rich, A. (1995). *On lies, secrets, and silence : selected prose, 1966-1978*. W.W. Norton.

Rich, A. (2018). *Selected Poems: 1950-2012*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Runyan, A. S. (2018). What Is Intersectionality and Why Is It Important? *Academe*, 104(6), 10-14. [Available online](#).

Scheuer, C. (2025). *On Audre Lorde's "Outlines."*

Maps-Legacy.org. [Available online](#).

Showalter, E. (1972). Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers. *The Antioch Review*, 32(3), 339-353. [Available online](#).

Tarana Burke. (2021). *Unbound : My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*. Flatiron Books.

The Roestone Collective. (2014). Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization. *Antipode*, 46(5), 1346-1365. [Available online](#).

UN women. (2020). *Intersectional feminism: what it means and why it matters right now*. UN Women; United Nations. [Available online](#).

Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room Of One's Own*. Hogarth Press.

esme mills presented at the NAWE Conference on how creative writing is the perfect tool to support the life coaching process.

"What does the story want to be asked?" (Drake, 2018: 345):

Life coaching is the process of exploring one's potential and creating "new, alternative and more uplifting narratives about their own life" (Stetler, 2007, cited in Stelter and Law, 2010: 154). Narrative coaching is a specific approach which focuses on "the stories people tell to and about themselves" (Bruner 2004, cited in Jensen et al., 2018: 29). The literature on narrative coaching reflects and mirrors the language of creative writing in many instances, making creative writing a natural tool to complement the narrative coaching approach. As Law (2019: 39) says, "storying has power to transform life."

The writer, or coachee, can story their life by using their experiences and "narrative material" (Drake, 2018: 343) to create meaning and purpose in their life (Hunt, 2023: 157). By framing their life as a "movie" (Drake, 2018, cited in Hunt, 2023: 160) and themselves as a character, distance is created between the coachee as writer and the struggles they are facing, and the coachee is more able to see for

themselves a positive solution or outcome. "In re-authoring, the coachee story is regarded as a 'script', and the coachee the 'author'. As such the coachee should have power and freedom to re-author the story of their life" (Stelter and Law, 2010: 160).

Using creative writing to both literally and figuratively re-author their story can help the coachee to see what may be possible.

Prior to undertaking any creative writing exercises, the coach should discuss (Stone and Heen, 2015: 42) the purpose of the writing and subsequent feedback. The primary goal of the creative work in this process is not publication but to help the coachee to create a more empowering life story, on the path to self-actualization.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK

In the context of the life coaching process, feedback is a tool that "challenges the learner's thinking and supports the learner's growth" (Atkinson et al., 2022: 441). Much like the creative writing workshop, narrative coaching depends upon "honest feedback" (Hunt, 2023: 158); likewise, when using creative writing as a tool in the process, "gathering feedback

is a critical skill for creative work” (Krishna Kumaran et al., 2021: 4) to further development.

Being mindful that “the coach does not offer advice, but enables the coachee to think through the issues themselves and come up with a solution” (Hunt, 2023: 157), feedback should be framed as a dialogue or conversation rather than one-way communication, based on an understanding of the coachee’s strengths and weaknesses (Atkinson et al., 2022: 442-3).

When offering feedback to a coachee on writing created as part of the coaching sessions, the life coach must be mindful that they are not simply providing feedback on a piece of writing but on someone’s life and choices.

As Carr said: “Lives are told in being lived and lived in being told” (1986: 61, cited in Stelter and Law, 2010: 156), which suggests that any critique of the writing has the potential to be a critique on the life being lived and vice versa.

QUESTIONS IN NARRATIVE COACHING

In life coaching, inquiry is “both a mindset and an act of communication” (Drake, 2018: 343) and “one of coaching’s greatest strengths” (Drake, 2018: 342). Questions are an opportunity for the coach to help the coachee “surface, explore, and adapt their narratives so they can make the changes in their life or work they have deemed important” (Drake, 2018: 355).

As the creative writing piece is a tool within the coaching process, and not independent of it, the coach must be mindful of the parameters of the coaching process and that the creative writing receives the same kind of feedback as other aspects of a coaching process—making neutral questions a preferred method of providing feedback for both.

Using questions as a feedback tool honours the coachee’s creative work and shows the coach has done a close reading of the work without providing negative critique that may adversely impact the coachee as writer.

Asking questions can “help the coachee in exploring their story, see it from different perspectives, understand how the story is constructed, see the possibilities and limitations and realise that there are other possible narratives” (Drake, 2007, cited in Jensen et al., 2018: 29). Questions can help the coachee to become aware of their current state, discover what they need and how to move forward and to effect external change (Drake, 2018: 343).

“What does the story want to be asked?” (Drake, 2018: 345) is a way to frame the process in order to keep the feedback neutral and focused on the narrative itself and not the skills of the coachee as writer or the life or decision-making of the writer as coachee. In keeping with the concept of life as story, the coach may consider questions around motivation, point of view and endings when providing feedback on the creative writing.

These questions may provide a starting point to exploring the coachee’s present state and direction (Hunt, 2023: 161), which is the goal of the coaching session. Inquiry around motivation can include questions such as: “What essential question is the

coachee trying to answer? Are these still the right questions? If not, what is the essential question now?” (Drake, 2018: 343). Additionally, framing the questions as “why-questions plays an important role in giving people an opportunity to put on words and further develop important philosophies of life” (Jensen et al., 2018: 30), assisting the coachee in understanding their motivations for specific decisions and actions.

Questions around point of view might include: “Why this way of seeing things? What do you gain by seeing it this way? What do you lose by seeing it this way? How else could you see it?” (Hunt, 2023: 161). These questions, which would also be beneficial in a more traditional writing workshop, will help the coachee to take ownership of their life and stories and to break free from any limiting narratives that have been imposed upon her. “What will you do next?” (Law, 2019: 42) or other questions that explore what happens after the story ends may help the coachee to see alternative possibilities and to continue living the story being told.

In this feedback process, the questions are grounded in the narrative itself, but they also leave spaces for the coachee to “become clearer” (Drake, 2018: 344) in both their story and their life’s purpose and to “engage and explore” (Drake, 2007, cited in Jensen et al., 2018: 34) their story both on and off the page.

The creative work the coachee produces through the narrative coaching process is to provide insight to the coachee and be viewed part of the coachee’s journey of self-discovery (Drake, 2018: 346). As such, the coach should be mindful of “giving space for the unfolding of narratives” (Stelter and Law, 2010: 156) and understand that the story—by its very nature, a perpetual work in progress—may not be clear or complete. When providing inquiry-based feedback, the coach should endeavour to “ask questions to generate experiences not pursue or provide explanations” (Drake, 2018: 364), and consider how it will serve the coachee (Drake, 2018: 358).

The life coach can use the framework of the story to ask questions of the story that may lead the coachee to find answers they are searching for in life. For a coachee to benefit from the feedback process, the coach may consider “mov[ing] toward the unknown more than the known” (Drake, 2018: 364) and using questions “to create new experiences for coaches that open new doors” (Drake, 2018: 344), even if the questions or answers may not serve the story on the page as long as they work in the bigger picture of the narrative coaching process.

The coach should look “for elements in the story that are amenable to challenge, redefinition, or reinterpretation” (Coulehan, Friedlander and Heatherington, 1998, cited in Drake, 2018: 356) that can support the coachee in rewriting their story in a more positive light. The coach should aim to be present and courageous in their questions (Drake, 2018: 345) in order facilitate deep transformation within the coachee; truly courageous questions may require silence.

SILENCE

Although “silence has been problematized within multiple disciplines” including business, education, psychology and others (Bağ-Srednicka,

2024: 220) and “can block communication” (Turner, 2020: 135), in life coaching and the coaching feedback process, silence can be viewed as “stillness, tranquillity, peacefulness, quiescence and ‘peace and quiet’” (Turner, 2020: 134). Silence—or pausing—is a powerful tool that provides the space for both questions and answers (Drake, 2018: 342).

Silence can be used as a tool that can “produce reflective moments” (Turner, 2020: 135) and “act as portals into the mind of the client” (Turner, 2020: 133). Silence can also be “a space for thinking more than doing, reflecting more than solving” (Lee, 2010: 34, cited in Turner, 2020: 134), allowing the space for new plotlines to be woven into the narrative.

Powerful questions can have a big effect on the coachee, which may be noticeable to the coach by the silence that follows (Drake, 2018: 342). Meaningful silence allows the coachee and writer time to process and prepare and is an integral part of learning. While outwardly quiet, “such silent moments are filled with their inner speech” (Bağ-Srednicka, 2024: 222), which “open up space for learning” (Walsh, 2011: 148, cited in Mirzaee and Yaqubi, 2016: 80).

This meaningful stillness may be part of what the poet John Keats described as “negative capability”: “the capacity poets have to let themselves be overwhelmed by the otherness of the work they are creating” (Falke, 2019: 80), and the capacity to embrace uncertainty, “a capacity that all artists must have but that women especially manifest” (Falke, 2019: 91).

As women working in a patriarchal system are likely to experience uncertainty and doubt, embracing the uncertainty and practicing negative capability, through the use of silence, will support the work they are creating.

More than moments of reflection or inner speech, silence can also be a response (Kim and Markus, 2002: 435) in the coaching discussion or on the page—in the white spaces and the margins—as “silences themselves speak, challenging any claims to truth in the dominant [colonial] narratives” (Silmi, 2023, p.59). For oppressed people particularly, including women and racialized women, silence speaks “when speech becomes impossible” (Silmi, 2023, p.60): “their words are mute, and one should read that which has not been said, or that which was said without knowing it, in the gap, in the interval between meaning and truth” (Silmi, 2023, p.61).

It is interesting to note that “the lack of this period of silence can easily lead to the withdrawal from the participation by the learners” (Mirzaee and Yaqubi, 2016: 81); a coach who is not comfortable with lengthy silence might, therefore, end up filling the silence with feedback that is less curious and more directive or prescriptive.

Filling the silence is common in Western culture,



Esme Mills

which does not generally allow generous periods of silence in dialogue, especially in comparison to other cultures; however, the coach should focus on the main tenets of coaching and trust the coachee to find the answers within themselves, even in periods of silence. The coach might want to think of their silence as a gift to their coachee: “it allows [them] to express emotions that need to be expressed in a safe atmosphere (Gillingham, 2014, in Turner, 2020: 134).

QUESTIONS AND SILENCE IN TANDEM

More than a tool, “silence constitutes communication and [...] speech thrives on and emerges from silence” (Korwin-Piotrowska, 2015, cited in Bağ-Srednicka, 2024: 220); “language doesn’t disappear in silence; on the contrary, it becomes more available to you” with silence simply a different form of engagement (Shibli, 2024), meaning silence and questions work in tandem.

Drake suggests that “listening drives inquiry, not the other way around” (2018: 357) and recommends the coach should “let your questions emerge from the silence and what you hear” (2018: 364), ensuring “questions neither lead nor follow the conversation, but accompany it” (Drake, 2018: 363).

For the coachee, without the pause after the question, there is no opportunity to truly explore and self-reflect on their work and self; both are necessary to do the deep work they are called to do in the coaching process.

DISCUSSION

While traditional teaching frameworks are still very much the norm, and feedback on creative writing can end up being a one-dimensional critique of the worth

of the piece, which can directly impact the self-perception of the writer, the coachee who is using creative writing is doing so through an autonomous process where they have been encouraged to trust the answers can be found within themselves.

As such, the coachee is not looking for an authoritative feedback system but rather feedback where they continue, as with the rest of the coaching session, to create their own meaning—and be the author—of everything produced through the session.

The use of questions empowers the coachee and writer to explore the creative work with curiosity and without judgment. In this way, they are less likely to be impacted by negative feedback that can lead to feelings of inadequacy or the impulse to alter their work based on external opinions rather than conscious decisions about what the story needs.

The use of questions is of particular benefit to female coachees and writers, as a way to move away from a more patriarchal system wherein feedback is imposed upon the recipient. This may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable to the female coachee who is unaccustomed to being easily heard but they will build trust throughout the process. The silence after a question allows the coachee to trust and to witness that there is space for their thoughts and ideas and that they are, in fact, the person who is authoring or re-authoring their story.

As such, it is worth considering if silence, more than language, offers the greatest possibilities, as the gaps are where meaningful work can happen.

Returning to the opening question—“What does the story want to be asked?” (Drake, 2018: 345)—is a reminder to the coach on how to approach providing feedback on creative writing pieces produced as part of the coaching process.

By using this as a starting point, the coach is reminded that the feedback process “is about coming alongside coachees to inquire into their stories with them, rather than standing outside their stories and asking questions to them” (Drake, 2018: 345). Ultimately, this will support both the coach and coachee to engage in “transformative human conversations” (Drake, 2018: 50), which include both language and silence, leading the coachee to better understand both their creative work and themselves, on their way to achieving the positive outcomes—the starring role—that brought them to coaching in the first place, which is what every story needs.

By using creative writing in the coaching process, through the use of questions and silences as feedback, the coachee will be supported to better express themselves, be empowered to move through life’s transitions, and trust themselves to reauthor their life story—ultimately supporting them on a journey of self-actualization.

The coach who accompanies them on this journey is hearing their coachees words—and silences—and has the honour of reading them and examining them,

because there is nothing more important or pertinent (Lorde, 2007: 32).

I acknowledge and thank the W̩SÁNEĆ people on whose traditional territory I live, write, and create.

BIOGRAPHY

esme mills is passionate about the power of story to change lives. She recently completed a post-graduate programme in Teaching Creative Writing at Cambridge University. In her roles as writer, certified life coach and communication manager, esme became interested in how to help others to explore their own life stories.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, A., Watling, C.J. and Brand, P.L.P. (2022) “Feedback and coaching,” *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 181(2), pp. 441–446. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00431-021-04118-8>.
- Bak-Średnicka, A. (2024) “The agential qualities of silence in post-observation feedback sessions,” *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 141(4), pp. 219–230. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4467/20834624SL.24.013.20463>.
- Djamasbi, S. and Loiacono, E.T. (2008) “Do men and women use feedback provided by their Decision Support Systems (DSS) differently?,” *Decision Support Systems*, 44(4), pp. 854–869. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2007.10.008>.
- Drake, D.B. (2018) *Narrative Coaching: The Definitive Guide to Bringing New Stories to Life*. Petaluma, CA: CNC Press.
- Falke, C. (2019). Negatively Capable Reading. In: B. Rejack and M. Theune, eds., *Keats’s Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp.79–92.
- Hunt, N. (2023) *Applied Narrative Psychology*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009245333>.
- Jensen, T.R., Høyer, T.R. and Spaten, O.M. (2018) “Narrative Therapy and Narrative Coaching Distinctions and similarities,” *Coaching Psykologi - The Danish Journal of Coaching Psychology*, pp. 27–38 Sider. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5278/OJS.CP.V7I1.2620>.
- Kim, H.S. and Markus, H.R. (2002). Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Silence: An Analysis of Talking as a Cultural Practice. In: R.A. Shweder and M. Minow, eds., *Engaging Cultural Differences*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, pp.432–452.
- Law, H. (2019) “Narrative coaching – Part 1: An introduction and the first step,” *The Coaching Psychologist*, 15(2), pp. 39–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119835714.ch40>.
- Lorde, A. (2007) *Sister Outsider: Essay and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press (The Crossing Press

feminist series).

Mirzaee, M. and Yaqubi, B. (2016) “A Conversation Analysis of the Function of Silence in Writing Conferences,” *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 4(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30466/ijltr.2016.20366>.

Shastri, G.K., Shurchkov, O. and Xia, L.L. (2020) “Luck or skill: How women and men react to noisy feedback,” *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*, 88, p. 101592. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2020.101592>.

Shibli, A. (2024). *The Experience of Palestine in Narration*. Louisiana Channel. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMxZa20wvYk>.

Silmi, A. (2023) “Voice and Silence in Assia Djebar and Adania Shibli,” *Critical Times*, 6(1), pp. 58–84. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-10235943>.

Stelter, R. and Law, H. (2010) “Coaching – narrative-collaborative practice,” *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5(2), pp. 152–164. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2010.5.2.152>.

Stone, D. and Heen, S. (2015) *Thanks for the feedback: the science and art of receiving feedback well*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group.

Turner, A.F. (2020) “Silence in Coaching,” in *The Coaches’ Handbook: The Complete Practitioner Guide for Professional Coaches*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

Writing as Water: Towards a Non-Innocent Practice of Creative Writing in the Digital Age

Yilin Tang



Image: Mick Haupt on Unsplash

YILIN TANG offered at the NAWC Conference that web poems are not just poems about the internet or merely published on the internet as a platform, but serve as materialised digital spaces for writing with and through the internet.

I begin with water.

Water is never still, yet it holds on to my fingers, shoulders, and strands of hair. When I write, I feel the same liquidity. As I post a piece of writing on social media platforms, or see someone's poetry online, they glitter with font styles and colour, shifting in motion as views, reads, and reposts change. That is the moment when I feel "the water on me." I write them, yet they dynamically move towards uncertain and undefined futures, with more-than-me, within the complex configuration of screens, algorithms, and their becomings.

Writing today is not an individual act of self-expression but a motion with many: body, code,

screen, atmosphere, histories, affect. This is what I have come to call non-innocent writing when creative writing enters the digital age.

Donna Haraway once wrote, "We are not in charge of the world" but must "strike up non-innocent conversations" through our prosthetic devices (1988: 594). Her provocation lingers with me each time I open a document on my laptop or type a line across the screen.

In the 21st century, creative writing is no longer a purely linguistic or human-centred act, it is a distributed, relational process that happens with technologies, through bodies, and across material conditions.

I propose that to write non-innocently is to write with awareness of these entanglements, to admit that writing is no longer solitary but situated. It steps out of a world of paper and pen and mingles into a world – many worlds – of onto-epistemic complexity:

data, code, and computation, becoming both writing to be read and writing to be heard, seen, reposted, and liked in the digital world.

WHAT IS NON-INNOCENT WRITING?

I first encountered the word *non-innocent* from Donna Haraway. She has discussed "non-innocent conversations and connections," especially in her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". Haraway argues that we are not innocent observers of the world we inhabit, but participants with *non-innocent conversations*.

Haraway uses "prosthetic devices" to describe the world around; devices that emerge slightly outside of, yet remain deeply connected with humans. On the one hand, these devices refer to how our perception of the world is mediated and packaged through technologies of visualization and information.

On the other hand, our ways of seeing are always located and partial, shaped by our bodies, emotions, and cultural biases. We live in relational entanglements with the prosthetics of technology, body, and affect.

I understand writing as one of these prosthetic devices, through which such non-innocent conversations take place.

The author, through screens, algorithms, and codes, engages in a writing that is not separate but

relational. As an author, I am not in control of writing; rather, writing comes into being with myself and technology.

Moreover, I approach non-innocent writing in digital times through what Karen Barad describes as "a material-discursive practice." Writing online involves material conditions of screens, light, gestures, and code; at the same time, there are still discursive elements of language, culture, and meaning. These elements encounter each other, entangle, and co-produce writing on the internet.

For instance, opposite is a web poem I found on a social media platform in China. From the picture, it clearly demonstrates how the material conditions of the photograph – the wall, the woman, the weather – are entangled with the handwritten words, which together produce a short poem.

Figure 1. A creative writing post themed around the philosophy of life from Xiaohongshu.

More interestingly, the poem is not a stable product fixed on the platform, but a temporary crystallization of ongoing flows, where likes, comments, and reposts are constantly changing, while algorithms distribute it, situating the poem here and there, emotionally, digitally, and socially. Non-innocent writing, thus, is a form of writing-becoming: generative, emergent, and situated. It is a mode of writing-making with the digital world.

WHY NON-INNOCENT WRITING? THE EMERGENCE OF NEW WRITING FORMS

As a creative writer and a social media user, as many people nowadays do, I encounter poems embedded with images and appear online, as the instance above. I also read algorithmically generated texts that learn our preferences, fragmented poetic languages that appear online capturing our eyes.

A tweet may read like a haiku; a line of code may perform as a stanza. A poem now circulates over, as and through an image, a video of poetry, or a fleeting post that invites touch and response.

In such entangled writing, the distinction between writer, reader, and medium dissolves. Meaning arises through the weaving together rather than solitary expression.

In addition to creative writing on social media platform, the way we write has also shifted. The School For Poetic Computation in New York, for instance, supports the education of arts, coding, and writing. It combines the creative writing with computation and develops the term "poetic computation" that engages computer as a medium for artistic expression.

Poetic computation reshapes our relationship with code, data, signals, text, and creative thinking. These new writing forms, and the pedagogies that accompany them, signal an onto-epistemological shift in how and why we write.

Moreover, the emergence of new writing is not merely technological but also ethical. Here, I recall a concept from Karen Barad: *response-ability*, which highlights the capacity to respond in a relational way. Instead of standing outside and observing the digital world, we, as writers, are writing *with* it as a way of

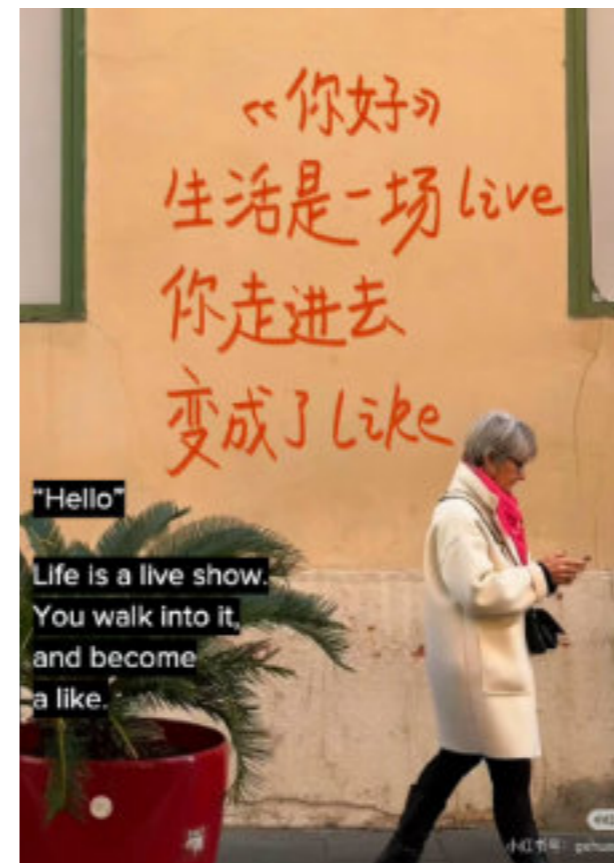
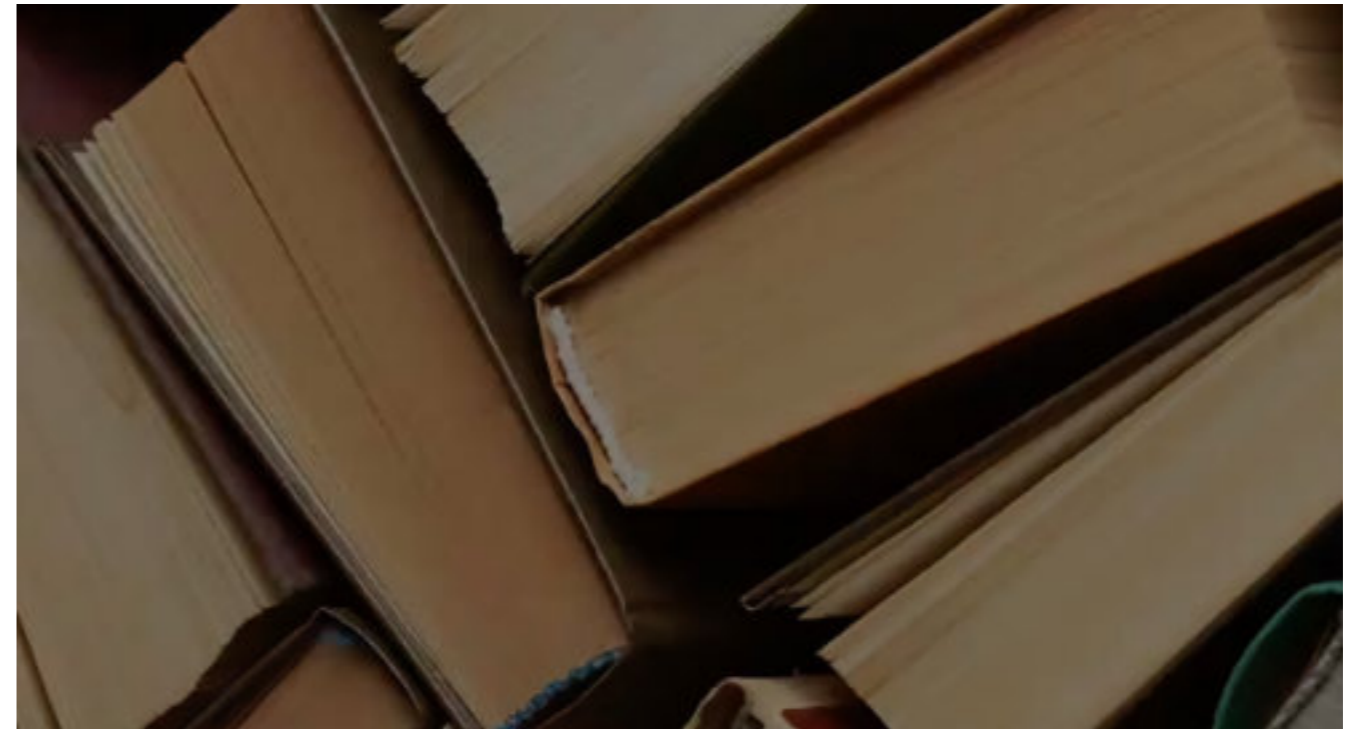


Figure 1

Translation as a way into Creative Writing

Liz Cashdan



making response. What emerges from this response is a new onto-epistemological way of writing.

Writers begin to engage with attention, the touch of a screen, the sound of a keyboard, the play of images, and the network of reposts, recognizing that we are always, and already, in a relational, embodied, and non-innocent writing.

Writing has changed. It is no longer bound to the page; it happens through interfaces, gestures, and codes. It has become multisensory, participatory, and affective. This is why *non-innocent writing* becomes important: it offers us a way to attend to these complexities, to think about the relationships between text, data, interfaces, and senses, and to be able to respond, non-innocently.

Understanding authorship as a separate, individualized entity may no longer work, since when language moves through digital networks, it also inevitably moves through infrastructures of power, attention, and affect. Our creative writing is shaped by algorithms, devices, and platforms that determine what can be seen or heard.

Thus, we need *non-innocent writing* to think, feel, and act with nuance and relationality when confronting this complexity. *Non-innocent writing* calls us to stay with this entanglement rather than retreat from it, to notice how writing always co-emerges with technologies and others, and to respond with awareness, care, and accountability.

Implications for teaching creative writing pedagogy

As a creative writing researcher and workshop facilitator, I have begun to recognize the relational, material, and non-innocent forms of writing that are emerging in the digital age. If writing itself has changed, then the pedagogy of creative writing could also shift. Teaching needs to attend and respond to the motions of writing, recognizing the entangled nature of technologies, materials, and affects that shape how we write and listen.

In my workshops, I often ask participants to begin not with words but with a feeling of encounter, where an object, an image, or a line of code might appear.

We then write not about it but with it, allowing these elements to move with the writing rather than remain fixed. For instance, instead of writing about autumn, we attend to the materials that compose an autumnal moment: falling leaves, a cold breeze, yellow ground, people in trench coats. Confronted with these materials, we begin to produce a discursive practice with and through them. We are not writing the autumn breeze; we write with and through them. On the one hand, writing from the breeze's own imagined perspective, and on the other, attempting to move through its materiality to sense how it connects with other materials, forming an overall affective field. Such practices invite writers to think relationally, to notice how words, images, and objects are constantly configuring and reconfiguring one another in the unfolding of writing.

Writing, in this sense, becomes a situated and non-innocent practice that emerges from relational complexity. Texts, objects, images, and digital environments appear intertwined, yet each retains its own singularity. This echoes Haraway's (2016) reminder that "we are all in this together, but we are not one." As contemporary writers, what we are writing, ontologically, is a continual negotiation of

our entanglement with digital devices and more-than-human companions, while still holding our own agencies and subjectivities in this shared world.

Also, in teaching creative writing, more attention could be given to short, fragmented, and process-oriented digital forms rather than the more traditionally valued, finished, long-form works. Short forms, such as micro-writing or two-to-five-line visual poems, capture the immediacy and relationality of digital life, revealing how writing unfolds through affective encounters, gestures, and dynamic responses. Sometimes regarded as "less serious literature," these works, in fact, hold the potential to express presence: to trace how attention, emotion, and material context come together in moments of writing. Engaging with such forms invites both writers and educators to recognize the shifting onto-epistemic conditions of writing today and to cultivate an ethics of attentiveness and relationality in the digital world.

Non-innocent writing is writing with water. Even when the water is invisible, we get wet and dry. We are already entangled before we put our hands into the water and write.

BIOGRAPHY

Yilin Tang (Jolin) is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include the teaching and learning of creative writing in Asia, poetry as a research method, and contemporary women's writing. Her academic work has been published in the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Creative Writing Studies*, *The Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal (CERJ)*. Her recent book chapter is included in *Empathy in Creative Writing: Ethics, Diversity and Communication* (2025, Palgrave Macmillan). She currently serves as the President of the Cambridge University Poetry and Prose Society (CUPPS).

REFERENCES

- Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988) Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.

LIZ CASHDAN spoke at the NAWE Conference about using translation not just as moving between languages, but opportunities in structure, character, and genre.

As a poet and teacher of creative writing, from a family where parents spoke Russian and with five older siblings all speaking and learning, between them German, French, Hebrew, Arabic, Yiddish, Swedish with smatterings of Finnish, Spanish and Italian, plus the languages of history, physics, mathematics and medicine, and the raw wool trade, I couldn't fail to grow up with an interest in what words mean, how they work, and how interrelated all languages from different, nationalities, cultures and trade both share ideas and words, and differ in their speakers' view of the world.

So Russian was eastern European, old world Czarist and modern day communist.

Hebrew was ancient, religious and at the same time pioneering and kibbutz-based. Arabic was Hebrew's cousin, poetic and middle eastern. Yiddish was linked to being Jewish and telling jokes. German was an O-

Level language with folk songs and composers like Schubert and Hitler raging on the radio, and war.

French was Louis XIV and revolutionary and holidays in Menton with lemons and mimosa and no fresh milk or toast.

Swedish was instead of Finnish which was unintelligible, and made sense of Vikings and place names like Whitby.

Italian was musical, allegretto and moderato with Monteverdi and Puccini but also the rages of Mussolini. Spanish was civil war and Franco, and along with Portugese brought English to America.

And then there were all the Latin and Greek words in medicine and science, the -ologies and words that begin with Ps.

And then the Anglo-Saxon words from the wool trade, like shoddy and noil.

So translations have always been part of my life. Recently I attended an online workshop with David

Constantine of Oxford University and he presented the participants with a literal translation into English of a poem written in German by Berthold Brecht.

He asked us to then use the literal translation to write a poem. My mind raced into the word hoard of German and English, into the history hoard of Hitler, persecution, flight and asylum, into the story not only of Brecht's flight from Nazi Germany to Finland in 1933 but also to my parents' flight from communist Russia to Finland in 1920.

Here is the literal translation of the Brecht poem followed by my transfer-poem:

*When I had to flee from my own country
I eventually arrived in Finland. Friends
Whom yesterday I did not know, offered two beds
In a clean room. On the loudspeaker
I heard the victory news of the Nazi scum. Curious
I looked at the map of Europe. Far north in Lapland
Beyond the northern sea of ice I still see a small door.*

Flight: plus ca change 1917 (after Brecht) Liz Cashdan

*When my parents had to flee from fellow Russians
they came to Finland. They were met by friends
whom yesterday they had not known, who welcomed
them to freshly laundered beds. In the newspaper
they read of victories by the Bolshevik scum. Curious
they searched the map of Europe. Far to the west
in England washed by its island seas, they spied
a tiny door left ajar.*

I presented these to the workshop participants at the NAWA conference and asked them to write a translation of some sort.

Here are two versions they came up with, the first about fleeing eastern Europe for New Zealand and the second translated/transferred to a domestic situation:

*I came to New /ð/-land. I thought I was travelling to
"green" land. It was green, but in another part of the
world. Online I read that Putin again came to power
For the second, and then third, and fourth time...*

Flight Elen Caldecott:

*When I fled my husband's house. It was my mother
who took me in, offered me space on her sofa under a
blanket she had knitted herself fed me oven chips and
thick slices of buttered white bread. In time, his angry
phone calls grew less frequent. He stopped ringing her
bell at gone midnight. Today, when I take a seat in your
home and you offer me tea I am thankful that your sofa
was a small door.*

Working towards the same idea of flight and refuge, but using a different story line, I decided to make an even bigger transfer by staying with the Brecht format, structure and metaphors to write about my own life and achievements.

Flight Path

*Time to fly the nest of school and family
I eventually make landfall in St. Anne's, Oxford.*



Liz Cashdan

*Tutors and students whom I've never met before
offer me stories, late night escapades
studying and singing in college choirs.
I hear news of my siblings' struggles and,
curious I look for ways to succeed.
After different jobs and years of teaching
I see the runway lights of poetry flicker a welcome.*

Of course when we look for ideas for our own poems or suggesting prompts for students we can use this kind of transfer or translation. As Picasso is supposed to have said *all art is theft* so we don't have to worry about plagiarism, and there is always a way out by writing a superscription: *After...*

I decided to ask ChatGPT to try the same thing. Here are 8 lines of its 28 lines which I am sure every practitioner, student or tutor will agree are not very inspiring poetry. It sounds more like low level doggerel.

Escape: The Career Refugee

*I am not fleeing war, nor famine's bite, But the noise of
a world that tells me what's right. A thousand voices
crowd my mind, Each claiming a purpose I must find.*

*I left the shores of certainty, Not in a boat, but with my
degree. The paths are many, none are clear, And each
step forward feeds my fear.*

BIOGRAPHY

Liz Cashdan is a published poet with a first degree in History and a PhD in literature. She has taught all genres of creative writing at all levels from Year 1 upwards in schools and with university students and community groups. She knows French well and has some knowledge of German, Spanish, Russian and Hebrew.

Book Reviews

Edited by MATTHEW TETT

Writing Creatively for Work or Study: Easy techniques to engage your readers by Helen Kara



Helen Kara's *Writing Creatively for Work and Study* shows readers how adopting creative approaches to workplace writing can be accessible and fun. The book is a practical guide, one that challenges the divide between academic and creative writing. One of Kara's main arguments is that many professional guides encourage the importance of clarity – but they do not, explicitly, encourage creative thinking. Kara's says that serious writing can be imaginative and, in turn, this can enhance its overall accessibility. *Writing Creatively for Work and Study* will be a valuable source of writing support for many.

One of the book's most appealing features is its accessibility. Kara writes with a clarity that makes the text feel welcoming. Here, there is an encouraging approach which is based on experience and this helps to take away the mystery of creativity – showing that it is something that can be adopted by all, not just a select few. Kara's explanations are very inclusive and suggest that a creative approach is for all, regardless of their writing experience.

Kara's book starts by discussing what creative writing is. This includes any form of writing that uses imagination, different devices and the senses – not just fiction or poetry. In other words, it is an accessible guide for anyone who writes. This takes away any rigidity people may feel and also, she insists that creativity can enhance factual accuracy by removing the complexity of ideas. This approach is particularly impactful and shows that this book is sure to be a great resource on any writer's desk.

There is a strong sense of the practical in this book. The chapters include exercises to help readers experiment with different writing techniques, such as exploring characters, building creative worlds, writing without constraint and more. The prompts provided are useful tools that encourage writers to break away from their habits – Kara reinforces that creativity is developed through physically applying, not just by thinking about doing. A huge benefit of this book is that exercises are quick to read and can be applied to many contexts; this makes them extremely useful and applicable to different writing situations.

Kara considers ethical issues and this makes it particularly useful to researchers. Much of the book deals with a variety of considerations to help people overcome self-doubt and writer's block. One particularly useful thing is how Kara writes about reframing – how it is a discovery process and not an elitist test. This is something that is particularly liberating and helps to take away fear of writing in the workplace.

The book is structured in a very user-friendly way. Initially, there is a section on creative writing in the workplace which covers a wide range of points to ease readers into the book. This is followed by eight chapters, dealing with subjects such as stories and fiction, through to dramatic writing and good practice in writing. Essentially, readers can select what is needed for their specific context, although given the book's high quality and usefulness, I think that every chapter has something to offer regardless of individual needs.

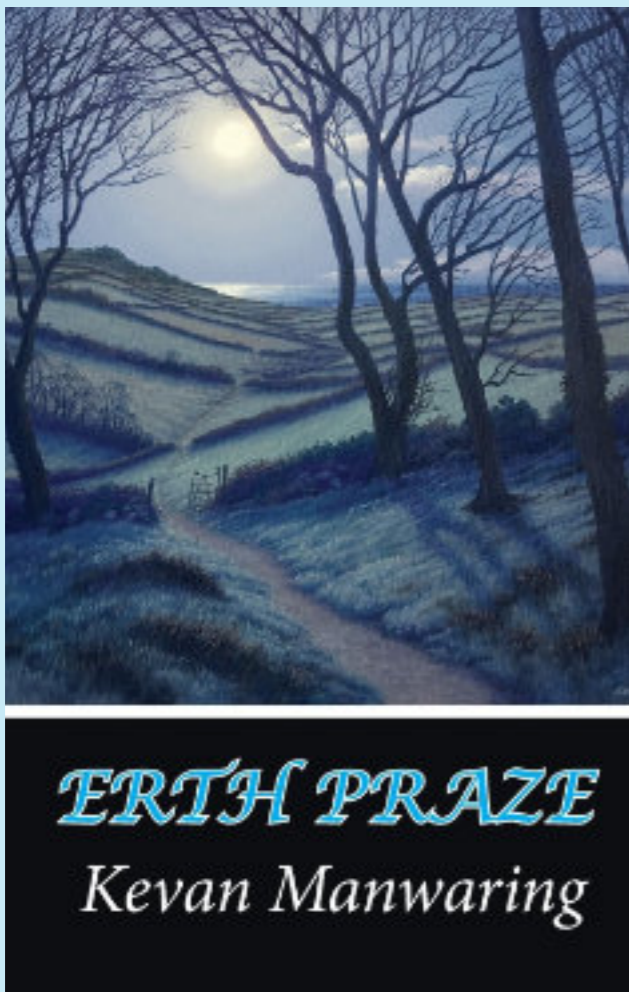
Of course, some readers may find certain sections cover ground that has been covered before – but such is the nature of a guide to writing. However, even if one is particularly well-versed in poetry, for example, this specific chapter provides a great overview of different types of poetic form. It might be old ground for some, but it will certainly be revelatory for others.

Ultimately, *Writing Creatively for Work and Study* enables readers to see writing as an activity that is adaptable and relevant. It is also something that humans do – and in this day and age of AI, this is more important than ever. Kara blends theory with practical points, encouraging readers to use the book in the best way for their needs. Whatever a reader's needs, whether it be a policy for work, a research proposal or something more creative, Kara provides readers with the tools and confidence to write in an imaginative and authentic way.

This is a book that should be on anyone's desk who writes for a living – or has to write as part of their job. It is a helpful reminder that creativity is integral to many people's work – not a distraction as it is sometimes perceived.

Matthew Tett

[Buy *Writing Creatively for Work or Study*, Manchester University Press, 2025, £18.99](#)



Kevan Manwaring's *Erth Praze* launches Goldendark's new small press with an eco-poetry collection that is firmly rooted in embodied experiences and environmental concern.

Written primarily since the author's move to West Dorset, the book frames the question which animates much contemporary ecological writing: How can we honour the Earth whilst inhabiting and impacting it?

The poet approaches this question not through abstract theorising but through close encounters with our landscape, encounters that take place while rambling through the Wessex Ridgeway, wild swimming along the Jurassic Coast, camping in remote areas, or travelling by train across Europe.

The poems collectively aim to map a lived ecological consciousness that is shaped by movement, immersion, and attentive presence.

One of the poetry collection's defining qualities is its geographical breadth. Although many poems arise from Dorset, there are others that reach outward, towards Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland, Vienna, and Turkey, creating a sense of lateral movement and interconnectedness.

This glocal interplay reflects the ecological perspective the book advocates: An awareness that local ecosystems exist within global environmental pressures, histories, and crises. Throughout the collection, the Earth is treated as both a specific,

sensuous presence and a shared planetary home that is both vulnerable and resilient.

The titular poem, "Erth Praze," is among the collection's most compelling pieces and offers a strong entry into Manwaring's wider concerns. It almost functions as a keynote, bringing together the themes of praise, gratitude, fragility, and the physicality of being an earthbound being. The language is rhythmic and incantatory, echoing older traditions of devotional poetry while remaining alert to contemporary environmental issues. The poem demonstrates Manwaring's ability to balance celebration and critique: the Earth is a place of astounding beauty, yet the poem never allows the reader to forget the human elements and activities that endanger it. As a powerful statement of intent, "Erth Praze" grounds the book in its core ecological ethos.

Another standout work is "Bellwether for Greta Thunberg" which guides the reader towards the political and generational dimensions of climate issues. Here, Manwaring refrains from didacticism and instead crafts a poem that reflects the emotionally resonant power of youth-led environmental activism. The work speaks of the influence of Greta Thunberg as a symbolic figure. It is part warning and part guide and positions the activist as bellwether not only for environmental futures but for cultural willingness to confront them. It is restrained in tone and clarity, which makes it one of the book's sharper and more immediate contributions that invites readers to reflect on how poetry can participate in ongoing conversations about climate justice.

In the wider collection, the poet blends ecological observation with mythic and folklore-like echoes. This approach appears to align with his broader body of work, which often engages with the mythopoetic dimensions of landscapes. Sometimes, the poems function as field notes infused with imaginative speculation. At other times, they grab at archetypal resonances, drawing on traditions of nature writing and environmental philosophy.

The inclusion of full colour illustrations is complementary and adds a visual layer that supports imaginative framing and contributes to the sensory experience of the book.

This poetry collection's structural rhythm moves between different terrains, emotional registers, and cultural references. It is a structure that creates a sense of journeying, even rambling, where readers join the poet in his reflective journey through chalk downs, coastlines, forests, and continental cities. Manwaring is attentive to sound and cadence, and many of his poems favour musicality or narrative, often progressing through patterns of repetition, invocation, or litany. The result? A textured and varied reading experience that foregrounds the interplay between movement, embodiment, and ecological awareness.

Erth Praze situates itself within the ever-expanding field of eco-poetry at a time when environmental writing is both increasingly urgent and increasingly diverse. Manwaring's background as a creative writing lecturer, storyteller, ecocritical author, and performer shapes this collection's voice. A voice that often shifts between meditative stillness and performative energy. Readers who have an interest in

the intersections of ecology, travel, and the mythic imagination will likely find much enjoyment in this book.

Overall, *Erth Praze* can be considered as an ode and an enquiry: a celebration of Earth's enduring presence and recognition of complicity in [or entanglement within] environmental crises. Via its blend of rooted experience and global awareness, this collection contributes to ongoing poetic conversations about human relationships with space, responsibility, and hope. While individual readers may respond differently to the range of styles and approaches within the collection, its strongest poems, particularly "Erth Praze" and "Bellwether for Greta Thunberg," offer resonant and thoughtful explorations of what it means to live attentively in precarious times.

Lisette Alexander

Lisette Alexander is a writer, researcher, and creative educator whose work explores pedagogy, memory, and resistance. She is completing an MA in Creative Writing and education at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she was Creative Writing Lead for Spinning Gold Literary Journal. Her fiction, informed by archival research, engages with themes of surveillance, state control, and social justice. Lisette teaches English across GCSE, A-Level, IB, and higher education, focusing on trauma-informed and inclusive literacy.

She is founder of an education charity supporting survivors of modern slavery and of The Exam Shelf, creating exam-aligned resources including her *What Really Happened?* GCSE Support Series.

[Buy Erth Praze by Kevan Manwaring, Goldendark \(2025\), £10.99](#)

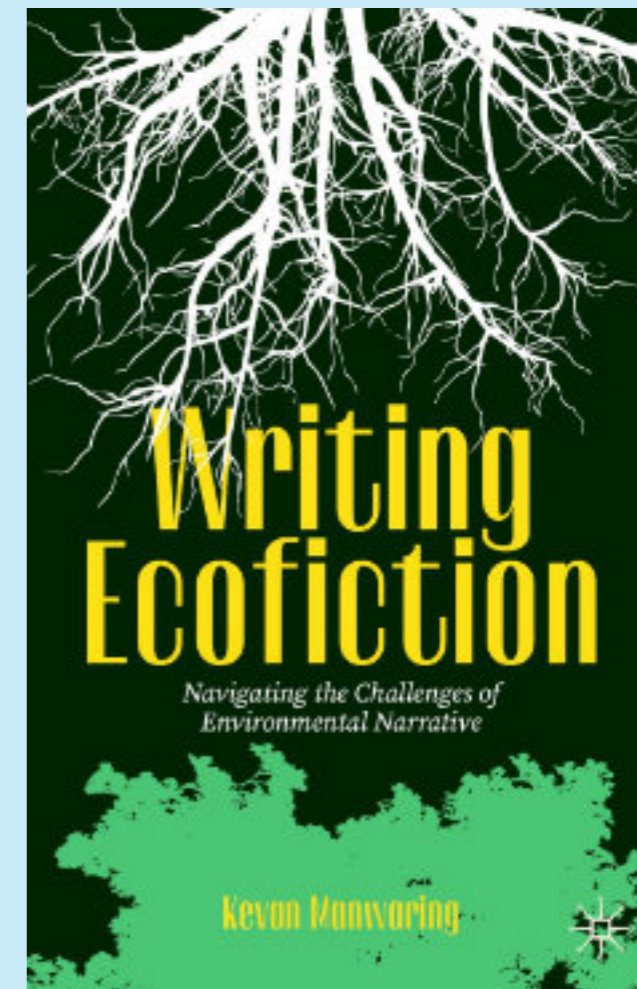
Writing Ecofiction: Navigating the Challenges of Environmental Narrative by Kevan Manwaring

"Never open a book with weather," runs the infamous advice from crime writer Elmore Leonard. But what if the weather – more accurately, the climate – is the story? Our climate is changing; as writers we need to reflect that. How best to do it, when the subject is mired in controversy?

In this generous and wide-ranging guide Dr Kevan Manwaring, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Arts University Bournemouth, offers not just a plethora of approaches but a deep and wide context for our current predicament.

We are living and writing in the Anthropocene, a period where human activity has affected the earth's environment and climate, and which is generally agreed to have begun in 1945 with the detonation of atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ecofiction, sometimes called climate fiction, has emerged out of the novel and nature writing. If the subject feels daunting and doom-laden, Manwaring quotes the Climate Fiction writers' league, founded by former physicist Lauren James, who emphasise "the need to create positive, empowering narratives". Crucially, they say the debate must move "beyond fear" towards a more solutions-based view: "Change is possible... Our fiction should reflect that."



Manwaring suggests that writers try to find "ways through", and rather than wallow in dystopian settings embrace the idea of throtopia, a term coined by philosopher Rupert Read: "How to live and love and vision and carve out a future, through pressed times that will endure."

The book is laid out in three parts. Part I, *Taproots*, examines key texts such as creation myths, legends and folk tales exploring climate and ecological concerns.

Part II, *Branching Out*, considers new voices and emerging forms. Its seven chapters cover topics such as the ground beneath your feet; going beyond what you know; activism versus art and shaping a world in flux. Each chapter includes a themed essay, followed by "Mycelia" (connections to other writers, texts and resources) and "Spores" (writing activities).

There is a wide range of suggested activities: from writing the body and using the senses, to "re-wilding" language to give voice to a non-human, or using the organic structures of the natural world to shape a free-range piece.

Part III of the book contains interviews with 20 ecofiction writers.

"Storytelling... is one of the most effective tools for raising awareness", says Manwaring. But is it possible to write uncompromising eco-fiction that is also a great read? He emphasizes that readers love a "deep dive into other lives", and writers can use this.

Character is key: make them well rounded and believable. A shining example is Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*, published in 1993 but set in 2024. Manwaring praises the "spiritual, redemptive vision" of Butler's story of teenager Lauren Olamina, who has the gift to feel others' pain, saying it "provides an escape hatch from the grimdark nihilism" of the early 21st century.

"The act of compassionate imagination" of novel-writing helps us understand different worlds, says Manwaring.

He is an encouraging guide to the dilemma of writing outside our own lived experience: "It is a generosity to the world to look beyond your own particular picket fence – conceptually, culturally, ethnically, economically, and in terms of one's beliefs and politics."

But with this approach comes responsibility, and the need to recognize that the climate crisis disproportionately affects the global south – or global majority – yet the voices of Black Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) are less often heard.

Non-BIPOC voices can be allies: Manwaring cites US author Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 *The Ministry for the Future* as an example. The novel was chosen by US President Barack Obama and discussed at COP 26. And Manwaring is hopeful that there are signs of change in the growing diversity of publishers' lists and increased availability of books in translation.

The message is urgent, but the story must entertain. Manwaring suggests that authors use "stealth exposition" and "sneak in the essential information" to avoid didacticism.

And different viewpoints should be aired, so that readers can decide who they agree or disagree with: we should credit our readers with discernment.

Writers should also resist the urge to tie the story up too neatly: "An open ending will sustain the realism and present the reader with the choice – which is ultimately more empowering." It may even prompt them to act.

A short review can't do justice to this impressive book. It provides an exhaustive and accessible road map to arguably the most pressing issue of our times.

Sarah Hegarty

Sarah's short fiction has been published by *Msllexia*, Cinnamon Press and the *Mechanics' Institute Review*. Her short story *The Ishtar Pin* was a finalist in the 2021 Manchester Fiction Prize.

Her debut collection *Magpie and Other Stories* is published by Troubador.
<http://sarahhegarty.co.uk> / @sarahhegartywriter

[Buy Writing Ecofiction: Navigating the Challenges of Environmental Narrative, Palgrave Macmillan\(2024\), £24.99](#)

**NAWE is a Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered in England and Wales No. 4130442
and a Registered Charity no. 1190424**

NAWE, Tower House, Mill Lane, Askham
Bryan, York YO23 3FS. +44 (0) 330 3335 909
www.nawe.co.uk

Staff

Membership Co-ordinators: Katie Worman
and Sophie Flood
admin@nawe.co.uk

Information Manager: Philippa Johnston
pjohnston@nawe.co.uk

Publications & Editorial Manager: William
Gallagher
publications@nawe.co.uk

NAWE Board of Trustees

Dr Yvonne Battle-Felton
Jonathan Davidson
Francis Gilbert
Ruth Moore
Jane Moss (co-chair)
Derek Neale
Jocelyn Page (co-chair)
Karina Lickorish Quinn
Heather Richardson

Higher Education Committee

Dr Emily Bullock
Dr Alexia Casale
James Draper
Carrie Etter
Dr Francis Gilbert
Barbara Henderson
Andrea Holland
Dr Holly Howitt-Dring
Dr Zoe Lambert
Dr Adrian Markle
Peter McAllister
Dr Alison McManus
Dr Kate North
Dr Joanne Reardon
Anita Slater
Dr Amy Spencer
Edwin Stockdale
Kim Wiltshire
Patrick Wright
Dr Sarah Gibson Yates

Patrons

Alan Bennett, Gillian Clarke, Andrew Motion,
Beverley Naidoo

NAWE is a member of the Council for Subject
Associations www.subjectassociations.org.uk