Focus on Africa: Paul Herzberg in Angola; Candi Miller storytelling with San writers; Sarah Penny using dramatherapy in Cape Town

Schools: Sheffield Voices; Playwriting in Tower Hamlets
Higher Education: Peer feedback; Flash Theatre; Negative Capability
Writing & Research: Calum Kerr; Anne Lauppe-Dunbar in Berlin; Simon Holloway questioning the MA

plus: Humble Haiku; Poetry & Young People; Writing at the Museum; Writers and the Digital World; The Writer's Compass; news; reviews
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Cover Image: ranus amygdalus (The Almond Tree) from A Curious Herbal by Elizabeth Blackwell © The National Museum of Wales.
Who reads editorials? Beyond the first sentence, that is. If they are written looking forward to the contents of the publication, are they any more than an obstruction, full of so many annoying things like rhetorical questions? In my NAWE role I haven’t made many public statements as such, certainly in a personal capacity, so I feel I cannot let the chance pass to say something about the background to this issue, a what-we-did-in-our-summer account, from my own standpoint. It’s not just about NAWE’s loss of Arts Council England funding, but it would not be happening with that (please insert your own adjective) decision.

You get to know more about people and organizations in a time of crisis than probably at any other time. So to find out just how good NAWE is as a collective has been heartening, from my position as a relative newcomer. What has come out if this for me, is that far from ushering in a period of downsizing and retrenchment, what has happened has sparked an attitude of ambitious defiance on all fronts. So if ACE won’t recognize our contribution to the creative scene in this country, we’ll keep on working with those who do. If some universities don’t acknowledge Creative Writing as a subject area in its own right, they soon will. And now it’s not if we can help get the Creative Writing A-Level off the ground, it’s when. And there’s the renewal of the vision of a global collaboration, strengthening the links with other Creative Writing communities across the world, and making new contacts.

This edition of Writing in Education is an international one, ranging from Wales to South Africa, from Somali students in Sheffield, to the San people of the Kalahari, via Germany and the Japanese haiku. It investigates difference in identity and identity in difference in ways that are at odds with much of our strangely landlocked, insular British (or rather English) literary culture. You know the one: it gets grants for ticking diversity boxes by peddling its ‘great art’ to those on the ‘outside’. The attitude here feels much more inclusive and less patronising. Can Facebook really help the Kalahari Peoples Network to thrive? It’s too early to say, but it’s a tool they’re remaking for themselves. Sarah Penny’s article on Haditha Ya Afrika tells the story of a project which is the converse of a missionary trip – an attempt to enable a potential, to teach specific skills (this case in dramatherapy) which will help not only individual but communal healing, in this case from, amongst other things, the consequences of the apartheid-inspired Bantu Education system.

The consequences of conflict and oppression shadow much of this issue: Paul Herzberg’s experience of returning to the scenes of his deployment in the South African army; Anne Lauppe-Dunbar’s visit to the once-Kafka-esque athletics training centre in the old East Germany. Writing is not a ‘recreation’ here, it’s not about giving young people access to ‘great art’: it’s about creative strategies resorted to in the face of – often in the belly of – the things that we are capable of doing to one another. Not great but important, genuinely useful.

Hopefully useful to you as well.

So if I say it’s been fun helping to edit this magazine, don’t get me wrong. There’s been a lot to think about, but there’s real humour in the mix too, and it’s good to see these energies at work. I’ll leave you to find the funny bits.

I do want to thank all the contributors. They’ve been very patient and understanding with my suggestions and questions. I think I might be a fairly demanding editor. But most of the work fell to my colleagues, especially Paul Munden, whose role on the magazine I can finally properly appreciate.

But to return to the beginning, knowing that I’m now only writing to those who actually do read editorials. I’ve always had a great suspicion of the institutionalization of writing (of which putting the word ‘creative’ in front of it is just a sign). If I didn’t, I wouldn’t trust myself to run a Creative Writing course in a university. There’s a spirit of collaboration that all of the institutions of writing have to nurture – I strongly believe this – from the community workshop up to (dare I say it?) the Arts Council. I think NAWE is doing pretty well. We genuinely haven’t fallen into a state of back-biting and frenzy. No that we wouldn’t want to bite someone...

Keith Jebb
LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA

Ethical imaginations, educational reform: mutatis mutandis

Australasian writers in education are gearing up for this year’s AAWP conference, which is being held in paradise: Byron Bay on the northern New South Wales coast. How easily the delegates will focus on the important issues of the day, when the world is waiting just outside the door, is yet to be determined. But the theme of the conference is Ethical Imaginations, which will no doubt prick our consciences and spur us to professional, ethical practice. For any of our UK colleagues who make it down to the conference, we can guarantee not just good papers and good brainfood, but a genuinely delightful immersive experience, with sun, wild parrots, great surf breaks, excellent food and wine, excellent company and, of course, the beach.

This sybaritic environment offers only temporary reprieve from the business of consolidating the place of Creative Writing programmes. Following several major reviews of Higher Education, the Australian government is in a mood to reform. One reform likely to have a profound impact is the change to a demand-driven entitlement system – which means a deregulated university market, all caps removed from courses, and universities ‘free’ to enrol as many students as seek a university place. What this means is anyone’s guess – who knows how the market might work? – but it is very probable that it will force each university to reflect carefully on their distinctive mission and the focus of their programmes, in a radically changed environment. With respect to this reform, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra notes wryly that ‘Possible consequences included ... the risk that the shape of the future workforce was being handed over to the whims of 16 and 17 year olds as they made up their minds what to study’ (Parker 2010). What this means in real terms will emerge as the next cohorts of school leavers decide what they want to do with their lives, and whether they want to study writing; but we can be certain, as writing academics, that we will have to prepare for a degree of uncertainty about levels of enrolment, the extent of competition, and the need to keep a market eye on our scholarly practices.

Yet another, and equally troubling possible outcome of these reforms is associated with research. As many readers of Writing in Education will know, Australian universities have adopted a version of the UK’s Research Excellence Framework, and we are currently preparing for the second round of what is locally known as the ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) process. What effect the results will have in real terms has not yet been confirmed, but there will be financial implications. More worrying is the possibility that any programme that does not achieve satisfactory research assessments in the fields in which it offers coursework may not be permitted to offer degrees in those fields, or to recruit postgraduate and research students. The likelihood is that some courses may simply be closed down; and this should give all Australian writing academics and their managers pause for thought about how to juggle the multiple roles of teaching, writing, researching, recruiting, engaging with the community and the profession – oh, and hanging out with loved ones too.

I won’t leave this column on a sour note, though I regret it will be a faintly pretentious note; plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. The history of Higher Education has been one of constant gutwrenching change, and yet here we still are, doing our research, doing our writing, doing our teaching, and finding ways to get by. And as governments across the world check their bank balances and their ideologies, and turn thoughtful eyes on the Higher Education sector, it will be useful for all of us who wish to remain as writing academics to achieve resilience, perhaps by doing what Michel de Certeau (1984) termed ‘escaping without leaving’. Perhaps we need some research into the sorts of micro-subversive practices that will allow us to build satisfying lives and careers while delivering on our contracted obligations to government and institution.

Notes


Jen Webb (University of Canberra)
Chair of the AAWP