NAWE Conference Collection: Rosemary Dun on performance poetry; Gill James working in foreign languages; Derek Neale on montage; Heather Richardson using historical sources in fiction; Craig Batty & Sandra Cain; Lisa Sansom; Karen Stevens

Marc Blake on Comedy; Liz Cashdan on storytelling; Sarah Dobbs on the Creative PhD; Ashley Lister on bridging modules; Alyson Morris on law and the short story

Plus: The Writer's Compass; International updates; reviews
Charles Wright, a widely-published American poet, said in a recent interview, “I write poems. That’s my reason for living. Most of my poems start with me looking out the window or sitting in the backyard as dusk comes down, and what that sort of translates into – into my thinking at the moment.” He continued:

I used to think the power of words was inexhaustible. That’s how we said the world was how it was and how it would be. I used to imagine that word-storm and word-thunder would silence the Silence and all that, that words were the Word, that language could lead us inexplicably to grace, as though it were geographical. I used to think these things when I was young, I still do.

Dramatic and resilient. Many writers would envy Wright his calm dream-space as they contemplate the ongoing problem of finding time for their own writing – a conundrum for many NWE members, put succinctly by Diana Barsham: ‘In today’s academy, the burden of the creative mystery tends to be subsumed beneath the burden of administration.’ Yet Wright’s statement and poem says a lot about the life-long dedication required of writers and it seems apt as an introductory thought for this edition of Writing in Education: a splendidly diverse range of essays; a grand cornucopia of knowledge, ideas and strategies for teaching fledgling writers; a sharing of expertise; a magazine airing across a number of literary genres, the difficulties and commitment entailed within the dual role of writer and teacher.

‘A writer is someone who writes’ and indeed it is fascinating to read the reports of the AWP Annual Conference held in Washington DC earlier this year. Why does [the Conference] work so well? Linda Anderson asks, before answering her own question: ‘The hugeness of it is one reason, the sheer festivity and democracy of everyone gathering there, writers, many of them with international reputations; editors, publishers, writing teachers, MFA students’. Then there were the panels, the ‘swirling of method and mystery, an atmosphere of openness and a lack of stiffness ... a reverence for writing too ... not just a focus on craft, but an acknowledgement of how and why it matters.’ She concludes, no doubt speaking for many, ‘I have come away feeling reignited as a writer’, thereby focusing a similar need in many NWE members needing to be reminded of the importance of their own writing alongside the preoccupations and demands of teaching. Some of the articles here could be summed up as making a claim for reflective space, the dream-space, referred to above, necessary in order to think and capture their writing ‘selves’. Karen Stevens gives us her reflections on the challenge of teaching fiction in Higher Education, discussing character-based exercises that have proved useful in helping students ‘to think like a writer; to quickly access the reflective space necessary to step inside another’s skin and listen ... It is only through listening that the mystery of a character’s story may authentically unfold and move us.’ There are no short cuts to becoming a writer, but shared insights and tried and proven exercises such as presented by Stevens and other contributors can be very useful.

Heather Richardson expands the possibilities for writing historical fiction by suggesting ways to explore and thicken historical context and character-motivation. Lisa Samson’s use of the elements as triggers is a workshop winner, fun, and extremely adaptable for all genres. Throughout the issue, there is much emphasis on story and narrative as the basis for creative approaches and movement. We have Alyson Morris’s report of Human Rights students using the short story as a method of trialling assessment, and as a step to promoting authenticity in legal cases. Rosemary Dun examines performance poetry with its various guises in a piece ironically titled, ‘Does It Work on the Page?’ Derek Neale relates the increasing importance of adaptation for stage, radio or film, and how montage facilitates contrasts in story-telling techniques, with reference to contemporary works, such as Hare and Daldry’s The Hours.

Sarah Dobbs questions the need for a critical theoretical component as a validation requirement in Creative Writing PhDs. Finally, Diana Barsham’s article about negative capability and the role of the imagination in the academy today is a gem, a piece to be read and re-read for its tribute to Keats and for its correlations between his situation and the Higher Education teacher short of time. The parallels are challenging and meaningful. For example: ‘Where Keats could focus intently on shaping his writing identity, contemporary conditions in the academy require the imaginative writer to co-exist in any one individual with the teacher, administrator, manager, peer reviewer, editor and often exhausted family member’.

Katherine Gallagher
LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA

Here in the south many of us have been watching, with mounting gloom, as the UK government continues its work on your university system. The effect of the funding and other decisions seems to be falling more heavily on the humanities and the creative arts, though no doubt schools of social and physical sciences are also feeling the pain.

This all feels rather familiar. Australian universities have been dealt a series of such cuts over the past 15 years or so: from having relied almost entirely on government funding, we now receive about 40% of our income in direct operating grants.1 We are urged — required — to go ‘out there’ (where?) to find our own sources of funding for capital works, research, teaching, student support. Overall the university sector has coped remarkably well with this huge change to our environment — if we disregard the disappearance of programmes of study in areas like physics, philosophy, the classics, history ...

We are also facing a changing physical environment. As you probably heard on the news, during this summer half of Australia was drowning under floodwaters, and the other half was on fire. The cost of recovery is phenomenal, and the government has necessarily been driven to raid various of their piggybanks to fund the rebuilding of the country. In principle, who could argue with this? But in practice, anyone relying on one of those piggybanks is now squealing at the impact on their areas. One cut that is causing real pain in the academic sector is the withdrawal of funding, and the expected disappearance, of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).

This government-funded body was established in 2004 to ‘promote excellence in higher education’. It has run a number of important programmes on a shoestring budget: fellowships to build national and international networks, awards to raise the profile of excellent teaching, grants to support research, including academic leadership, collaborative relationships and assessment standards. It has been critically important to developments in the creative arts disciplines, given the paucity of other research funding.

The axing of this programme will generate savings of $88 million over 4 years — almost irrelevant, one might say, in the context of the billions which are the more usual currency of government budgets. This small funding allocation has had a tremendously positive effect on teaching and learning innovation, and its loss is a cause for sorrow across the country.

On a more cheerful note: the Australian government has just completed its first round of our version of the RAE. The Excellence in Research for Australia exercise (ERA — no relation to RAE!) assesses research in discipline groups to produce rankings against what is rather cloudily categorized ‘world class research’. World class is quite a robust designation for disciplines that have citation indices and other metrics to determine relative quality. For the arts and humanities it is necessarily a rather subjective measure. Nonetheless, the creative arts and writing have stood up very well to this first evaluation of our work, with 21 of 40 universities being ranked at world standard or above.2

I would like to invite UK colleagues to visit Australia in November this year. Southern Cross University is hosting the Australasian Association of Writing Programs’ 16th annual conference, titled Ethical Imagination: Writing Worlds. This conference will explore the multitude of ways in which ethical considerations are intrinsically connected to the practices of writing and reading. An ethical engagement in literature from both a writer’s and a reader’s perspective has important resonances for the 21st century scholar. In this conference we will examine ways in which writing is linked to an ethical engagement with the world.

The dates are 23 – 25 November 2011, a period when Australia is warm without being brain-fryingly hot. It is being held in one of the most salubrious parts of the country, Byron Bay. Expect palm trees, golden beaches, friendly happy locals, rigorous conference discussions, and wine and cheese in the late afternoon sun. Full details are given opposite.

Professor Jen Webb
Dean, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra; Chair, AAWP

2. There were actually 41 institutions evaluated, but I exclude the Melbourne College of Divinity on the grounds that they report only religious studies research.

AAWP CONFERENCE 2011

Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds
Ethical concerns and their implications in literature and writing

23 – 25 November 2011, Byron Bay, Australia

Call for Papers

Southern Cross University and the Australasian Association of Writing Programs are pleased to announce the Australasian Association of Writing Programs’ 16th annual conference.

This conference will explore the multitude of ways in which ethical considerations are intrinsically connected to the practices of writing and reading. An ethical engagement in literature from both a writer’s and a reader’s perspective has important resonances for the 21st century scholar. In this conference we will examine ways in which writing is intrinsically linked to an ethical engagement with the world.

Background

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the cultural principles or rules that guide us in the way we live. Ethical questions imply a certain moral obligation to care about the responsibilities we have to others and seek to resolve the nature of these responsibilities and obligations. Over the past few decades writers, social activists and academics have developed particular notions of ethical practices in relation to literature and the way it is written and read. How might we define these practices and what is the history of their development? Ethical writing and reading practices offer a range of interpretations both culturally and linguistically but, in the world of writing, ethics is in itself a translatory space, not a given. How does the contemporary reader and writer engage with such interpretations and spaces? The idea that a set of universal values can guide humanity seems antithetical to the role contemporary writers and readers play in posing and responding to ethical questions. How has literature dealt with contemporary debates about universal values and moral relativism? Under a range of different frameworks this conference will ask these and other questions about the ways in which ethical imaginations might seek to represent worlds which offer some alternative solutions to contemporary dilemmas.

Papers for the conference are sought on the following themes:

- The politics of ‘I’: whose story is it?
- Honesty and ethics in writing the self and others
- Ideology and point-of-view
- Ethical engagements in language and identity
- Queering writing: Ethical engagements in gender and sexuality
- Writing Indigenous: Indigenious writing
- Representing whiteness in contemporary writing practices
- Narrating otherness
- Speaking the silences: Writing, advocacy and enabling voice
- Literary hoaxes and the ethics of authenticity
- Questions of authorship in the 21st century
- Authority, power and the ethics of authorship
- Ethical frameworks and writing genre
- Realism and the power of truth telling
- Local stories, global connections
- Narrating nations
- Refugees, and the ethics of the diaspora
- Ethical interventions: narrating trauma
- Sedition and the right to free speech
- Making a difference, writing in the age of Human Rights
- Writing the World Wide Web
- Orality and the written word
- Ecology matters: sustainable narratives
- Edible ethics and writing about food
- Writing in transition: translation as a practice of interpretation
- Ethical teaching: guiding students towards an awareness of ethical writing practices
- Plagiarism or collaboration: the ethics of imitation
- Other ...

Website

A conference website will be established by March 2011. The site will guide the submission of abstracts and full papers for refereeing.

Publication

Publication of conference proceedings (Referred Articles) will be on the ‘Publications’ section of the AAWP.