

Central Queensland University

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*Researching Creative Writing* [review]



Jen Webb

*Researching Creative Writing*

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This important and timely book is a guide to understanding and enacting research in creative writing. The text is clear and beautifully written. Its argument is coherent and its advice is useful. Its author, Jen Webb, who is a Distinguished Professor in Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, is perfectly positioned to produce such a text – well known to all in creative writing teaching and scholarship in Australia, and to many further afield. A poet and artist, Webb is a leading and eminent researcher in the field, experienced research degree supervisor and examiner, a past Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and current, or previous, editor of important journals in the field including *Axon*, *TEXT* and *Meniscus*.

*Researching Creative Writing* begins by defining the nature of research in writing, and the roles played by writers, researchers and writer-researchers. This is an important place to start for, as Webb explains ‘Not everything we do as creative writers constitutes research’ – even if, as she continues, that endeavor ‘involves finding something out’ (12). Research is, instead, Webb proposes, drawing on Christopher Frayling, enacted in three ways: ‘into’ ‘through’ or ‘for’ creative writing (13). What is especially evident in the rest of this chapter, as it is throughout the book, is the skillful, and never obtuse, teasing out of both foundational and more advanced concepts and practices of research

in creative writing. These explanations provide assistance to both fledgling and more established researchers, and the clarity of exposition is a strength throughout. This is supported by detailed examples and case studies, and Webb often draws on her own experience. Even when the matters being discussed may be complex, even difficult, the writing about them and how they are explained, are not.

The text follows a logical path from understanding, to conceiving and planning, to doing and then to publishing research and, in this, clearly achieves its aim to help both commencing and more experienced writer-researchers ‘craft their own “toolkit” that will help them produce better creative work, more rigorous research work, and innovative, engaging contributions to the worlds of literature and knowledge’ (20). The reference list for the volume is a contribution to the field in itself, and will be useful for many students and supervisors, as well as those thinking about research practices and processes in other disciplines and artforms.

With Masters and Doctoral research degrees in creative writing offered across Australia as well as in New Zealand, the UK, USA and elsewhere, this volume is sure to find a grateful audience in many locations. It is certainly internationally-focused and globally relevant. The scholars and scholarship it draws upon ranges widely: from the Ancient Greeks to work just published, and from many relevant fields such as literary studies and theory, and history, as well as creative writing. This erudition is seamlessly woven into the text, but what comes through is the wide knowledge, depth of understanding and sensitive perception of the author. Many guides to research and methodology are worthy but yawn-making; this is clear, helpful and charming in equal measure.

I especially enjoyed the appropriately chosen quotations which head every chapter. These are unexpected and range from writers and artists such as Tom Wolfe and Henri Matisse to philosophers and theorists such as Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These provide flash points of focus such as the pithy aphorism from Truman Capote at the start of the chapter on ‘Research and other people’: ‘A conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That’s why there are so few good conversations: due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet’ (127). As this volume is written by an acknowledged expert on Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, their works feature in, and contribute to – but never dominate – this text.

As a research postgraduate degree supervisor, I use this book as a textbook with my research higher degree candidates at Masters and Doctoral level, and those students appreciate its clarity and encouraging, upbeat tone. As a researcher, I consult it for clarification. As an editor and publisher, I look to this text for inspiration when I need to respond to a researcher who either has either not quite ‘got it’ in terms of the practice and parameters of research in creative writing, or who I want to praise for their ability or innovation in the field.

Webb is gracious in her acknowledgements section, thanking many members of the Australian and international scholarly creative writing community (including myself), as well as the prominent creative writing organisations and publications. Although I am sure such tribute is warranted, her voice has been a leading one in that community for some decades. This is why she is a Distinguished Professor in the field, and it is certainly an act of generosity that she has produced a text that gathers together, and

shares, her wealth of knowledge in the field, for others to access. It is also fitting that such a text is authored by an Australian, leading the field and setting the agenda for future research in the field both in Australasia and globally.

An attractively produced volume in the Creative Writing Studies Series published by Frontinus, *Researching Creative Writing* is a must-read for all supervisors, candidates and researchers in creative writing, and a must-have for all scholarly research libraries.

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