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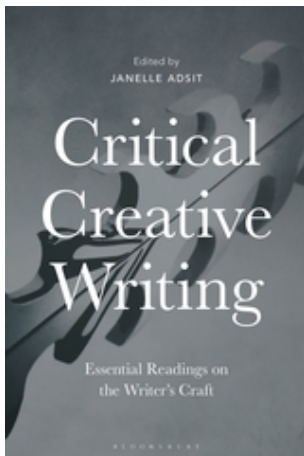
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TEXT review

Seeing our blind spots

review by Rachel Hennessy



Janelle Adsit (ed)

Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft

Bloomsbury, London 2019

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Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer's Craft is a collection of essays edited by Janelle Adsit, whose previous works have engaged with issues of inclusivity and diversity in the teaching of creative writing. Adsit's single-authored, *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to guide the Literary Writing Curriculum* (2017), challenges many standard pedagogical practices, both inside and outside the academy, utilising the idea of 'threshold concepts' to question the prejudices inherent in dominant constructions of authorship, representation, identity and craft. Her co-authored work, with Renée Byrd, *Writing Intersectional Identities: Keywords for Creative Writers* (2019),

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provides, as the title suggests, a glossary of keywords related to these challenges, with succinct summaries of issues such as ‘appropriation’, ‘essentialism’ and ‘positionality’, as well as providing a guide to further readings. Together, these works engage intensely with the ways in which creative writing has traditionally been taught, provoking instructors to consider not only how their curricula need to transform to be inclusive, but how the workshop itself reinforces a particular model of creativity that is historically contingent and in urgent need of interrogation.

Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer’s Craft sits itself somewhere between a collection of themed essays and a text book. Each chapter contains three to four pieces of varying length, and ends with a Chapter Reflection, providing a number of questions, as well as a Writing Prompt. The introduction addresses first the student and then the instructor. In the address to the instructor, Adsit positions the work as an anthology of multiple perspectives on key issues in creative writing; she wants those in the arena to be provided with a vast array of resources, so that it transforms into something more than a handbook. It is, she writes:

- An invitation to join conversations taking place among contemporary creative writers about the politics of literary art-making.
- An examination of aesthetic considerations that transcend what can be covered in a typical craft handbook, including questions of linguistic diversity and the relationship between art and politics.
- A survey of the craft-criticism genre and its importance to the field of creative writing.
- A chance to engage with irresolvable debates in creative writing. (x)

This ambitious agenda is evident in the subsequent amount of issues the book sets out to address. Seven chapters cover ‘craft’, ‘identity’, ‘privilege’, ‘representation’, ‘language’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘evaluation’. The range of voices and styles counteracts any notion that these issues are in any way “new” and brings together both academic writing and populist articles to demonstrate the width and breadth of the engagement over time and across a number of countries. The decision to include author biographies and/or article contextualisation at the beginning of each piece is a good one, linking the content of the collection with its form. The chapter reflections, consisting mainly of questions, are aimed at students and, thus, could be used by teachers in their classrooms after delivering the material.

In the ‘Craft’ chapter, the stand outs are Matthew Salesses’ “‘Pure Craft’ is a Lie”, which comes from a series of posts on the *Pleides Magazine* blog and is an easy introduction to the questioning of convention, considering how the workshop often pushes ‘the writer to write to the dominant culture’ (10). This questioning of the familiar and the unfamiliar is further explored by Chris Green in ‘Materializing the Sublime Reader: Cultural Studies, Reader Response, and Community Service in the Creative Writing Workshop’. Again, Green focuses on the workshop, and concludes that it ‘needs to address lived situations rather than assuming

and perpetuating the presence of a falsely sublime (generally a white, educated, middle-class) reader' (30).

These considerations are more theoretically explored in the 'Identity' chapter where Dorothy Wang's wonderfully nuanced piece 'Aesthetics Contra "Identity" in Contemporary Poetry Studies' succinctly summarises the core challenge being posed:

...being able to cognitively grasp ("think") these phenomena – in this case, politics, history, race, and their effects on subjectivity and language – does not in any way reify or essentialize or make reductive the not always definite ... often mysterious, but very real relation between and among the social (radical), subjective, and poetic. (83)

Here, there is no sense that identity should be "tacked onto" creative writing studies, for those who come from the non-dominant culture are already 'acutely aware of the contingency and relationality of not only human identity but also language and natural phenomena' (81).

The following section, 'Privilege', is one of the shorter sections of the work, but perhaps the easiest to imagine using. Adsit's contribution, 'Unpacking Privilege in Creative Writing' (already available in her single-authored work), takes its model from Peggy McIntosh's well-known *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1988). Adsit's twenty-seven points are an invaluable resource for teachers wanting to challenge their writing student's assumptions in the early stages of their coursework. The 'Framework for Diverse & Equitable Programs in Creative Writing' which Adsit has also provided on the website accompanying this collection – www.criticalcreativewriting.org – provides further ways for instructors to consider their pedagogical practices in relation to inclusivity. Perhaps the only disappointment is the implied audience of much of this work. Adsit writes:

This framework is inspired by the writing of Claudia Rankine, Viet Thanh Nguyen, David Mura, and many authors who have called creative writing faculty to address racist and exclusionary practices that are pervasive in our academic programs. (Adsit 2018)

Here the 'our' is, quite clearly, American academic programs, a limitation which is not explicitly stated anywhere in the document, nor in the introduction to the book.

The next three sections of the collection – 'Representation', 'Language' and 'Appropriation' – provide strong essays to engage with these ideas, in particular Jess Row's 'White Flights: American Fiction's Racial Landscape' which has deep resonance for non-indigenous Australian writers; Kristen Harmon's 'Writing Deaf: Textualizing Deaf Literature', which broadens out the issues towards disability, often eclipsed or forgotten altogether; and Conchitina Cruz's 'The Filipino Author as Producer', a wonderfully honest calling to account of the author's own discomfort with being a representative of her entire race (though I did wonder why this article was included in the 'Language' section, as it is most concerned with issues of class and representation).

The final chapter – ‘Evaluation’ – spends some time reproducing the debate around literature versus genre but Forrest Wickman’s ‘Against Subtlety’ and Natasha Sajé’s ‘The Politics of Literary Evaluation’ provided me with the most stimulation. Wickman’s critique of close reading and subtext – the “show, don’t tell” mantra and the Hemingway iceberg theory – is a refreshing challenge to the standards of creative writing teaching while Sajé’s article, originally published in 2004, still feels pertinent and should probably be required reading for every first year creative writing student. Sajé’s words provide a fitting end to this collection, summarising the call to account *Critical Creative Writing* asks for:

...we must try to see our own blind spots; we have an ethical obligation to be clear about “where we are coming from” when we evaluate literature. And the literary world will become larger and more interesting when we open ourselves to as many ways and kinds of reading as possible, when we realize that evaluation is contingent on our values, and when we question those values. (251)

Having set itself up as being more than ‘a typical craft handbook’ (x), *Critical Creative Writing: Essential Readings on the Writer’s Craft* delivers excellent resources for the teacher of creative writing to ensure students consider their own positionality and its relationship to their writing practice.

It should be noted that the challenges raised by this work are already being explored in the Australasian context, with Threasa Mead’s *Liminal interventions in the regional creative writing classroom* (2019) specifically drawing on Adsit’s threshold concepts and many of the issues around appropriation and identity in teaching practice given critical space in *TEXT* in recent years (including Collins & Crawford 2017; Collins & Crawford 2018; Walker 2018; Bobis 2018; Kon-yu & Gandolfo 2018). We can look forward to more of these direct responses to ensuring diverse and inclusive pedagogical models are utilised in creative writing programs.

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