

ANDREW COWAN:

I'm Andrew Cowan and I'm a novelist. I'm also a Professor of Creative Writing and the Director of the Creative Writing programme at the University of East Anglia, UEA.

It's an odd question whether I'd consider my use of language to be creative because language always strikes me as a problem and a challenge. And the word 'creative' and 'creativity', both those words have a very benign complexion. They're positive, happy-sounding words. And you imagine that anything that is creative is going to be enjoyable. Enjoyable to do and enjoyable to consume. And yet, as a novelist, as a writer, every time I sit down before a blank page or a page full of language waiting to be revised and edited, I don't often feel in a happy, positive frame of mind. Because I think what's before me now is something that's going to be very, very challenging and take a lot out of me. And it's going to be a tussle.

And I think a lot of writers feel this. And it perhaps accounts for the amount of time-wasting, displacement activity and nest circling that goes on before most writers actually settle down to the task. In some way I think we're fearful of what lies ahead of us or a bit daunted by the challenge that lies ahead of us. And so I come to writing prepared for it to be difficult and to be problematic and to challenge me to find solutions to the problems. And clearly, if you're finding solutions to a problem you're having to be creative. You're having to employ imagination.

I don't think that's confined to writers or artists of any other stripe in particular. Mathematicians have problems they need to solve and it requires imagination and creativity. Scientists of all stripes are required to be creative. But creativity I think isn't often enough associated with hard work. I think creativity does demand a lot of you.

My writing processes actually changed a lot over the years. I am a perfectionist. I know that perfectionism is anti-creative because it prevents you taking risks. It means very often that you'll stay in the same place endlessly revising a sentence, unable to move on until it has the appearance at least of perfection. It's a noose I think for most creative people to become too obsessed with achieving perfection now, at this stage, with this draft.

Nevertheless, that's how I began as a writer but I think that way of working takes its toll. Writing my third novel which is called *Crustaceans* I was so much in the habit of being a perfectionist and writing very, very carefully sentence by sentence that I got stuck half way. And my solution came about through reading Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* where she advocates a practice of automatic writing. And I'd never tried it but I had to. And it was the only solution it turned out for the situation I'd got myself into which I would describe as a writer's block.

So I simply put a series of headings. The headings were the names of the characters, the locations in the book, the main themes of the book. And then I just wrote automatically for 30 minutes at a time to each of those headings. I gave myself permission to splurge any old stuff on to the page just to get it out of me. It was all stored up inside of me. And I got it down on the page. It was a bit raw but in amongst the slurry were a few gems, a few usable phrases, some thoughts that I hadn't been aware of harbouring. I was able to surprise myself on the page here and there.

And so then I was able to go back to my stalled novel and start to fashion the second half of it out of this very raw writing. And it was revelatory to me. I speeded up enormously. And so my method now is to begin with automatic writing, to get as much on to the page as I possibly can with the least amount of interference from my critical or editorial intelligence. I put that side of myself to one side. I've read interviews with other writers where they begin a novel with the glimmer of something, an image. I think John Fowles began *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with an image of the character played by Meryl Streep in the film standing at the end of the Cobb at Lyme Regis. He had that image of a woman staring out to sea.

I've never been visited by images in that way that seem to me to be the glimmer a story. I don't know where my ideas come from. I often doubt if I even have ideas. I think I start writing in pursuit of ideas. I write in order to find out what it is I'm thinking. I write in order to find out what it is I'm writing. At certain points in the process I will pause and look back at what I've got and things then will start to suggest themselves. It's almost like the writing speaks back to me.

The whole time that I've been a published writer alongside that I have been a teacher of creative writing. And it's interesting that I don't say 'I'm a creative writer and I teach writing.' I say 'I'm a writer and I teach creative writing.' And I think it's because creative writing is the term we give to the teaching of writing. It's a pedagogical term. It's a category of activity which happens in institutions which are dedicated to learning. I don't think historically writers have been called 'creative writers'. I think some... in some instances 'imaginative writing' has been used to describe or to distinguish the poet from the journalist, the novelist from the copywriter perhaps. But I think the term 'creative writing' comes out of pedagogical literature. I think it's a book called *Creative Youth* by Hughes Mearns which was the key text of a progressive education movement, as I understand it, in the 1920s in America. That's where the term 'creative writing' is first used. And it's used in an educational context. Creative writing is a course of study. But I think it's a distinct activity from what most teachers of creative writing do when they're not in the institution, when they're at home developing their own poems, their own stories and scripts. That's back to writing because it's not in an institutional setting. And it can't be done to a syllabus. It's not programmatic in that way. It's a bit scarier.

Most of the commentary asks the question 'Can writing be taught?' I think we can teach craft. There is an enormous literature now dedicated to the teaching of the craft of writing. That literature is full of exercises that can be adopted and applied in the classroom. And I think every teacher of creative writing has seen how efficacious those exercises are. They work. You see that the students enjoy them and are often quite thrilled with what they produce in response to an exercise. So clearly, certain craft elements can be taught. The art is that spark of originality or the unexpected, the element of surprise that the student brings to the context. And what we can do as creative writing tutors is provide an environment that is sympathetic or conducive to invention, to imagination.

In a way we give permission to the student writer to try things out, to feel supported, to make mistakes. And thereby arrive at something which they didn't perhaps know they were capable of and which they might not have done without the context that affirms them. Because if you're going to join a creative writing course you're kind of signing up to the idea that you're going to be a writer. You're going to practise the art of writing. The term 'workshop' is actually applied to almost every aspect of creative writing pedagogy. I think of a workshop as a peer review context or it's where you have 10 or 12 people ideally coming together with their tutor in a room where three of them will be submitting work for discussion. The other students will have taken that work home the week before. They will have read it very carefully once from sense, once for the sentences. So the first time they read it to get the gist of it, the second time they read it with their pen. And they annotate it very carefully and constructively and then they come back the following week prepared to talk about it. What they think works.

But not just what they think works, why they think it works and what they think doesn't work and why they think it doesn't. And they try to engage with that piece of work on its own terms, not require it to be what it isn't. If it's a piece of science fiction you don't try and ask it to be a piece of realistic fiction. You engage with it as science fiction and you try to enable it to become the best possible version of itself.

So that's what the group's doing collectively. The person who has written that piece of work is generally silent, generally sits and has the privilege of listening in on the reception of their work. And I think it's beneficial to both parties. The student who submitted the work gains an awful lot of feedback which can be helpful in the redrafting. But the group, in engaging with this piece of work on its own terms, they're acquiring a schooling in how to be editors of writing in progress, work in progress. And that's only going to be helpful to them when they come to edit their own works in progress. So that's what I think is a workshop and that conversation amongst the students about the piece of work that's been submitted in that collective editorial exercise is facilitated by the tutor who doesn't try to dominate the discussion but tries to encourage it.