REWARDS OF CREATION

Is the boom in creative-writing courses a good thing?

(RSL – The Royal Society of Literature Review, 2010)

Last October Faber & Faber took a full-page advertisement on the back of the *Guardian* Review. It was not, however, advertising books. Instead, it invited aspiring authors to sign up for the creative-writing courses organised by the 'Faber Academy'. Among the tutors were Tracy Chevalier, Helen Dunmore and Esther Freud.

I for one was astonished. It can seldom have been harder for writers to find their way into print, or get their books reviewed, than it is now; yet here was a major publisher, which must reject hundreds of manuscripts a year, encouraging hopefuls to part with their money (a six-month course costs between £3,000 and £3,500) in an attempt to realise their dreams. Could anything have been more cynical?

When I put this to Patrick Keogh, who organises the courses, he was highly indignant. 'This is built out of all the good things Faber stands for,' he told me. 'We try to get the best writers [as tutors], and not just from our own stable; our goal is to teach people and make them more aware of beauty.' Unfortunately his occasional lapses into marketingspeak ('We were looking at the core strengths of our brand and thinking of different ways of diversifying') served only to increase my suspicions.

In its first year Faber ran 30 courses, drawing more than 500 people – some of them from as far away as Australia and Brazil. But in terms of Britain's growing creative-writing industry this is merely the tip of the iceberg: a journalist friend who signed up with the academy found that in a group of sixteen, she was the only person who had not already done a similar course. The Arvon Foundation attracts 2,000 students a year for its £595-a-week

courses, of which 97 different varieties are on offer in 2010. At British universities, according to the National Association of Writers in Education, there are now over 200 undergraduate creative-writing courses, plus some 100 offering an MA (costing at least £3,200 per annum) and 30 offering a PhD. At Cardiff you can even study for an MA in *teaching* creative writing. No overall figures for students are available, but UCAS registered 2,735 embarking on 'imaginative writing' degrees in 2009, an increase of 22 per cent on the year before. This is not to speak of the myriad independent courses, such as Dea Birkett and Rory Maclean's travel-writing workshops.

What has brought this boom about? Is it a good thing? And can writing, for that matter, *really* be taught?

The last of these questions remains hotly disputed. Mark Le Fanu, head of the Society of Authors, is quite sure that the answer is no. 'On the other hand,' he says, 'I was persuaded years ago, by Rose Tremain among others, that it is very valuable for potential authors to have uninterrupted writing time, with help and encouragement from professional writers, in an atmosphere that is supportive and creative.' The veteran literary agent Anthony Sheil is also unpersuaded, but believes some genres are more teachable than others: 'With non-fiction I think it might be possible to attain beta double minus; but *fiction*?'

Fay Weldon, by contrast, is a former sceptic who now teaches creative writing at Brunel University. 'You can't teach them the art part,' she says, 'but you can teach them the craft. Creative writing gives a degree of sophistication, which is the difference between a primitive writer and a trained writer. Just as art schools teach how to put on paint, we teach them not to use too many adjectives.'

'Flaubert was not a natural writer,' argues Michael Schmidt, who runs Glasgow University's programme as well as Carcanet Press. 'His gift was one

of vision, and the labour that went into his work was considerable. A lot of writers make their own gift. What can't be taught is imagination.'

Given this continuing debate, it is not surprising that the idea of creative-writing courses has taken so long to take root here. The most respected one in the USA, the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, can trace its beginnings to the 1890s; the UK's twin beacons, the Arvon Foundation and the University of East Anglia creative-writing MA, were created in 1968 and 1970 respectively, and have only in the last ten years lost their aura of eccentricity. 'There was a sense that studying creative writing wasn't really British,' says Andrew Motion, who took over from Malcolm Bradbury at UEA in 1995, and now runs Royal Holloway University's programme: 'people thought it was a bit like athletes taking steroids.'

Many reasons are suggested for the growing change in attitude. Patrick Keogh believes that the credit crunch is largely responsible for the popularity of Faber's courses: 'I think the way the world's gone in the last twelve to eighteen months has made people reassess their lives,' he says. 'They've realised that they have been doing something unfulfilling and want to change that. A lot of the people on our courses come from professional backgrounds; perhaps they read literature at university, then neglected it for ten or twenty years, and now want to re-engage.'

Others believe that the process has been more gradual. Jeremy Treglown, who set up the University of Warwick's programme, attributes it to changes within universities and society in general. 'If I were being cynical, I would put some of it down to the fact that universities get marks for publications, and real writers tend to produce more books than academics do. But more important has been the huge expansion and broadening of higher education: you can now go to university to learn to be a chef or a road engineer, so why not a writer?' To this he adds the dynamic of an ageing population with time

on its hands, and ‘the related growth of the idea of literature as an activity – festivals, readings in bookshops, local reading groups: all of which has certainly in social and possibly even in literary terms been more good than bad.’

Above all, there is what he calls ‘the over-theorisation of literary work in universities’, which has left some students seeking a more practical approach. Andrew Motion for his part believes that creative-writing courses – many of which put a strong emphasis on reading – are compensating for the inadequacy of the A-level syllabus. ‘I came to notice at UEA that a lot of undergraduates’ reading was really spotty,’ he says. ‘Certain things one could once assume were no longer there: they’d know Angela Carter but not Pope.’ Blake Morrison, Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College, identified a different type of gap when he suggested in the *Guardian* that students were looking for ‘the kind of editorial help they can no longer hope to get from publishing houses’.

Most flattering to established writers is the suggestion that others are seduced by the glamour of their profession (‘earning £35,000 from a book and having a writer’s lifestyle in N16,’ as Ian Jack, the former editor of *Granta*, puts it); most disconcerting, the new notion that writing is something anyone can do if they care to put their hand to it. ‘We’re living in the golden age of the amateur,’ argues Ruth Borthwick, head of the Arvon Foundation. ‘People want to participate and express themselves in many ways. Writing has been somewhat demystified: clearly, there are some people who are more talented than others, but most could produce something – a story from their own life or a poem.’

As if to bear her theory out, I found myself talking a few months ago to a retired personnel manager and his wife who had just tried a creative-writing course. Neither had grown up wanting to be an author; nor had their

aspirations changed – they simply saw writing as an interesting occupation to try out over a weekend, and had very much enjoyed doing so. The success of the First Story in inspiring schoolchildren (see page ??) also testifies to the stimulation writing can bring to ordinary lives.

There are practical applications too: another acquaintance, a travel executive, saw her course as an aid to composing better press releases. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of students are motivated by a desire to be published, and not just on their own websites. ‘Having a book in your hand is certainly your goal,’ according to Neil Bradley, one of several students from Goldsmiths who debated the subject at last summer’s Inside Out Festival at Somerset House. ‘You need physical proof of what you’ve done.’

The statistics are heavily against them. Andrew Cowan, who teaches the UEA course, estimates that between 25 and 30 per cent of its graduates attain their goal – and this is at one of the most competitive institutions in the country. Patrick Keogh admits the possibility that none of the students doing Faber’s courses will end up as Faber authors. So are those who run these programmes guilty of cashing in on their students’ delusions?

Certainly, some courses offer better value for money than others. ‘Given how many there are around the country, they won’t all be tip-top, and they won’t all suit the individual,’ observes Andrew Motion. Even the most hallowed course is no guarantee of quality, as one graduate of UEA – who prefers to remain anonymous – discovered: ‘We were paying a lot of money for very little supervision, and that was a common feeling. I really enjoyed the reading side, but I learnt absolutely zero about writing fiction. Some people found the discipline of having to produce work helpful – but I was doing that anyway.’

‘It all lies in the quality of your teacher,’ believes Olivia Hamilton, a journalist and former bookseller who has taken several different courses. ‘It’s

well worth it if you find the right one – and it's great to meet a writer you admire. But I had one tutor who was drunk quite a lot of the time; and if the course isn't well structured you just find yourself listening to other people's dreary stuff for hours and hours.' She found the students' level of commitment high: 'But the majority had no idea how hard it is to get published. I think the organisers should tell you from day one – but then, why would they? It's not in their interest.'

To be fair, there are plenty of responsible tutors who do make this point. ('RADA is a good comparison,' says Maggie Gee, who teaches at several universities. 'People should be told to do it, but be aware that only a tiny proportion will make it.') The problem, says Andrew Motion, is that most students simply don't believe it: 'It's like trying to imagine death – they think, "It will happen to others but it won't happen to me." '

What he does consider reprehensible is that some universities – recognising that creative-writing courses are much in demand and cost little to run beyond the tutors' fees – sometimes cram too many students on to them. 'The group dynamic is incredibly important. I'm convinced they work best if the group is small, so that different people's work comes round regularly.'

The 'workshop' is the accepted format for most courses, with students taking it in turns to read what they have written and commenting on each other's contributions. The disadvantage of this is that an uncommitted tutor can get away with doing very little; the advantage, that it can foster great camaraderie. 'I have to encourage my students to be nastier to each other,' says Fay Weldon. 'I thought it would be the other way round.'

'The most important thing is friendship,' says Michael Schmidt. 'In a workshop of twelve, the comments of nine will be of no value, but the comments of three will be immensely helpful.' Neil Bradley found it a life-changing experience 'to meet like-minded people, who I would never have

come into contact with otherwise. My family and friends were really suspicious of the fact that I wanted to write – they thought I was gay.'

What is dangerous about workshops, Michael Schmidt believes, is that students may tailor their work to appeal to their fellow students rather than take risks which will make their writing better. This mirrors a general departure from the original purpose of creative-writing courses as envisaged by pioneers such as Malcolm Bradbury and himself: 'The idea was to give writers two or three years in which to experiment, not to write commercial fiction for a hungry publishing industry. Now it's become opportunistic: they teach students how to play the market, they organise occasions to meet agents, which to Malcolm Bradbury was counter-literary – a feeling I share.' As Blake Morrison points out, however, times have changed: in the 1970s, writers had no particular need for an agent; now their manuscripts are unlikely to get read without one.

Another worry is that a certain type of course will come to produce a certain type of writer – particularly in universities, which are always vulnerable to the latest critical and political fads. 'On *Granta* we used to receive a couple of hundred submissions a month, and you could see the carpentry and hammering of the paragraphs that had gone into them,' says Ian Jack. 'A lot of them were very similar'. Michael O'Loughlin, who teaches at Trinity College, Dublin, gives an example of a growing orthodoxy:

'Creative-writing schools in the US teach that a poem needs to have what they call a "redemption": something at the end which lifts the reader up. I spend a lot of time crossing out last stanzas with the comment, "A redemption has to be earned!" '

Nevertheless, given that the number of students studying the humanities at British universities has shrunk to 10 per cent, the fact that anyone in the country is taking a deeper interest in literature has to be welcomed – as does

the emergence of a new source of income for established but impoverished writers. The National Association of Writers in Education estimates that at least 600 have benefited, though most will be teaching a few hours a week for £40 an hour, rather than drawing professorial salaries such as Martin Amis's celebrated £80,000 a year at Manchester University.

Andrew Motion argues that even if the students do not become published authors, they are likely to reap other benefits – a greater breadth of reading, higher literacy and sharpened critical faculties. More than that, the process of study 'might make you better able to lead your life: you discover yourself more deeply. It allows a flowering of interest and self-expression which secondary education and most university courses don't; it allows you to ski off-piste.'