



Researching Creative Writing

Mary Hedengren

University of Texas, Austin

mary.hedengren@gmail.com

Review of

Webb, Jen. *Researching Creative Writing*. Newmarket: Frontinus, 2015. Print.

Creative writers are a curious lot. They are curious about what is artistically plausible as well as what is scientifically probable. Because of this rich curiosity, creative writers are uniquely positioned to provide a fresh research perspective into a variety of other fields through their literary art. Additionally, many creative writers who are housed in universities find themselves under increasing institutional pressure to publish work beyond literary venues. These creative writers participate in academic research. Doctoral students in creative writing are often required to include a “scholarly preface” to their dissertations, and the proliferation of creative writing studies journals, such as *New Writing*, *TEXT*, and *the Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, opens new venues for young and established creative writers alike to undertake research about their creative writing. With creative writers beginning to engage “research for research’s sake,” rather than only as a first step in producing art, a book like Jen Webb’s *Researching Creative Writing* becomes essential reading for writers who may be novices to research practices and methodologies for studying the field.

Webb has produced a text that clearly defines the terms and elements of academic research for creative writers who may be attempting this form of scholarship for the first time, while cogently insisting that such research is worthwhile and necessary. For some writers, moving into a new mode of research and writing may be intimidating, but Webb builds her case for academic research on the work creative writers already do. The increasing presence of creative writers in universities—Webb alludes to Frank Moorhouse’s quip that the second question after inquiring whether someone is a writer is “Where do you teach?” (qtd. 106)—means that many creative writers must find themselves doing new kinds of writing with new kinds of research. Scholars such as Dianne Donnelly, Stephanie Vanderslice, and Graeme Harper are, in Webb’s words, “carving out a third field” between straight academic research and creative practice through imagination and innovation, experiment and inspired writing (114). Pedagogical investigations like Donnelly’s *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* and philosophical treatises like Harper’s *The Future for Creative Writing* are pioneering works that inspire creative writers to engage in other brands of knowledge-making.

Webb's text is an invaluable compendium for new writer-researchers, whether creative writing doctoral students, or established creative writers in departments that expect academic research. The nine chapters are divided pragmatically into three parts: "Designing the Research," which defines various philosophical lenses researchers would do well to be cognizant of; "Doing the Research," which catalogs methodologies and their relative strengths; and "From Materials to the Published Work," which focuses on the management of research and its eventual dissemination. At 272 pages, it's a tidy book, comprehensive enough to sit deskmade in the university offices of a growing number of academic creative writers.

The book begins by interrogating the slippery meanings we give the word "research"—a surprisingly versatile word. We often use *research* to describe finding out something for ourselves that others may know as a matter of course: for instance, I say I must research transportation options to my new job or research a political timeline for a new book. Webb moves away from these common definitions, emphasizing the research that contributes to a community's understanding of their practice in context. "In the best cases," Webb writes, "writer-researchers will deliver a fine piece of writing, an improved understanding about some aspect of professional creative practice and a new way of seeing the world" (72).

And when you begin to think about ways of understanding the world, philosophy and theory are not far behind. One of the great strengths of the book is the crystalline explanation of key terms like *axiology*, *epistemology* and other terms that we know, but might not be able to describe in terms of our own research. Knowing our semiotics from our phenomenology is about more than just sitting smug in our sophistication in English department staff meetings: when we have a clear understanding of the theories that inform our research, we are aware of their strengths, limits, and potential audiences.

But this isn't just a book about abstract theory. Webb moves us into the very practical elements of choosing a viable research project in pedagogy, critical theory, or sociology; developing a research question; and identifying a research context and research methods appropriate to the project (17). In this, Webb is our guide through the process of composing a manageable review of the literature (34-38), explicating the research question (41-48), and generally developing "better creative work, more rigorous research work and innovative, engaging contributions to the worlds of literature and of knowledge" (20).

Since it isn't enough just to plan out a research project, Webb also supplies an overview of common research methodologies: focus groups, interviews, surveys, ethnography, and a very thorough treatment of archival research. She provides definitions of these methodologies, but also gives personal experience and advice that ranges from the theoretical to the practical. She covers topics from the etiquette of buying coffee for an interviewee (144) to the complexities of the "other" box on a survey (134). While this slim volume should not be the only resource for, say, a creative writer who wants to conduct a series of interviews, it does provide a robust introduction to the varieties, possibilities and potential pitfalls of this and other methodologies.

As soon as we "have something to say" (206), it's time to write. Webb acknowledges that "each written work needs a particular reader, and to serve a particular purpose" and for this reason, academic publishing

may look very different than creative publishing (214). This may mean that the writer-researcher is seeking to publish not one document, but two, related yet discrete projects (185), such as a volume of historically situated short stories as well as a critical or scholarly essay about the historical research done for the stories. Publishing outside of literary venues may take creative writers out of a comfort zone, and Webb doesn't shy away from the potential personal and professional risks—but neither does she downplay the dizzying possibilities of publishing creative writing research. Creative writers have unique perspectives and practices to bring to a variety of academic fields and, with the theoretical and methodological resources that Webb introduces, publishing our research seems far more attainable.

That isn't to say that Webb's book is completely without its own blind spots. For a text that describes how creative writers might enter into new discourse communities, there is a curious dearth of genre theory and disciplinary studies. Webb's many justifiable references to Pierre Bourdieu certainly belong in the volume, but I kept searching for more about how contemporary disciplinary scholars have built upon his work. If we are entering into new genres and new disciplines, it behooves us to learn the vocabulary and conventions of those genres and disciplines, just as it improves a six-month research exchange to France if you can learn a little about the language and culture beforehand. Scholars like Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler, John Swales, Gerald Graff, Anis Bawarshi and Ken Hyland are especially useful resources when crossing over into a new academic territory or in better coming to know the conventions of our own territory. I admit that because of this exclusion, I felt as though the book's title was missing a comma: not *Researching Creative Writing* as a field to be researched by insiders and outsiders alike, but *Researching, Creative Writing* as two tandem endeavors that nonetheless inform each other.

The other potential flaw of Webb's book is that it may veer towards essentializing some of the research methods she describes. I found myself frowning when she wrote that “For the quantitative researcher, reality is out there,” while the qualitative researcher believes “reality is how the investigator frames what they see” (68). Having waded through my share of large quantitative data sets, I am confident that the quantitative researcher, too, finds fluidity in the meanings such data sets afford. Still, it's hard to fault Webb for sometimes simplifying various research methods and privileging those adjacent to literary studies. For her audience of beginning researchers, it's better to start out with a basic model, much as biology students begin with a plastic mold of the body, and then gradually move to more complex models that accommodate more idiosyncrasies and exceptions.

The simplicity and lucidity of the text makes it ideal for introductory scholars, and that is its most obvious audience. While the list price might be prohibitive for some researchers, I recommend this book to every PhD student in creative writing, especially those who must produce a scholarly element in their dissertation. Indeed, the book is ideal for such doctoral students, and I recommend it for the libraries of dissertation advisors and program heads who direct creative writing doctoral students. More mature creative writers who are ready to embark on research projects would benefit from the volume as well, but I am itching to place this book into the hands of the many creative writing doctoral students I encountered in my own creative writing research.