Creative Writing Innovations and Old and New, Tried and Untried

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Review of

***Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom.* Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein, eds. Bloomsbury, 2017.**

***Old and New, Tried and Untried: Creativity and Research in the 21st Century.* Jeri Kroll, Andrew Melrose, and Jen Webb, eds. Common Ground Publishing, 2016.**

Many of the authors and editors of *Creative Writing Innovations and Old and New, Tried and Untried* are veteran members of Creative Writing Studies, and both essay collections have developed in response to the questions that form the basis of this field. *Innovations* focuses on pedagogy, thoroughly interrogating the goals and purpose of the creative writing classroom. Meanwhile, *Old and New* further develops creative writing's unique relationship with research and explores it from an administrative perspective. Both volumes challenge the boundaries of what creative writing has traditionally been considered capable of doing, and both provide compelling arguments for why creative writing is invaluable to the university.

Creative Writing Innovations

In their introduction, Clark, Hergenrader, and Rein ask what on the surface appears to be a basic question: if producing publishable literature was no longer the primary goal of creative writing classrooms, what else would those classrooms be able to accomplish? What would they be free to do? Beneath this question, however, the authors make several important assertions that are familiar to readers of the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*. Not only does *Creative Writing Innovations* support creative writing as a teachable subject, it argues that creative writing classrooms help students develop a diverse set of higher-order skills, making creative writing a valuable part of the university regardless of its students' publishing output. The essays provide ample evidence for this assertion, teaching not only craft, but also collaboration, empathy, critical analysis, research skills, and metacognition.

The essays included in *Creative Writing Innovations* deconstruct the workshop at every level. The editors have gathered the essays in this volume into four thematic groups; however, these themes are often loosely defined, and the essays reconsider more aspects of the workshop than even these initial groupings suggest.

Section one, "Rethinking the Workshop," focuses largely on the overall goals of the creative writing workshop as well as the products students are expected to produce. Tim Mayers outlines his model for a process-oriented workshop, which allows students to think more about the early stages of a project, as well as the theory behind what makes writing creative. Graeme Harper advocates for an "unworkshop," where students are free to pursue their own definitions of success without the constraint of social expectation. Derrick Harriell looks beyond the completion of individual products, teaching his graduate poetry students how to turn collections of poems into a cohesive manuscript.

In section two, contributors experiment with the inclusion of unexpected genres in the creative writing classroom. Rachel Himmelheber introduces a research assignment into her fiction courses with the goal of increasing her students' ability to empathize with identities different from their own. Hazel Smith incorporates music into her curriculum so that her students can explore the relationship between words and sound, while Tom Hunley's students study the generic connections between poetry and songwriting, helping them better connect to the oral tradition of poetry. Joseph Rein discusses the results of recruiting a film class to produce screenplays written by several of his students, enabling one of his students, Kyle McGinn, to see how his screenplay evolved beyond its original genre and outside of his individual control. Michael Dean Clark embraces the genre-defying nature of creative non-fiction and discusses the ways he designed his course to help students identify —and sometimes defy— conventions of essayistic writing.

Section three, "Creative Collaborations," contains a diverse array of approaches to the subject of collaboration. Several of the essays address the benefits of creative group projects. Mary Ann Cain discusses the ways her collaborative projects influence her students' sense of creative ownership and classroom dynamics. Trent Hergenrader uses collaboration to help his students develop their character and world-building skills. Cathy Day combines the merits of collaborative worldbuilding and research: her students study the history of Muncie, Indiana, then use their research as the setting for their stories. This section also explores the relevance of place to creative writing experience: Janelle Adsit discusses the possibilities and challenges that rise when creative writing classrooms leave the isolation of the classroom and take a fieldwork approach. The section concludes with a reflective essay by Katharine Haake, who theorizes a classroom where the students regularly describe to their teacher the lessons they have been learning, giving the teacher a chance to metacognitively consider the beliefs they have been imparting on the class.

In the fourth and final section, "Identity and the Creative Classroom," contributors discuss ways in which the creative writing classroom can upturn traditional hierarchies and empower students to

pursue non-normative (and creative) approaches. Tonya Hegamin opens by addressing the exclusions her non-traditional and predominantly Black students face in the creative writing classroom, embracing codeswitching as a way of challenging the damaging concept of "right" and "wrong" in linguistic expression. Ching-in Chen addresses similar themes of authority and identity, finding ways to help their students express gender and sexuality in the classroom. Prageeta Sharma concludes this section, and the volume, by arguing for the relevance of critical literary theory to the creative writing classroom, using *The Waste Land* as a means to discuss with her students how cultural privilege influences our perceptions of the work's value.

The most daring claim that *Innovations* makes is that requiring publication to be the goal of the creative writing classroom can actually limit its true potential. Many of the classrooms these contributors describe wouldn't be able to justify their existence using a traditional view of the purpose of a workshop, yet when the goal of the workshop is altered, these creative writing classrooms not only survive, but thrive.

A major strength of this book is the diversity in its pedagogical approaches. Rather than arguing for one right way to run a workshop, the authors demonstrate how reconfiguring aspects of a creative writing classroom can achieve many different outcomes depending on the teacher's goals for their students, making this volume an excellent choice for teachers who are more interested in developing their pedagogy. Additionally, when taken as a whole, *Creative Writing Innovations* successfully argues that creative writing courses can do more to develop the minds of students than they have traditionally been given credit for—helpful evidence for anyone who needs to demonstrate how their classes might fit into the overall educational goals of their department.

Innovations also lays the groundwork for further consideration as to how creative writing can contribute to and enhance the lessons of other disciplines in the university. Creative writing's connection to English and the fine arts is obvious, but some of the authors in *Innovations* use creative writing as a way to deepen students' understanding of subjects in history, social science, and cultural studies. When read as a whole, *Innovations* illustrates a wide range of possibilities for creative writing, shifting it to a more central place within the Humanities curriculum.

Old and New

The editors of *Old and New, Tried and Untried: Creativity and Research in the 21st Century* maintain a global perspective when looking at the institutional changes happening to creative writing, framing the research collected in this volume as a response to educational reforms in the UK and Australasia. The editors assert that national and international policy changes resulted in a merging of creative and academic identities, as well as a rise in creative scholarship—an intellectual and cultural shift that the editors aim to represent through their selected essays. In general, the programs that *Old and New*'s contributors have worked to satisfy all present the same challenge: demonstrate rigorous academic

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research in a creative writing program. As the editors of this volume note, the contributors' responses to these challenges raise a number of questions: should academics in the arts identify as both practitioners and scholars? What is the relationship between these identities, and how do they fit within the boundaries of the university?

The scope of *Old and New* is broader than it first appears. While several contributors directly address the challenge of meeting the guidelines introduced by their governments, the editors emphasize that each of the book's contributions are part of a larger, international debate about the role of the arts in the university, the division between performance and scholarship, and the definition and purpose of research.

At the same time, context is key to understanding this book. Readers must consider the institutional and cultural structures that have led to the creation of each individual article. Each essay must be considered within its national or international context because there is no universal consensus as to how the arts should operate in higher education. *Old and New* is carefully developed and organized to assist with context. Every chapter begins with an abstract, and many of the authors in this volume begin with a detailed description of the programs they are discussing as well as the educational cultures that necessitated their programs.

For example, Jordan Williams begins his chapter on higher degree by research (HDR) by explaining his role as an administrator before providing a thorough description of what HDR is and how it works, including how it is funded and what expectations it places upon creative writing departments. For readers from universities in countries that are not held to HDR guidelines but must justify the academic status of their programs, context is what makes the concerns of *Old and New*'s contributors understandable and relatable. The downside to any discussion of programmatic outcomes is that they can be difficult to apply outside of the situations they were created to address. However, the approaches included in this volume can still serve as a source of inspiration, and rather than copying a single programmatic response, administrators can pick and choose strategies that fit their needs. Williams, for instance, suggests that doctoral programs allow for more innovative types and forms of thesis projects and consider multiple ways of describing the value of doctoral outcomes. While his advice is presented as a way of resisting funding struggles, perhaps allowing for innovation in theses could benefit schools in other ways as well.

While some research volumes are designed to offer standalone chapters that can be read individually, I think that readers will best appreciate Old and New if they read the book as an integrated collection. The first chapter, written by Jen Webb and Paul Hetherton, forms the theoretical framework that supports arguments made in later chapters. The authors discuss academic institutions' habit of separating creative works from research and assigning unequal value to these endeavors. Webb and Hetherton explore and re-envision the relationship between creative production and research. Their boundary-blurring way of approaching the value of creative works serves as a helpful theoretical framework for

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nearly every other chapter in this book, and many of the contributors to *Old and New* utilize concepts, such as "practice-active" and "research-active," that chapter one explores in detail.

Later chapters in *Old and New* come from diverse perspectives. Although all of the authors address the complex relationship between production and research in the academy, some authors focus on program-specific questions, while others take a more universal or theoretical approach to the topic. *Old and New* weaves back and forth between program-specific and universal discussions, using programmatic chapters as the building blocks that provide necessary context for more generalized chapters.

In the first few chapters, Jordan Williams discusses Australia and the UK's way of measuring the value and methodology of creative writing doctorates, while Jeri Kroll explores issues surrounding Australia and the UK's way of choosing supervisors for these doctorates. Paul Munden follows Williams and Kroll by addressing a related issue, the undervaluation of pedagogical studies in the UK, arguing that pedagogical research is fundamental to creative writing research. These chapters are followed by an essay by Andrew Melrose, who describes creative production as a naturally collaborative act where research and communication are part of the process of production. Melrose discusses the implications this understanding may have for creative writing research. While Williams, Kroll, and Munden introduce programmatic issues and discuss how they rose to those challenges, Melrose's chapter explores the nature of the problems from a more universal perspective. Because of this pattern across the chapters, reading *Old and New* sometimes feels like attending a particularly articulate and helpful panel discussion followed by a meeting to reflect on the meaning of what was discussed.

After Melrose comes a chapter by Sue Joseph, who returns to the development of creative writing programs in Australia. Joseph reiterates and expands on some of the concerns discussed by Williams, Kroll, and Munden, looking at the undervaluation of practice-led research in Australia. Joseph's chapter also examines how doctoral projects that focus on trauma narratives are supervised and conducted.

In its final two chapters, *Old and New* shifts into providing examples of how practice and research may blend in a scholarly endeavor, as well as how this work may be useful pedagogically. In chapter seven, Nigel McLoughlin discusses Text World Theory and how applying theoretical frameworks to poetry can be useful for creative writers. Julian Meyrick, in chapter eight, returns to the terminology discussed in chapter one, using his experience as a theater director to illustrate the unique contributions of performance projects and their relationship to research and to argue for new and mediated categories of scholarly engagement.

Old and New is a book for creative writing scholars who are already well versed in the theoretical and institutional challenges creative writing faces, especially if they are thinking about how to advocate for their departments administratively. In particular, *Old and New* continuously reminded me of Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper's edited collection *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), which provides a diverse set of examples for how scholars can apply lenses and frames to

research questions in creative writing. When the contributors to *Old and New* talked about encouraging graduate students to blend "practice-active" and "research-active" methods, I pictured the projects featured in *Research Methods*, and McLoughlin's essay on Text World Theory would have been right at home in the 2013 volume. For these reasons, I recommend *Research Methods* as a helpful introduction to *Old and New*.

Old and New accomplishes a significant goal: it provides a consistent and compelling argument for how creative writing research can function within, and contribute to, universities. When faced with bureaucratic rules and guidelines, the contributors to this volume could have responded disingenuously, creating programs that follow the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the practice, but the tone of *Old and New* is ambitious rather than resigned. The contributors embrace the innovative possibilities of blending research and creativity; instead of bemoaning the destruction of creative projects, these authors and administrators envision the transformation of both the research and creative sectors. They refuse to treat themselves as outsiders pretending to be academics, and administrators should absolutely take a close look at the deft ways in which these authors have articulated the value of creative production as a scholarly endeavor.