



Studying Creative Writing—Successfully

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Review of

Vanderslice, Stephanie, ed. *Studying Creative Writing—Successfully*. Frontinus. 2016.

Stephanie Vanderslice has recruited some of the biggest names in the field to create the definitive handbook for undergraduate creative writing majors and graduate students. In doing so, she has contributed to one of the most essential genres of an academic discipline, the deciding-on-a-major guide. I recall, as a freshman, reading one such book titled something like, “Do You Want to Major in Psychology?” and the answer, it turned out, was no. Such books, characteristically, describe the state of the field broadly—what Gerald Graff has called “field coverage”—and paint an appropriately grim picture of the job prospects for graduates. Vanderslice and her contributors, though, know something that sets their handbook apart from other “Do You Want to Major” books —creative writing isn’t like other majors.

The differences between creative writing and other majors mean that this book is more than just about how to carve a path to employment. Rather, it is more holistically about what it means to be the sort of person who majors in creative writing: the habits of the mind, commitment to community and transferable skills that come from studying and practicing writing. This is not a handbook to survive the degree, or to get a job; it’s about what a degree in creative writing means to a community. The result is a book that redefines “success” in terms not limited to employability (or even degree completion!), instead emphasizing skills and habits that the community most hopes to inculcate in novice writers.

The authors must think broadly because, in part, the job prospects for students who study creative writing very rarely consist of just creative writing, a fact that Vanderslice mentions on page one of chapter one, claiming that “only 0.05 percent of writers” sustain themselves by creative writing alone. This immediate admission frees Vanderslice up to then set up the premises of the rest of the compilation: creative writing majors must be flexible and proactive, designing their destiny from day one rather than checking off requirements for graduation, trusting the program to prepare them for post-graduation employment. Vanderslice recommends open-minded, experiment-filled semesters and summers of diverse internships to help students to craft the program they would like to graduate from. At the

end of the chapter, she tells “Success Stories” of graduates, none of whom support themselves solely by writing. Instead, they have writing-inflected careers in publishing, teaching and library science (10-13). The moral, Vanderslice implies, is that you need to be thoughtful about your program, and create a good life for yourself during and after graduation.

And to that end, the compilation is masterful for all levels of creative writing study. Trent Hergenrader’s chapter provides advice for the prospective student, most notably that, because of the statistically small chance that a student will become a professional writer, engaging on a course of creative writing is actually “a very *low stakes* endeavor” (27, his emphasis) that should be pursued with equal parts experiment and enjoyment. It’s very freeing to begin from the premise that creative employment is out of the picture, so study can be engaged for its own sake. Imagine the consequences: no grade grubbing, no begrudging classes outside a chosen genre, no classroom jealousies.

That’s all very well and good for the student while they are a student, but what happens when they graduate, set adrift from the moorings of the university? Many good things, the contributors assert. This is, I admit, my favorite part of the handbook because, unlike similar handbooks for psychology or chemical engineering majors, the future described for the creative writing major is holistic, taking in the full lifestyle and not just the working hours of the graduate. Very few books of this genre—off-hand, I can think of none—care about the full person of the graduate as deeply as *Studying Creative Writing—Successfully*.

The reality that very few people support themselves on their writing doesn’t mean that the graduate is destined for unemployment. Anna Leahy believes that the skills a thoughtful creative writing major develops “might lead to and be used for a paying job” (117). Rather tempered expectations, perhaps—that it *might* lead to a “paying job” and not that it *definitely* leads to a writing job—but a paying job is much better than no job at all, which some students, and their parents, may foresee with a creative writing degree.

More importantly, Leahy describes how (and whether) to keep writing once the scaffolding of the university is removed. She boldly asks in one subheading “How Important Is Your Writing?” and then challenges the obvious answers of her audience: is it more important than other things you could be doing? Is it even more important than social media, gaming or Netflix streaming? If so, she proposes strategies of accountability, habit, and patience to extend creative writing beyond the ivory tower into the after-hours of someone with a “paying job.”

Donna Steiner discusses a different kind of involvement in the literary world, what Cathy Day calls “literary citizenship.” One of my favorite chapters for early-career creative writers, Steiner’s chapter emphasizes the twin virtues of “reciprocity and usefulness” for creating vibrant literary communities (132). After relating a history of literary community, Steiner gives easy tips to build that community, from simply posting about books on social media to creating writing groups, organizing free libraries

and promoting independent bookstores (140-144). Students who have devoted years of their lives to the literary community may be underwhelmed by the suggestion that they can support the arts by buying five books a year (144) or subscribing to a literary journal (143), but nationwide there are few people who do so, even among those who have come up through our creative writing programs. Furthermore, as Steiner points out, “Being a literary citizen is a lifelong endeavor. It is also a creative one” (146) and to that end needs the persistence of a novelist, the attention to detail of a poet, and the societal awareness of an essayist. Engaging in literary communities will help former students see their training as significant and useful, both to those in the writing community and beyond.

Some students, though not all, will find themselves back in the classroom as instructors of creative writing. Some of these students begin teaching while they are still attending school. *Studying Creative Writing—Successfully* also does an excellent job of describing the pedagogy of creative writing, a useful introduction for young graduate students who will be managing their own classes for the first time. But creative writing students may have deeply engrained misconceptions about creative writing’s pedagogy. Julie Platt, for instance, in a chapter on grading creative writing, begins “When you hear the words ‘grading’ and ‘creative writing’ in the same sentence, do you do a double-take?” and goes on to claim that “Creative writing deserves to be held to the same high academic standards as other majors found in American colleges and universities, which means that creative writing courses and assignments cannot be given automatic ‘As’” (86). Her chapter gives concrete examples of how to grade creative writing, including a full sample rubric for grading haiku. Joseph Rein quashes any false euphoria about teaching or taking a creative writing class online by gravely declaring “*a course online will be a good deal more work than you’re expecting*” (105, his emphasis) and continuing to give tips uniquely situated to an online course, and an online creative writing course at that. These chapters on pedagogy do a good deal to dispel the ghosts of the “unteachable art” that students may still hang onto, especially if they’re very invested in the concept of talent. They are chapters like swinging doors, applicable to students who teach or want to teach, as well as to students who are surprised at the grading standards they find themselves subject to.

If students do find themselves working in higher education or as professional writers, they may also be required to write more than just their own creative works. To address the need to meta-cognitively describe one’s own writing process, many creative writing programs require critical and reflective writing about the student’s creative work. Dianne Donnelly’s chapter on writing critical and reflective pieces can aid the increasing number of students whose programs encourage a scholarly preface to their final projects. She admits that many students may “see a critical and reflective study as less exciting and as holding less weight than the product of [their] creative work,” but insists that such scholarly introspection is “a critical part of understanding” both process and position in the larger field of creative writing (84-85).

Studying Creative Writing—Successfully, I have claimed, is a groundbreaking handbook for beginning creative writing students because of its open-eyed approach to the field’s employability and its holistic

approach to the student's future life. That being said, there are sections of the book that proceed more conventionally: Tim Mayers describes the importance of reading to write; Travis Nicholson gives free-writing suggestions and tips for invention; Mary Ann Cain gives revision strategies; and Garry Craig Powell describes how to give a reading that actually entertains the audience. These are important skills for beginning creative writers to develop, and their absence would certainly limit students. And while similar advice may be found in more conventional writing handbooks from *Triggering Town to Bird by Bird to Writing Down the Bones*, their inclusion makes this book quite comprehensive, describing the principles of writing as well as everything else that goes in to studying creative writing.

Stephanie Vanderslice has gathered together some of the finest scholars in creative writing studies to create an all-in-one handbook for creative writing majors or graduate programs. The price is not prohibitive to making the book requisite for new creative writing students, and the advice may well prove priceless.

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