



The Routledge
Creative
Writing
Coursebook

PAUL MILLS

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THE ROUTLEDGE CREATIVE WRITING COURSEBOOK

This step-by-step, practical guide to the process of creative writing provides readers with a comprehensive course in its art and skill. With genre-based chapters, such as life writing, novels and short stories, poetry, fiction for children and screenwriting, it is an indispensable guide to writing successfully.

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Paul Mills teaches creative writing at York St John College. He has held writing fellowships at Leeds and Manchester universities and a Fulbright Teaching exchange fellowship in the US. He is a poet and dramatist.

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CREATIVELYWRITING
COURSEBOOK

Paul Mills



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FOR ELIZABETH

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PREFACE

Somewhere between a second edition and a sequel, the present book follows *Writing In Action*, with a focus exclusively on *creative* writing. It aims to offer fresh approaches and some new terms to match. Whilst writing this book I became aware of new ground to be discovered, and the constant need to rethink what happens when we read and write creatively.

Creative writing as a taught discipline is on the move; it is going places, and I hope I've provided some opportunity to think about interesting new directions. As well as that, my method, as in *Writing In Action*, has been to encourage genuine pleasure in the things good writing can do, and to move from given examples to suggestions for writing. Excitement and pleasure in written words generates momentum without which technical advice would be sterile. The plan of each chapter is therefore quite straight-forward, and offers, I hope, enough but not too much guidance.

I acknowledge that what I have written in every chapter stems from my personal experience as a writer and reader. The whole idea is to stimulate not just good writing but open discussion, assuming that one leads to the other, and so leave room for tutors and students to make their own discoveries. With this point very much in mind, I am pleased to acknowledge how much I myself have benefited from the influence of students, colleagues and friends, many of whom are writers themselves, whose insights are mirrored here in so many ways.

Paul Mills, July 2005

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CHAPTER 1

WRITING AS ART

Writers build up worlds, make them real, emphasise and illuminate them through images. Through voices they hold our attention, remind us of the varying tones of speech. Through stories told and heard they show the way our thoughts are shaped by narrative, how we shape the thoughts and lives of others and ourselves. From among the features by which we identify writing as an art form, in this first chapter I have selected four that produce a consistently powerful impact for writers and readers. These are voice, world, image and story. Without these elements our practice as writers would become disadvantaged. Creative language would not be as it is, neither would we read with the special attention and pleasure it generates.

Story implies structure, and structure meaning. Stories are told by voices creating images; voices also build and inhabit worlds. A writer staying close to the voices of characters has more chance of crossing over into their rhythm of living, of involving readers in that rhythm, so that as readers we feel we know it for ourselves. The use of speaking and thinking voices in writing seems to be a key quality, perhaps the most important skill of all for a writer to learn. But then, if we think about it, the voices that most hold our attention are those that tell stories, generate images, make their world as real to us as our own.

In this chapter I shall begin my exploration of how these qualities interact. Not one of them stands alone as the central foundation. But it may be that each of the five genres I cover in this book—memoir or personal narrative, poetry, fiction, children's writing and drama—typically favours one quality above others. We might see *image* as the domain of poets. We might expect *voice* to be the foremost interest of any dramatist, while *story* dominates every instance of prose fiction or memoir. It will help, however, if we *don't* make these assumptions. A successful poem can be written as dramatic story. A piece of short fiction might have very little in the way of narrative. Voices might not always be appropriate. Obviously there will be differences within genres, between writers. While Alan Ayckbourn writes by devising a carefully plotted story, Harold Pinter describes a play as 'an evolving and compulsive dramatic image' (Pinter, 1976:12). The emphasis may change from writer to writer, but to value their impact we need to experience voice, world, image and story as strengths, qualities, amazing creative inventions. What is it that they do? How do they work? This chapter will be the first step in discovering some answers to these questions.

VOICE

Writing as art helps us to recognise the voices, images, worlds and stories we inhabit—and which inhabit us—in other words, our acquired culture. But it usually does this not

through explanation or analysis, but by encouraging us to listen and see. In the following passage from her novel *The Bluest Eye*, the black American writer Toni Morrison paints a picture of weekends in a family household in Ohio. The child narrator remembers the impact of her mother's voice. She recreates her singing, her idioms of speech, the actual words spoken in the house. The picture has been painted for us in sound:

Saturdays were lonesome, fussy, soapy days. Second in misery only to those tight, starchy, cough-drop Sundays, so full of 'don'ts' and 'set'cha self downs'.

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me-times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-me to my name'. I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave me, when I would 'hate to see that evening sun go down...' ...Misery coloured by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.

But without song, those Saturdays sat on my head like a coal scuttle, and if Mama was fussing, as she was now, it was like somebody throwing stones at it

(Morrison, 1994:25–6)

This last image (of the mother fussing at her children), even without mentioning voice directly, represents it to us as something terribly uncomfortable: we see hands going up over ears to block it out. In the passage we also hear the narrator and catch a sense of her own speech-rhythms. Morrison has got right inside this child's voice. The story at this point is being told to us through a distinctly spoken language: 'lonesome...fussy, soapy ...starchy, cough-drop Sundays.' This narrator is inclined to speak very much in her own fashion—independent, awkward to handle, yet also sensitive, sympathetic. Other voices come through to us: the first line of a lyric from the black jazz singer Bessie Smith, 'I hate to see that evening sun go down'.

Exploring the voice has uncovered a rich field in contemporary writing. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison describes a conversation like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop' (Ibid: 15). Yet a fascination with voices and speech has been present in fiction for over two centuries. The personal letter, a form where writing comes closest to natural speech, made its appearance in one of the earliest examples of fiction. *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson (1740) contains a series of letters written between women on the subject of love. Authentic, spontaneous, as if close to real, unedited experience, it was partly through its use of the letter (we call this an 'epistolary style') that fiction placed its emphasis on speech. In a recent, unusual example of such emphasis, Iris Murdoch begins her novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, written and set in the 1960s, by inventing a conversation which continues for almost twenty pages, with only one short interjection by the author setting the scene. If one rule of fiction is to discover *what most interests the characters*, then one such interest could be love, but another might be

conversation itself. As she demonstrates, talk, conversation, interests this husband and wife because it is their way of shaping experience. We hear their voices because, for them, voices are important. Talking matters.

Dialect and Diversity

In the middle of the last century, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called attention to voices used creatively by writers. ‘Diversity of speech’, he wrote, ‘is the ground of style’, and commenting particularly of the novel: ‘For the prose artist the world is full of other people’s words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear’ (Bakhtin, 1984:200–1). In his book *After Bakhtin*, David Lodge, himself a prolific novelist, draws attention to this feature in the novels of Dickens, George Eliot and D.H.Lawrence.

But the uses of voice don’t confine themselves only to fiction. In our time poetry has also widened its appeal by developing its range of speaking voices, tones, registers, accents, slang expressions. Writing in all its creative forms no longer limits itself to the voice of one dominant authority, or to a form of address by a single speaker; that is, white, middle-class, educated British-American. Writing as art is now practised by people from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, representing differences of age, gender and sexuality. All these voices are actively sought by audiences and readers whose numbers reflect a similar range of culture and experience.

When it comes to the question of how much or how little we know about other people, it is hardly surprising that voices provide one of the first signals of difference or similarity. We might indeed remember a voice more than a name or face. City neighbourhoods often consist of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Living on the same staircase as an Asian family, the Scottish poet Liz Lochhead wonders about the mother’s position in terms of her speech and location. Spoken language can differ between generations in the same household: ‘How does she feel? / her children grow up with foreign accents, / swearing in fluent Glaswegian’ (‘Something I’m Not’, in Crawford and Imlah, eds, 2000:505). In a radio play by Benjamin Zephaniah, a young boy with a natural-born English Midlands accent wonders about his father’s black Caribbean preacher-voice holding forth in a manner astonishing to him—one is obsessed with football, the other with the Bible.

In his poem ‘The Shout’, Simon Armitage describes how he and another boy at school were testing ‘the range of the human voice’. How far does a voice carry? was the question they asked themselves:

He called from over the park—I lifted an arm.
Out of bounds,
he yelled from the end of the road...

Neither, however, could have foreseen the end of the test:

He left town. went on to be twenty vears dead

with a gunshot hole
in the roof of his mouth, in Western Australia.

(Armitage 2003:2)

‘You can stop shouting now, I can still hear you’, Armitage writes in the final line of the poem. The real question was not about distance but difference: of age and of experience. Can voices ever overcome the sense of growing apart? The news of suicide carries further than any shout could reach. The voice has stopped, yet in a truer sense it persists.

Deception and Evasion

For some strange reason we often associate creative literature with truth, yet novels and plays are full of characters who fail to tell it, deliberately avoid it, prefer to tell what they wish was the case rather than what actually is. Plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, like those by Chekhov and Ibsen, typify what we might call the literature of evasion. The truth, of course, finally gets spoken, but not until a voice for it can be found. In terms of structure their plays are about discovering that voice, but sometimes the reverse happens, and we hear an especially courageous voice begin to founder and almost silence itself. The voices in Beckett’s plays seem to prefer silence. Another voice known for its bleakness and humour is that of Holden Caulfield in Salinger’s novel *The Catcher In The Rye*:

I thought what I’d do was, I’d pretend I was one of those deaf mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam stupid useless conversation with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they’d have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They’d get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I’d be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody’d think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they’d leave me alone.

(Salinger, 1995:178–9)

Holden’s ideal world is *without* voices—even without his own. Even so, we can hear his voice speaking. His bond with the reader overrides his desire to stop communicating. It goes on despite his urge to escape to a permanent deaf-mute state. The voice we recognise—slangy, immediate, often perverse—speaks to us even when he explains he’d rather not. To neutralise one’s voice, as here, could be a form of cancelling out one’s story. Holden hasn’t committed vocal suicide, even though the story he tells contains moments when he’s seriously tempted.

In the following extract from a novel by Tim O’Brien, *In The Lake of the Woods*, again the setting is the United States, and the voices project an imagined alternative space, an ideal:

As a kind of game they would sometimes make up lists of romantic places to travel.

‘Verona,’ Kathy would say, ‘I’d love to spend a few days in Verona.’ And then for a long while they would talk about Verona, the things they would see and do, trying to make it real in their minds. All around them the fog moved in low and fat off the lake, and their voices would seem to flow away for a time and then return to them from somewhere in the woods beyond the porch...

They would go on talking about the fine old churches of Verona, the museums and outdoor cafes where they would drink strong coffee and eat pastries. They invented happy stories for each other A late-night train-ride to Florence, or maybe north into the mountains, or maybe Venice, and then back to Verona, where there was no defeat and nothing in real life ever ended badly. For both of them it was a wishing game. They envisioned happiness as a physical place on the earth, a secret country, perhaps, or an exotic foreign capital with bizarre customs and a different new language. To live there would require practice and many changes, but they were willing to learn.

(O’Brien, 1995:2–3)

These two characters create a world—they call it ‘Verona’—simply by talking about it. It becomes their own ‘secret country’ an ‘envisioned happiness’. It’s important, of course, that they don’t actually go to the real place, don’t make actual, practical plans. Would they agree with the author’s explanation—that their talk hardly amounts to more than ‘a wishing game’? They probably would. His voice overlaps with theirs. They half-know, half-suspect this Verona is an evasion, an easy escape-route. From what? They probably wouldn’t be willing or ready to say. Voices can be used to show concealment; sometimes this is precisely what speech is about.

This merging of the writer’s voice with the voices of characters in fiction is known as free indirect speech, a valuable device in third person narrative, as shown above. As readers it keeps our attention where it should be, not on the writer’s views and opinions, but on the characters in the story. We listen to *them*, engage with what is happening in their minds *below* the level of conscious, articulate speech. The writer enables us to see, hear and feel their hidden sensations, first intimations (for example) of doubt or of desire, before these become conscious or can be spoken about directly.

Finding a Voice

If creative language frequently makes use of *voiced* forms, does this mean each writer is burdened with the quest to discover his or her unique voice, something expressly *original* among this huge polyphony of voices? The notion of ‘your own voice’, ‘finding a voice’, refers to a writer’s stance towards all the creative features of writing as art, including, of course, voice itself. Your voice will be generated by what you write about, the recurrent places, aspects and qualities of the world you represent, by the images you choose to highlight, the types of story or story-like events that hold for you a special fascination.

Some readers might think certain idioms, slang expressions and regional speech qualities to be a handicap. To others the possession of an accent suggests vitality. Conor MacPherson’s play *The Weir* (see Chapter 6, p. 214) is a play written to celebrate voices

(and stories) from the northwest of Ireland. But how do we choose our words, the right words? I don't like the word 'handicap', for instance, even though I found myself using it in a sentence above. Somehow it doesn't have quite the right sound to it, possibly because it's actually disappearing from spoken use. I really want something less old-fashioned sounding: 'dysfunction'? This is a euphemistic term, now therapist-journalese. Another possibility might be 'encumbrance', another 'liability'.

Choice of words depends more than we think on the currents and undercurrents of speech. Creative language incorporates what people say and how they speak—to themselves, to each other—and builds up a rich supply of spoken rhythms. Inside each single voice are many voices, some angry or calm, moral or perverse, some native, others overheard. One of the skills of the writer is learning how to listen to voices—those all around us and within us, those of characters in a story or play. It is as if the writer's job is to write down what his or her characters are saying, remaining wholly faithful to the way *they* speak. Maybe that is one way, paradoxically, of finding one's own voice—by hearing and recording those of others.

Voices under Pressure

MacPherson's play is set in a pub in a remote part of Ireland. Voices of people in a bar in any region will be influenced by their surroundings. Is there a pool table, wide-screen TV? Background noise, even background silence? Degrees of relaxation and tension influence speech, just as they do other types of behaviour. Talking never happens in the abstract. He said it on that day, in that place, and had these been different...who knows? This question applies to writers, too.

All writing is influenced by the conditions of its production. These conditions might be political or personal, close at hand, far in the background, almost invisible, unknowable, or very much in the foreground and invasive. Coleridge famously records how the arrival of an unwelcome guest—the 'person from Porlock'—interrupted the flow of his inspiration. Can we tell from a piece of writing anything about the immediate, practical conditions and pressures that helped or hindered, or at least influenced, the tone, form and content of it as a text? Might it encourage a certain reading by hinting (through its degree of formality/informality, its voice under pressure) at what might be called its *implied* circumstances? Can we tell if a poem was made spontaneously, *in the moment*, or heavily revised?

For writers and teachers of writing, such issues are quite specific and practical. A good many poets have developed the skill of writing as if in the presence of the scene, place, person they are describing, a style we might call responsive or expressionist. Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought Fox' describes not just a subject but a method, and one he recommends in his book on writing, *Poetry In The Making*. Against this is the measured, careful phrasing found in the work of other poets—the 'midnight oil' of the study Yeats refers to in his poem 'Among School Children'. Poems such as 'The Thought Fox' operate by describing a physical location—snow, shadow, movement—in a way that makes the physical location so real it seems to replace the actual conditions under which the poem was written, conditions we don't actually know about unless we were there with the poet when he was writing. But in another sense we are there with the poet, looking at that landscape, that fox, through the transforming force of imagination. Certain

poems appear to have been written all at once, in one sitting, with few corrections, whether they have or not, while others show a formal care that seems to rule against a sense of such immediacy. When Sylvia Plath in the title poem of her book *Ariel* writes the line ‘The child’s cry/Melts in the wall’, was this a response to the real thing happening in an adjacent room as she was writing the poem? Do her poems carry a trace of being written ‘Between five in the morning and the milkman rattling his bottles’ as she explained in an interview? Was an alertness to sound in the predawn winter of 1963 a conditioning influence on her poems in *Ariel*? Or was she aiming, for the best of reasons, to give us that impression?

The English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt in the sixteenth century wrote under constant threat of imprisonment, possibly even execution, in the court of Henry VIII. Does his verse betray such conditions, or attempt to conceal them? Would a judicious degree of formality guarantee his survival, or should he adopt the disguise of careless spontaneity? In plays and films we expect physical and social conditions to influence the way characters speak. In David Mamet’s play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a real-estate salesman’s loss of confidence leads to abusive, sexist slang, deformed, unfinished sentences. This is a voice *under pressure*:

LEVENE: I tell you why I’m out I’m out, you’re giving me toilet paper, John. I’ve seen those leads. I saw them when I was at Homestead, we pitched those cocksuckers Rio Rancho nine-teen sixty nine they wouldn’t buy. They couldn’t buy a fucking *toaster*. They’re broke John. They’re deadbeats, you can’t judge on that. Even so. Even so. Alright. Fine. Fine. Even so. I go in, FOUR FUCKING LEADS they got their money in a sock. They’re fucking Polacks, John. Four leads. I close two. Two. Fifty per...

WILLIAMSON: ...they kicked out.

LEVENE: They *all* kick out. You run in streaks, pal. *Streaks*. I’m... I’m...don’t look at the board, look at me. Shelly Levene. Anyone Ask them on Western. Ask Getz at Homestead. Go ask Jerry Graff. You know who I am... I NEED A SHOT. I got to get on the fucking board. Ask them. Ask them who ever picked up a check I was flush. Moss, Jerry Graff. Mitch himself... Those guys *lived* on the business I brought in. (Mamet, 1984:7)

In his book on writing plays, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, Alan Ayckbourn notes the importance of punctuation in speech: ‘Sometimes the speeches are broken up (quite grammatically incorrectly) in order to give an indication to the actor of the preferred delivery’ (Ayckbourn, 2002:62). He then quotes a speech from his play *Woman in Mind* as an example, and adds—the speaker is Susan—‘her pattern is breaking up like her personality’.

A huge advantage of bringing the voice and voices to the fore in any piece of writing will be that readers engage with a text more sympathetically; also, they are going to connect with its verbal energy. If a character in a poem or play says something—to themselves or to somebody else, tells a story, reports or records an experience in their own words—there is a sense of human fragility, of excitement, danger, possible misunderstanding and risk. And it could well be that in creative writing this sense of risk, far from being a fault or a weakness, is the very stuff that makes us sit up and take notice.

Orality and Literacy

One final thought about voices. This section's title above repeats that of Walter Ong's book about the differences between words as sounds (orality), and written words. As Ong explains, 'Writing... was a very late development in human history. Homo Sapiens had been on earth perhaps some 50,000 years' (Ong, 1995:83). The visual field of the written word (writing has to be seen, spatially mapped) differs fundamentally from sound sensations. We can only read print as individuals, while we hear collectively as an audience. Voice is produced by, and resonates with, the body, it 'vanishes as soon as it is uttered', while writing 'separates the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist' (Ibid: 31-3). I hope it's clear, even from the few examples I've chosen, that writing *as* speech, writing *about* speech, adds vital qualities to a text, and we might even claim that *creative* writing, developing as it has done from an oral tradition, not only reduces the separation between writing and voice, but thrives on their proximity. If speech 'vanishes', creative writing keeps alive the traces of its vanishing.

WORLD

Whenever writers create credible worlds, each of these imagined spaces holds the attention of readers and audiences by making us share, care about and appreciate the actions and events that happen within its borders. Such borders might be close to the real world, adjacent to it, or far away from it. The distance is less relevant than the convincing representation of this space as authentic, consistent, believable, so that we feel our interest will be rewarded. Cinema audiences watching films whose setting is contemporary, respond to shots of cities, highways, deserts, rivers, streets and home interiors. These spaces connect with spaces they feel they could travel to and from. Fiction writers have to do this through words. The novelist Margaret Atwood remembers being told early on in her career, 'Respect the page—it's all you've got!' All forms of creative writing, including poems, need to persuade readers to keep attending, because the world of their invention has a distinct reality. A basic element of this hold on the reader is the skill of verbal realisation.

Stories can't happen without places made real to us as we read. As the writer John Berger explains, 'When we read a story we inhabit it. The covers of a book are like a roof and four walls' (Berger, 1992:15) But this feature applies just as much to other creative forms, as in this poem by the Canadian poet Gary Geddes:

*'Sandra Lee Scheuer' (Killed at Kent State University on May 4th,
1970, by the Ohio National Guard)*

You might have met her on a Saturday night
cutting precise circles, clockwise, at the Moon-Glo
Roller Rink, or walking with quick step

between the campus and a green two-storey house.

where the room was always tidy, the bed made,
the books in confraternity on the shelves.

She did not throw stones, major in philosophy
or set fire to buildings, though acquaintances say
she hated war; had heard of Cambodia.

In truth she wore a modicum of make-up, a brassiere,
And could, no doubt, more easily have married a guardsman
Than cursed or put a flower in his rifle barrel.

While the armouries burned she studied,
Bent low over notes, speech therapy books, pages
Open at sections on impairment, physiology.

And while they milled and shouted on the commons
she helped a boy named Billy with his lisp, saying
Hiss, Billy, like a snake. That's it, SSSSSSS,

Tongue well up and back behind your teeth.
Now buzz, Billy, like a bee. Feel the air
vibrating in my windpipe as I breathe?

As she walked in sunlight through the parking lot
at noon, feeling the world a passing lovely place,
a young guardsman, who had his sights on her,

Was going down on one knee as if he might propose.
His declaration, unmistakable, articulate,
flowered within her; passed through her neck,

Severed her trachea, taking her breath away.
Now who will burn the midnight oil for Billy,
ensure the perilous freedom of his speech?

And who will see her skating at the Moon Glo
Roller Rink, the eight small wooden wheels
making their countless revolutions on the floor?