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Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
investigates the
urge to write.

My last article (in ETp Issue 64) ended when the fictional Queen of England in Alan Bennett's novel *The Uncommon Reader*, having discovered the joys of reading, decides to take up writing as the next step. Like the Queen, many if not most of us, at one time or another, have felt the itch to write. This is often expressed in soulful sighs, 'I wish I could write...'. Unlike the Queen, we rarely act upon our wish, although, as Dr Johnson bluntly asserts, 'Any man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it'. No one gets to write unless they start to write. It is as easy – and as difficult – as that.

For language teachers, there are few more effective ways of re-activating and extending their grasp of the language, and of restoring their taste for linguistic risk-taking and playfulness, than creative writing (and that goes for non-native speakers as well as for native speakers). It opens the gates to the figurative and lyrical aspects of language. It pushes them to, and over, the edge of their comfortable plateau.

In this article I will be examining five books which address this urge to write creatively. Of course, reading a book about creative writing does not teach us to write. As I have said, to learn to write, we need to write. There is no other way. Yet such

books can help in several important ways. They can inspire us, stimulate our ideas, offer encouragement and support, and validate our belief that we can write. They can point out directions and even sometimes show us the nuts and bolts, the techniques we may need, and offer us practice. In varying degrees, all these books do some of these things.

Writing Down the Bones

Nathalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* is essentially an inspirational book, somewhat in the Beat Generation style, with a goodly dose of self-exposure. It is sometimes overly effusive and distractingly discursive, but it rides on the author's genuine enthusiasm for and long experience of writing creatively. It is a sprawling, almost random, collection of short chapters, most of which could stand alone: a mix of personal anecdote, memoir, reflections on most aspects of writing, some sound advice, and even a few practical ideas for generating writing. I find myself returning to it once or twice a year and always with profit.

Bird by Bird

A more organised, though still inspirational, version of the writing process for fiction is offered by Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird*. The book is in four parts. Part I, *Writing*,

focuses on getting started, character, plot, dialogue and setting. There are some eye-catching metaphors: 'Writing a first draft is ... like watching a Polaroid develop' or, quoting E L Doctorow, '... writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way'. In Part II, she offers more personal advice on the need to develop close observation, to be true to yourself, to trust intuitions, and to still the voice of the negative internal critic (and the uncritical voice of the self-regarding admirer!). Part III offers advice on where to get help: by using index cards for taking notes, using other people's specialist knowledge, writing in groups for mutual support, finding a reliable critical reader for your work, writing a letter when you get stuck, and general advice on dealing with writer's block. In Part IV, she discusses some of our motivations to write, apart from publication.

Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?

In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Kenneth Koch brings us closer to teaching, though in the context of teaching the mother tongue in a New York City public school (from grades 3 to 9). His book is based on the idea that children and adolescents can, and should, be exposed

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to 'real' poems by great poets from all periods, and that they can then use these poems to spark poems of their own. The ten sample lessons he offers are based on poems by Blake, Herrick, Donne, Shakespeare, Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Carlos Williams, Lorca, Ashbery and Rimbaud – not readings for the faint-hearted. He makes it clear in his introduction, however, that we should never surrender to 'difficulty' before it has been experienced. *'In deciding on poems, I wasn't put off by some of the difficulties teachers are often bothered by. Unfamiliar words and difficult syntax, for example, and allusions to unfamiliar things. ... To reject every poem the children would not understand in all its detail would mean eliminating too many good things.'* And later, *'What matters for the present is not that the children admire Blake and his achievement, but that each child be able to find a tyger of his own'*. This refusal to descend to children and his trust that



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they will make their own understandings of the poems seem to have paid off amply in the quality of the examples of children's work provided in the sample lessons. The final section is a stimulating anthology of poems, with suggestions on how they might be used. This is certainly an inspirational book, too, but it primarily offers insights into *teaching* creative writing, and is a great source of original poems.

Sing Me the Creation

Paul Matthews' take on poetry in *Sing Me the Creation* is somewhat different. He is very much part of the anthroposophical movement founded by Rudolph Steiner.

The first chapter, *A Personal Introduction*, may therefore sound some unfamiliar notes to the uninitiated. He makes it clear that this is not simply an exploration of the word, but of the world and the self in the world. He links the four basic sentence types: Command, Exclamation, Question and Statement with the four temperaments: Choleric, Sanguine, Melancholic and Phlegmatic, and the four elements: Earth, Water, Air and Fire, and with three characteristics of language: Image, Sound and Movement (rhythm). This may all sound a bit esoteric, but the ideas for developing writing are in fact highly practical and imaginatively stimulating. He groups them, all 307 of them, in five chapters: one each for *The Command*, *The Exclamation*, *The Question* and *The Statement*, plus one called *The Hearth*, which explores stories. The book is a fantastic quarry of original ideas for writing (mainly poetry), a cornucopia of source material for anyone wishing to explore their own writing or to incorporate it into their teaching. But these are not pre-cooked formulae – they require individual effort for their full realisation.

The Ode Less Travelled

Stephen Fry is better known to most people as a writer, actor and broadcaster, so it comes as something of a surprise to learn that he is totally enthused by poetry. The pun in the title of his book, *The Ode Less Travelled*, gives us a clue to the witty treatment of the subject to come, but it does not prepare us for the passion of it. He makes a number of points in his

foreword: everyone is capable of writing poetry, there is a need to learn how to do it better (*'talent is inborn but technique is learned'*), poetry is language, not a special kind of language but a special way of deploying it, and writing poetry makes us better appreciate the poems of others.

There are three main chapters – on metre, rhyme and form, with a coda about poetic diction and the state of poetry today. The style is light-hearted and delightfully disrespectful (he refers graphically to some poetry as 'arse drizzle'...) but the wit conceals an encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject. I know of no other book which makes metre so fascinating. He addresses his readers directly throughout, in a tone of gentle banter, and expects them to complete the exercises which

conclude each chapter (something I found well worth working through). He illustrates points with his own tailor-made verse, and with subtly-chosen work from a wide range of poets. This is an irresistible book – the best I have come across in years. Coincidentally, but highly relevant to the message of this series of articles, I came upon it in a second-hand bookshop in distant Vientiane, Laos. What better example of the serendipity of the worldwide confederacy of readers?



There are, of course, many other books on creative writing, and I have included a few of them in the *further reading* references below. But we should not forget the obvious truth that we don't learn to write from books about writing. We learn to write by doing it. Happy writing! 

Books reviewed

Fry, S *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* Arrow Books 2005

Goldberg, N *Writing Down the Bones* Shambhala 1986

Koch, K *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Vintage Books 1990

Lamott, A *Bird by Bird* Pantheon Books/Random House 1994

Matthews, P *Sing Me the Creation* Hawthorn Press 1994

Further reading

Angwin, R *Writing the Bright Moment: Inspiration and Guidance for Writers* Fire in the Head 2005

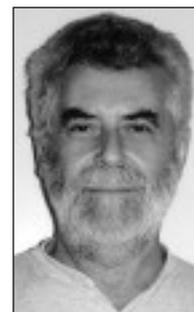
Bell, J and Magrs, P (Eds) *The Creative Writing Coursebook* Macmillan 2001

Drury, J *Creating Poetry* Writer's Digest Books 1991

Clark, T (Ed) *The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing* Writer's Digest Books 1998

Novakovich, J *Fiction Writer's Workshop* Story Press 1995

Whitworth, J *Writing Poetry A and C* Black 2001



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers.

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