

## **'CREATIVE WRITING' – A CAUTION**

**By Michael Ventura**

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Or maybe the headline should be styled like a chapter title in an 18th century novel, to wit: "In Which a Working Writer, Who Sometimes Teaches High School English, Cautions His Students as to the Lower Practices of Higher Education Concerning Creative Writing and Literature."

No class can cultivate what a writer most needs, the gift I call the "talent of the room." Writing is something you do alone in a room. If you don't have a talent for being in that room, your other talents are useless. Before any issues of style, content, or form can be addressed, the fundamental question is: How long can you stay in that room, for how many hours, for how many years? That's the writing part of a writer's life. Nothing romantic about it. It's the one thing about writing that's straight up-and-down. No matter your felicity with words, no matter how good a tale you have to tell, if you can't spend a long time alone in a room, you can't be a writer. Classroom learning happens in a classroom, a room filled with other people, and no classroom can teach solitude. Which is why most writing courses, by their very nature, ignore the fundamental thing a writer needs: the ability to cultivate the subtleties of solitude.

Good teachers can foster your strengths and alert you to your weaknesses. Bad teachers can swell your head or make you feel destructively insecure. Both good and bad can challenge you – the good challenge you to meet them on higher ground; the bad challenge you to learn in spite of them and to learn to be immune to their damage. But no one can teach you how you, in particular, are to write. You learn that only by writing. When you sit down to write, you discover the vast distance between experience and language. Then, painfully, by fits and starts, with many failures, you learn how to build your own bridges between experience and language until, for you, the two become one and the same: Your experience creates your language, and your language embodies your experience. When this is achieved, it's called having a style.

Some writers begin with a distinctive sound, a prose that's their own from the start. Then they must discover the uses of that prose, which they can do only by applying it to the expression of their experiences, to see what their styles can and cannot express. Other writers must work long and hard simply to be clear and write sentences that flow. But, in either case, the development of your vision and hearing is as important as the development of your language. Your writing will only be as good as your seeing and listening.

A good teacher can make you aware of what you must learn on your own, and a very good teacher can ignite elements in you of which you were previously unaware. A bad teacher will give you rules and regulations for what writing is and is not, and a very bad teacher will only approve writing that's like his or her own or like his or her favorite writers. The techniques of prose and poetry can be taught by any competent teacher, but only through reading many and varied writers can you learn the range of what words can do and how words behave.

Be careful of "workshop" classes in which you present your writing for the criticism of classmates and the teacher. Your classmates don't know any more than you;

their comments will be mere opinions, backed by scant knowledge and experience – but they have the power to hurt you. You want your writing to be approved, of course; when it's not approved, that's painful. But if you shape your writing to the opinions of the inexperienced and unknowledgeable, you'll set yourself back years. People of lesser character know only how to criticize, and people of even lesser character enjoy making others feel ignorant and anxious. Writing workshops can bring out the worst in such people. A good workshop teacher is there to support whomever is presenting their work, guiding the discussion constructively. An inept workshop teacher lets the discussion go any which way and doesn't notice who's bleeding and at what cost. A bad workshop teacher joins in the fray, flaunting his or her superiority.

With any writing teacher of any kind, hunt out what they've written. If their work doesn't speak to you, you needn't take too seriously what they say about your stuff. If they haven't published a novel, poems, stories, or essays or if their screenplays haven't been produced – then they are students, too, students still. Which doesn't mean they don't know what they're talking about; it just means they haven't yet gone the distance, and you need to be aware of that.

In the arts, a degree means nothing. Completed work means everything. When I taught a graduate-student seminar, I regretted that the degree they worked for is called "master." I told them, "When you complete this degree, you're in no way a master. This degree only certifies that, according to the standards of this institution, you're ready to begin."

Of course, anyone can begin at any time. Just sit down and start. It's never too early or too late. Sit down every day, and don't stand up (except to pace) until you've got 500 words – roughly two double-spaced pages. In seven or eight months, you'll have more pages than you'll know what to do with. A first draft, say, of a novel or memoir or book-length essay. Then you work with that. At which point you've begun. (Don't look for shortcuts. If you're to be a writer, there aren't any.)

As to curriculum, that's thorny. In American literature, it's especially thorny. I know plenty of people with bachelor's and master's degrees, even the odd doctorate, who seem never to have been assigned anything in college written prior to 1965. Mention Willa Cather, Hart Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, and many another, and these "educated" folks draw a blank. I ask what institution of higher learning they attended. They tell me. I say, "Demand a refund." As I told my boy, when he was still a boy, "I don't care if you go to college as long as you read one or two good books a month – books about anything, as long as they're good and they speak to you. Do that, and by the time you're 30, you'll be way ahead of most who attended college." College or not, if you don't read one or two good books a month, then by the time you're 30, your conversation will become, to put it kindly, confined.

One of my more gifted high school students, when she went to college, sniffed about not having to learn the works of "dead white men." The phrase refers to writers whom, by their deaths and color, apparently, her teachers deemed not worth her time. If you encounter this attitude (doctrine?), you might ask that teacher if women and people of color will be equally worthless when they die. You need ask but one question: Does this writer speak to me? If yes, inhale the work. If not, find another who speaks to you. There's no other consideration.

In your college studies you may run into something called literary theory, or it may try to run over you. Under its umbrella is formalism, structuralism, historicism, deconstructionism, hermeneutics, semiotics, etc., etc., often explained in densely written

volumes with big clanking words wedged into sentences that, if diagrammed, would look like a train wreck as seen from the air. Most of these theorists can't write, at least not well, so why would you believe what they say about writing? Keep in mind, in such studies, this sentence by Willa Cather: "Give people a new word, and they think they have a new fact." These theories were summed up gracefully in a missive to me from the writer Rocco Lo Bosco: "But paradox, incompleteness, difference, and illusion run through language like a vascular system." Which would have been no news to Shakespeare. Forty-odd years ago, my 17-year-old girlfriend Antonia summed up literary theory (of which we'd not yet heard) when she said, "I have learned that no one can write fast enough to write a true sentence." And yet sentences can bear truths and put them in our reach.

What else? Oh yes, the word "postmodern" will pop up often, presented as something new. Well, find me two postmodern novels that employ narrative strategies not found in Rabelais, Cervantes, and Melville – not to mention Joyce, Proust, and Durrell – and I'll buy you an ice-cream cone, double-scoop. Meanwhile ... write, read, discover. Find your voice. Use it.

On the first day of any class I teach, I hand out a saying of the Buddha. It is a maxim that I pray my graduates will tape to their dorm-room mirrors throughout their college years: "Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and common sense."

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