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Why Academic Authorship can be an Appropriate Indicator of a Potential Novelist: A Critical Essay on an Aspect of the Writer’s Craft

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Why academic authorship can be an appropriate indicator of a potential novelist

A critical essay on an aspect of the writer’s craft

Lelia Green

ABSTRACT This paper addresses aspects of critical writing and compares these with the requirements of creative writing. Commenting upon how the creative informs the critical, and vice versa, the paper examines how critical writing in cultural studies contexts necessarily draws on an amalgam of the theory and practice of everyday life. It argues that a journal article or academic paper worth reading in a critical forum requires novel insights and clear expression to make it interesting.

Introduction

This paper sets out to argue that successful publication as an academic author might be indicative of potential as a novel writer. Novel writing is traditionally seen as ‘creative’ and thus differentiated from the ‘critical’ work of academia. As a consequence of this differentiation, the conventionally acceptable indicators of novel-writing potential are other pieces of published ‘creative’ writing: novels, poetry, short stories, scripts. While published writing in these fields is indeed indicative of the successful author’s potential to undertake a more extended engagement with creative writing in their chosen genre, is prior creative publication a necessary—as well as sufficient—marker of

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this capacity? Might other publication, such as scholarly work in the
field of cultural studies, also indicate this potential?

I argue that the capacity of an author to write for one purpose indicates
a potential ability to write for other purposes; specifically, a strong track
record in academic writing and publishing should be accepted in some
circumstances, such as candidacy for a higher degree by research in
creative writing, as equating to established potential in creative writing.
However, evidence of potential must also be combined with evidence
of applied motivation. While an established capacity to write creatively
cannot be taken as indicating motivation, motivation can be inferred
from evidence of a commitment to writing creative works. Given that
candidates for a higher degree by research in creative writing must also
demonstrate academic prowess and tenacity, indicators additional to a
list of published works also become relevant.

This paper examines the transferability of writing as a skill, the nature
of academic writing in the humanities and the arts compared with
creative writing, and the role of ‘the novel insight’—the ability to see
things (and say things) differently—in each of these contexts.

Is writing a transferable skill?
The discussion here addresses the transferability of the skill of writing
across two dimensions. First, it looks at the individual’s ability to
transfer writing practices and competencies from one domain
(advertising, journalism, academia) to another (fiction, literary works).
Second, it considers the growth of creative-writing courses as evidence
for presuming that writing can be taught, and that the skill of writing
can be nurtured and developed in an apprentice through a process of
education, coaching, and revision by an acknowledged practitioner.

Writers have often demonstrated their ability to write for different
purposes. Robert Harris was a television journalist before writing
*Fatherland* (1992); Ernest Hemingway was a print journalist before
turning to fiction such as *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Shirley Conran
specialised in writing domestic hints and tips prior to penning the
‘best-selling guide to household management for today’s woman:
*Superwoman*’ (Conran, 1977). She then hit the fiction lists with
Courtenay’s thirty-year career as an advertising executive pre-dated
his success with *The Power of One* (1989), while Fay Weldon is credited
with dreaming up the slogan ‘Go to work on an egg’ before making
her own foray into fiction with such works as *Life and Loves of a She-devil* (1983). Erin Pizzey had a gift for public relations and community campaigns. She was the first person to raise awareness of domestic violence as part of second-wave feminism, and is credited with founding the UK's women's-refuge movement. Pizzey's life is not solely a matter of serious campaigning, however. She has a story-telling alter ego, producing books such as *The Shadow of the Castle* (1984) and *The Snow Leopard of Shanghai* (1989).

Academic life is not necessarily a counter-indicator of literary potential. J. R. R. Tolkien was an academic author before he wrote *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), as was C. S. Lewis before combining this with religious writing and subsequently creating *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Iris Murdoch was passionate about her teaching career as well as her book authorship. While some academics have sought to branch out into fiction writing, some universities have also sought to make fiction writers into academics. Over the years, having a renowned author on the staff has been used as a drawcard for students wanting to study the arts. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that a proportion of students signing up for humanities courses—in literature and history, for example—have done so with the hope of developing their writing skills, while a small number might also see themselves as potential authors.

In terms of reverse transferability, a range of successful novelists have developed secondary careers as teachers of writing techniques. From mainly grammar-focused 'how to' books, such as John Whale's (1984) *Put It in Writing*, through to Kate Grenville's (1990) *The Writing Book* and Stephen King's (2000) *On Writing*, well-known journalists and famous authors have celebrated their craft and sought to develop public understanding of their art through passing on their techniques as authors turned instructors. In a similar (and complementary) vein, an increasing number of writers given academic positions have been required to produce learned works as well as fiction. Given that the academy writes the assumption of skill transferability into many scholarly appointments when hiring authors and expecting them to develop 'a research profile', it is reasonable to hope that universities should also accept the converse: that those who are competent academic writers can also become fiction writers.

The burgeoning number of creative-writing, script- and screenwriting, and professional-writing courses (not to mention the global interest in developing literacy and numeracy skills) appears to indicate an

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increasing popularity of research into, and study of, the applied art of writing. These courses also demonstrate an academic confidence that writing is a skill that can be transferred by practitioner to novice through dint of practice and critique: essentially, the courses establish that there is a critical element to the business of creativity. Whereas most academic arts courses develop the capacity to write through theoretical essays (and science courses require lab reports and exposition, and business courses require students to produce marketing plans and proposals), the creative-writing course is especially designed to nurture and stimulate fiction, poetry, and playwriting using critical tools appropriate to the university (and creative) context.

To what extent, however, is greater success in the creative arena to be deduced from more modest success in that arena? Is evidence of, say, 5,000 words of published fiction necessarily better than, say, 250,000 words of academic writing plus a range of indicators of commitment to developing a track record as a fiction writer? While it may be appropriate that prospective candidates for creative-writing courses should demonstrate the capacity to produce publishable writing, it might be that the published work could be 'critical', rather than 'creative'. A capacity to perform against creative-writing yardsticks may possibly be deduced from other indicators, such as success in a different application of writing, together with a significant commitment to the field of creative writing.

What is non-creative writing?
David Lodge, publishing 'a critical book and a novel more or less in alternation' (1988, p. 77) over a period of twenty years or so, proposes a definition of what constitutes the difference between creative and critical writing:

*Creative or imaginative writing is usually valued above critical writing, and rightly so. It is more difficult to excel in, it is riskier, it is more unpredictable. To write a novel is to fill a hole that nobody, including oneself, was aware of until the book came into existence. First there was nothing there; then, a year or two (or three) later, there is something—a book, a whole little world of imagined people and their interlocking fortunes.* (1988, p. 77)

Academic papers and scholarly books, however—books such as my *Technoculture* (Green, 2002)—also fill a hole that can only be guessed at until they are written. A painstakingly scientific PhD thesis on the lifecycle of the cockroach would similarly come into existence over a risky and unpredictable period of years. Lodge admits as much when he
goes on to say: ‘One must be prepared to wait; to ponder, and re-read, and re-write what one has written, until one sees the way ahead that satisfies one’s own criteria of coherence, complexity, authenticity ... Even writing the shortest book review entails the same process of risk, uncertainty, self-testing’ (1988, pp. 77-78). Apart from identifying that greater social value is typically placed upon creative output, Lodge’s distinction between the processes of creative and critical writing is far from decisive.

This perception of an overlap between the fields is further strengthened when comparing the contents of ‘how to’ books that construct writing as a business. While it is difficult to specify exactly how much textbook-writing and novel-writing have in common (compared with how much they differ), there are significant areas of overlap, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of contents of two ‘how to’ books addressing the writing process

<table>
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<tr>
<td>By way of introduction</td>
<td>Foreword by Philip Blackwell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why write a novel</td>
<td>Authorship Approaching and working with publishers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deciding which novel to write</td>
<td>Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read ... study ... analyse</td>
<td>Developing plot ideas</td>
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<td>Developing characters</td>
<td>Developing characters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outlining</td>
<td>Structuring your material</td>
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<td>Using what you know ... and what you don’t know</td>
<td>Snags, dead ends and false trails</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting started</td>
<td>Matters of style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting it written</td>
<td>Readability Language and style The ‘extra bits’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting and redrafting</td>
<td>Length Keeping your book in print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks in the electronic age</td>
<td>Rewriting</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Getting published</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appendix: A sample book proposal</td>
<td>Doing it again</td>
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Why academic authorship can be an appropriate indicator
It would certainly be hard to argue from the information laid out here that critical writing has nothing in common with creative writing, or that successful academic authorship is no indication of potential to write a novel. (It has already been established that the converse can be true, that successful novel-writing can sometimes lead to publishing a textbook on how to write a novel.)

Writing, from Lodge's description and from my own experience, is an organic process. It starts with a sense of a communication waiting to happen, an idea in the early stages of germination and a hazy cognition of a possible outcome. The first words on the page or screen mark the commencement of a journey towards an end point. Sometimes, the task is clearly defined by a word limit, a genre, or a submission date. At other times, it may be less easy for the author to discern the moment when a writing task has been completed. The process of authorship combines a gestalt sense of awareness of the potential of the finished work with a matching sense of that work's (necessarily partial) realisation. A point is reached at which the text constitutes a 'completed first draft'. This watershed allows the engagement of critical reflection to review and refine the text as part of the editing and polishing process.

All writing endeavours—creative and critical—involves an awareness of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Not only is Lodge's creation of 'something—a book, a whole little world' (1988, p. 77) not restricted solely to the creative-writing endeavour, it may be that it is a social trait observable in primate species other than humans. Early studies of non-human primates indicated that 'they work with extraordinary concentration, to the extent of having tantrums if anyone tries to stop them before they are finished. They also seem to know when they are finished, ripping off a page to start a clean sheet' (Jolly, 1972, p. 287). Jolly uses this example to argue that artistic expression is a higher primate impulse, not solely a human one. (But what to make of chimpanzee Viki's category-sorting? Viki was hand-raised by a family called Hayes. 'She sorted photographs of animals vs. people, classifying her father in his cage as an animal, and herself (unclad, but in the Hayes's living room) unhesitatingly as a person' (Jolly, 1972, p. 314, citing Hayes & Nissen, 1971).

Writing is necessarily constrained by context and purpose. From shopping list to Christmas card, from academic essay to novel, there is a creative rhythm that accompanies the requirement to produce.
Germane to this experience is the awareness of fitness for purpose: a novel makes a poor shopping list, even if a shopping list could spark the idea for a novel. Genre flags the kind of purpose to be addressed by the writing to hand. However, facility at writing for one purpose may well serve to indicate the author's fitness to write for a different purpose. In particular, such tangibles as spelling, punctuation, and expressive power are all relevant to prose communication—whether the final result is for critical or creative ends.

The notion of creative writing itself is a problematic one, not solely in terms of process and approach, but also in product. Although creative writing is generally understood to mean fictional or literary writing, it can also include biography, which could equally be a critical work. Biographies can be critical but can also be constructed as a creative expression of an interaction between the author and their subject matter. One biographer of Marx, for example, might concentrate on the development of his economic philosophies; another might critique his domestic life and family circumstances, raising questions as to Marx's commitment to equality in his own home. Neither is wrong, necessarily (although some facts, dates, and inferences may be). Each book, very differently, explores one aspect of the complexity inherent in any human life. The act of creating the biography of Marx becomes a concomitant communication of the interests and passions of the writer—both a critical and creative endeavour.

There is no necessary or proscribed way in which an academic engaged in critical work must interrogate an idea or advance a theoretical position. The topics an academic chooses to raise and discuss are as revealing of their interests and enthusiasms as the setting of a novel or the plot of a screenplay is about the author of that creative work. Nor is it the case that the creativity in creative writing is about 'making things up'. 'Make sure you do your homework', extols romance writer Valerie Parv (1993): 'My research extends to reading dozens of books, interviewing people in particular jobs, and wherever possible, visiting the settings of my books' (pp. 101–102). This is a typically 'critical' approach.

Nigel Watts's (2003) comment is equally uncompromising: 'Just as you will be able to fully know your characters only when you have fully imagined them', he says, 'so too must you know the place well enough to answer any question about it' (pp. 88–89). An academic would say the same to a class of students about to start on a major

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assignment: ‘Do the readings, research the ideas, make sure that you know what you want to say, why you want to say it, and how it answers the questions posed’. Finally, the academic might add: ‘And make it interesting. Make me want to read it’.

For there is no such thing as non-creative writing worth reading. Whether in the critical or creative realm, the marketplace of ideas is a busy one. For an idea to stand out, it has to be imaginatively expressed and clearly communicated. The converse of creativity is a predictable conformity to the norm—there are very few academic careers built on such a foundation. Even academic referees have a boredom threshold. While a critical essay of 3,000–5,000 words should cite references and reflect upon the ideas of other authorities and sources in addition to the writer’s, it still requires creativity if it is to have impact—especially if it is to pass the test of peer review. Such a piece of writing displays a range of competencies quite different from those embodied in a poem or a novel, in addition to some that are constant across the genres. Yet creativity in and of itself is inherent in all memorable writing, no matter what form the output takes.

**Writing creatively in cultural studies**

Having suggested that there are reasons to believe that the skill of writing a published textbook is indicative of the capacity to write a publishable novel, not all textbook subjects are created equal in this regard: some academic disciplines are more formative of novel-writing potential than others. The cultural studies theorist and the novelist, for example, must both take the experiences of everyday life as their raw material.

The ‘father of cultural studies’, Raymond Williams (1958/1966), made an astute observation in critiquing the early studies of mass communication and popular culture. He commented that ‘there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses’ (p. 289). British scholar Tony Bennett (1982) later argued that, prior to the development of cultural studies, ‘Popular culture was approached from a distance and gingerly, held out at arm’s length by outsiders who clearly lacked any fondness for or participation in the forms they were studying. It was always the culture of “other people” that was at issue’ (p. 6). Contemporary theorists of popular culture tend to be vitally interested in social pleasures and meanings, as expressed in the everyday.
Janice Radway, whose 1984 study of romance-fiction readers broke new ground in cultural studies and feminist theory, explains some of the heat in this debate by differentiating between a ‘folk culture’ (or folklore) and a ‘mass culture’. She identifies as problematic the commercial imperatives that underlie the production of mass culture, and sees such products as coming into existence to make a profit. Radway initially constructed ‘profit-making’ as exploitation, but found her views challenged by the women she was investigating. Her ethnographic study of romance readers established other criteria by which romance-reading could be judged as a subversive and/or resistant activity (in terms of pleasure, desire, and time away from the demands of the family). ‘It seems clear that we must rethink our notion that all mass culture consumption perpetuates isolation and anomie and thus hinders the creation of potentially transformative contacts between people with similar interests’ (Radway, 1984, p. 23).

Cultural studies is concerned with, among other things, analysing the creation and circulation of popular culture—and popular culture is of critical importance to understanding the social context of people. The motivation of much popular culture may be to sell the commercial audience to advertisers—but this aim does not compromise the inherent popularity of the content, and the pleasure that individuals derive from consuming and recirculating cultural products. Active participation in popular culture is voluntary, but it is impossible to be social and not to engage with elements of popular culture. People who adopt an unusual approach to the popular (such as Amish communities in the United States—see, e.g., Umble, 1992) continually restate that position by eschewing such cultural commonplaces as make-up, factory-produced clothes, television, and cars. The popular-culture practices circulated among the Amish (barn-raising, music-making, hand-sewing) are deliberate markers of difference, separating them from most other elements of US society. These practices are still cultural, however, and within the Amish community they circulate as popular culture.

Exemplary academic practice in cultural studies requires academics to identify creative ways to bring novel insights into awareness. Consider Streeter’s (1996) review of John Hartley’s The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media:

> The writing is spry and witty, and he [Hartley] has a penchant for clever and arresting constructs. One of the best of these is his description of the growth of the ‘smiling professions’ in the twentieth century, that is, ‘jobs where work, preparation, skill
and talent are all necessary but hidden, where performance is measured by consumer satisfaction ... where knowledge is niceness and education is entertainment'. While the public relations official is probably the archetype of this trend, Hartley wittily uses synchronized swimming—a strenuous, highly skilled activity performed with a contrived smile—to illustrate the internal character, artfulness, and improbability of this new form of professionalism. Similar constructs—a discussion of the role of picnics in Western culture, for example, and a critique of the 'sexualization of the body politic'—occur throughout. This search for insight in the comically ironic and the absurd is central to Hartley's mode of inquiry.

In the same way that cultural studies requires academics in the area to draw upon experiences and observations of everyday life in their teaching, writing, and research, so expectations of scholarly publication in this discipline often differ from those pertaining to other disciplines. For example, M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture (2004) has this to say in its submissions advice: 'M/C Journal is a crossover journal between the popular and the academic, so your submission should reflect that aim stylistically. You should present your thoughts in a way that is open to readers not involved in your field'. The editors suggest that would-be authors read published articles to develop a sense of the crossover popular/academic M/C style. Nonetheless, writing submitted to M/C should still be 'academic' in form and structure: 'Submissions should be thoroughly researched and referenced, with a list of works cited. References and citations must be in MLA style. In particular, do not use footnotes, use endnotes kept to a bare minimum (preferably none).’

The content of some M/C articles, however, might be equally at home in a novel—maybe in the form of a character's thoughts or ideas—as on a scholarly website.

Conclusion
I have argued in this paper that publication as an academic author can be constructed as indicating potential as a novel-writer. Critical work needs to be creative to be published, and creative work has a critical edge—both in the pedagogy of creative writing and in the process of editing and revision. While the novel is traditionally seen as creative and thus differentiated from academic output, the two forms have much in common. Although it is conventional to seek evidence of novel-writing potential in pieces of published 'creative' writing—poetry, short stories, scripts—I suggest that a capacity for writing
fiction can also be indicated in other published work. Once potential has been established, the author must demonstrate a commitment to writing, and this may be inferred from a range of other evidence.

Notes
1. 'The fundamental “formula” of Gestalt theory might be expressed in this way. There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole’ (Wertheimer, 1925/1938).

References

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