

Creative Writing: The Launceston School for Seniors Genesis, Chronicles and Revelation

Creative Writing was offered in the Launceston School for Seniors as one of the first subjects when the School commenced, term 2, 1981. Muggins put himself forward as the tutor.

I was not totally unqualified for the job as I had taught English in a variety of Tasmanian High Schools over a period of seven to eight years and had taken a special interest in the subject of creativity, both during that time, and later while lecturing in psychology at Caulfield Institute in Melbourne. In 1972 I had written a rather lengthy (and very scholarly!) document on *Techniques for the Generation of Creative Thinking*. This had incorporated suggestions for promoting creative writing, many of which I had previously trialled.

Nevertheless, I had written very little myself of a creative nature and had published nothing. I was soon to discover that the world of informal adult education, particularly that world aimed at the older adult, was immensely challenging and exciting. Some members of the early classes had written nothing more complex than a shopping list. Others had completed, or were working on, novels. Some members had very limited formal education backgrounds. Others bristled with degrees. Some members were hesitant to speak. Others (with whom I identified) had to be restrained from talking for the whole session. Some members were in the class because there was nothing else that interested them on Thursday. Others had specific goals.

I recall opening the first session by chatting about my own interest (and lack of experience) in the area and then asking people to comment on what they had done or hoped to achieve. After that, an essential component of each session was asking people to read something they had written. It was my job, and that of other members, to make positive comments about what we heard. It was very informal. Very low-key. Very therapeutic. I would toss in suggestions that people might like to 'adopt or adapt' and occasionally propose a format, subject or theme that we could all follow.

It was on one of these occasions, when I suggested that we all write about a particular word, that someone in the group suggested that the word be 'comfort'. The idea didn't appeal to me at all, but the suggestion was carried on the voices. I still have the paltry effort that I produced the following week. Edward, however, was inspired by the word comfort and wrote his first poem on the subject. He was encouraged to write another one. Then another. And, after a number of weeks, he had completed his first book of poetry and was able to present it to his mother on her one hundredth birthday. That was the first of several books of poetry and other creative writings. In the nursing home he finally ended up in, he was a regular contributor to the home's newsletter.

Lexie would write stories about her father, her home life at Western Creek, her life as a mother, shop assistant and member of the community. I suggested ways in which these stories could be compiled and, as a result, we were able to launch Lexie's book, *Come Out of the Creek*, in a special event at our York St centre. (Lexie went on to become a serious student of creative writing and caught the attention of Bryce Courtenay at one of his workshops. Bryce became a mentor for Lexie and, among other acts of encouragement, provided her with an electronic typewriter.)

John was a member of the group at a very early stage. He was writing in a language that was not his native tongue. Partly for that reason, and partly because it was an aspect of his character, he would write in very crisp, stark, prose. John was the group's champion in putting a narrative into a hundred words. He had the knack of hitting the reader between the eyes by stripping his narratives clean of adjectives, adverbs and other superfluous adornments. Many of his stories dealt with harrowing incidents from the Second World War. He compiled several of these as a book that was published by Regal Press. It was called, *My Father's Voice*.

Sandy would present discursive essays that were brilliant examples of creative obfuscation. On one occasion, when the class was meeting in what was then the sewing room, he read one such essay to the group and it led to a profound silence. None of us, myself included, could think of anything constructive to say. None of us, myself included, had a clue what he had been writing about. There was a member of the class sitting next to Sandy who was the School's informal therapist. She would bring teddy bears to our Sunday morning gatherings at Margot's home in Elphin Rd and adorn the trees with them. When Sandy had finished reading, and after a heavily pregnant pause, she put her arms round him and said, 'That was lovely, Sandy.' He melted. Sandy edited one of our magazines.

Sid was passionate. Everything he wrote, and everything he did, exuded wit, energy and feeling. Apart from writing stories about his home life in Wales (including a story about swallowing a toy and how the wise women of the village 'engineered' its excretion), Sid was able to bring the group to life. Sid, with thousands of others, had once imbibed strong drink with Dylan Thomas. He, also, ended up as one of our magazine editors.

Janice was very timid. She would read her weekly contributions in almost a whisper, crouching in her seat. Her narratives were very flat. Not to put too fine a word on it, they were boring. Occasionally, however, Janice would stop, look around furtively, usually over her right shoulder, and bring her narrative to life with 'snippets' and 'asides'. I pointed this out to Janice, on one occasion, and asked her if she would like to write down her 'asides', rather than the main article, and read these to us the following week. It worked like a charm. And Janice's enthusiasm for creative writing increased dramatically. (As did our enthusiasm for listening to her stories.) I discovered later, that Janice had been to a school where the headmistress, who had been her English teacher, used to stand behind her, slightly to the right, correcting any English usage errors that Janice made while writing her compositions. It had taken some fifty years to 'get the monkey off her back'.

Jack turned up half-way through the term, in about year eight of the School's existence. By then there had been numerous creative writing groups, sometimes two or three per week, and several people had assisted in charring sessions. In the coffee break, the then coordinator of the School, June King, informed me that the new member – that is, Jack – had published something like seventy books, fifty of these in his retirement. Jack was initially somewhat dismissive of the 'rambling reminiscences' of many creative writing members and suggested that he might find it difficult to maintain an interest in coming. However, he 'hung in there' and began exploring aspects of his own life that were outside his normal academic focus. (Jack had written on a huge variety of themes – eye research, history, finance, retirement, character assessment, etc.) Jack had grown up in very depressed circumstances in a South London suburb. His autobiographical narrative was to be called, *Where No Love Ruled*. He was later to write a novel based on Tasmanian history that was called *Demon's Land*. We launched the novel (as we had for Lexie) in a ceremony at York St. With Jack now firing on

all cylinders, and creative writing members comfortable with his style and presence, I had the good sense to withdraw quietly and hand the class over to him.

Rest in peace, creative writers. Your stories and faces still haunt me. As I comb through thousands of scribbled notes and jottings of my own, may your examples of dedication and genius help me give birth. That would be a revelation.

Muggins

2017