

## **Creative Writing Theory Beyond Practice**

**Freshening the mind: an account of teaching a three-week creative writing course in Chennai, India, which is also an account of some thoughts on how practice implies theory and vice versa.**

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Ten girls await me on the first day. Tomorrow there will be sixteen and the next day twelve and every day thereafter for three weeks: twelve girls, all twelve, the same twelve. Young women, that is, in their late teens, college students.

And three older women.

The girls and the ma'ams, is how we begin to refer to our group. It is not the custom here for students to call teachers by their first name, so I and the other women, who are college teachers and writers, are called Inez ma'm, Mary ma'm, Meenakshi ma'am, Sri Devi ma'am.

But we're all students here, I say, writing requires not the expert's mind with its certainty, but beginner's mind which is open to all possibilities. Respect, equality, sisterhood: these are the principles for a writing group.

So I have begun. Teaching is like writing: having done it before is in most ways no kind of help because you haven't done this bit of writing, this bit of teaching in these particular circumstances with the particular requirements your work is to discover.

But experience is some help. I base what I do in the next three weeks on the many writing courses I have taught before, but as always I alter the course according to how much time we have, and in response to my sense of the group and the particular circumstances.

We are in a classroom in the grounds of Queen Mary's College, Chennai, the city formerly known as Madras. The room is part of a single story bungalow, simply furnished with old-fashioned school desks in rows facing a platform and a large chalk-board. A glance would confirm that this is not one of the better-off colleges with private funds and students from the privileged classes. But the impression of shabby and even decrepit rooms and buildings is offset by the spacious grounds surrounding us, dotted with neem and pipal trees, pleasant to the casual foreign visitor, though they have been spoiled by the rains. The driveways are potholed tracks and large ponds of water sit where normally there are stretches of land.

Poor Chennai had been lashed with record-breaking amounts of rain for the past two months already. It will rain nearly all the time I am there. Floods, contaminated water, blackouts, unpassable roads busted up or like rivers, many people displaced and 46 killed in a stampede over flood relief aid .... these are part of the context. The larger and smaller context (national to domestic) in which this group writes is notably different from that of the essentially privileged Western world I mostly inhabit as writer and teacher. What difference that makes to what can be said or understood about writing is an open question.

This is a government college, not a private one, and 80% of the students are on scholarships, beneficiaries of the stringent caste-based quota systems in place in educational institutions and places of employment – what we might call affirmative action programs. The programs are controversial, and I hear a great deal in my travels about their iniquities, the support they give to the incompetent and undeserving, the corrupt practices and the denial of merit that they involve. While these programs reportedly bring the over-all standard of student down, however, they also attract the best students. Among them are the girls who voluntarily attend this course, outside of normal college hours. They are the first in their caste or community to get an education.

Before I say very much I want the furniture re-arranged: my desk off the platform, desks brought close to me in the nearest to a circle I can persuade, a u-shape of desks.

Every day there's a clean cloth and a fresh flower on my desk. You wouldn't get that in Australia.

## Ω

Let's begin by talking about why we want to write.

We want to write because we love reading, it always begins that way. Or, just something we always wanted to do. To tell stories, to express or discover our selves and so on.

When you read something and you know it's *good*, what does that mean? What makes it good?

Their faces are full of considering this and arriving at answers but again I have to coax replies out of them, go round the room.

It's interesting, you learn something, it's a good story, you like the characters – I don't remember all they say. The ma'ams give more sophisticated replies: innovative use of language, insights into people and society.

It gives a feeling of freshness in your mind, says one girl.

Ah! I will use this phrase over and over: writing that gives a feeling of freshness in the mind. The phrase itself, its slight oddity, works that way for me, though I don't say that.

So these are the things we value in what we read. So that's what we want to achieve in our own writing.

I talk about an important distinction, one I want to make sure they understand, one we will use every day here. I will call it the difference between process and product.

During this course we will mostly do process writing (practice, experiment, writing no-one else needs to see) and they will do one piece of product writing (to be read by others) during the course, something to hand in at the end of week two, a short story.

Writing is sometimes a matter of deadlines, of considering a reader, of the necessity of just plain work.

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We did not speak the same language exactly, though all of this was conducted in English. Their first language was Tamil, and all the girls spoke Tamil at home, and (at least partly) among themselves. They had not gone to ‘English medium’ schools, usually the territory of privileged classes, who tended to use at least some English at home. They had begun to learn English at school, and from my experience not all their teachers would have been fluent, or even competent, in English.

English is, though, an Indian language (this is not undisputed), one of the nation’s official languages, and the most common lingua franca (eg Hindi is more unacceptable in the south). English is associated with a high degree of education, high class, status. And these days with a global outlook. This group, highly motivated, among the best and most ambitious students at the college, knew that their prospects were enhanced by fluency in English. They wanted to write in English.

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Now take a pen and paper. And I give them the non-stop-writing exercise. Start when I say, keep going till I say stop, don’t stop writing, don’t think about what you will say, just write, don’t correct anything, no-one will see this, *keep the hand moving*. (This well-

known exercise is the basis for the writing practices in Natalie Goldberg's books, such as *Writing Down the Bones* (1986.)

You can use a trigger phrase to begin with. Return to it at the end of a train of thought: I am, I believe, I want.

Everyone writes without stopping, and when I say stop they look up with that expression of someone snapped out of a daydream, self-consciousness returning to the mien.

We talk about what happens: How you might surprise yourself: you had no idea you would say that or anything at all. How you might have produced phrases or thoughts that will be useful in a piece of crafted writing. How one thing's for sure, something will be put down.

So don't wait to write until you know what you're going to write. I still make that mistake. Just start, just write something, one thing leads to another, sooner or later it will be something you can use in a story.

Next: I am aware that I am asking them to spend money but I have already cleared this and they can all get themselves a cheap notebook.

I always tell students to get a cheap notebook – avoid on the one hand the chaos and carelessness of scrappy bits-of-paper, on the other the beautiful notebook object that intimidates.

Just show up when it's time to write, your given time and place. We talk about good times to write and good places. What helps and what hinders.

The group do not have rooms of their own and it's not in their culture or their budgets to go to cafés. Still, they can all think of when and where they would do some writing.

No rules. Only experience. Find out for yourself. All I have for you is experience, which shows that you can't make rules for other people about these things, I can't anyway.

The practice is the writing. The theory is what you say about writing.

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When I say we talked about something, it was mainly me talking in that first week. I hadn't wanted to talk so much but it was going to take longer than it would in, say, an Australian group for them, the girls anyway, to begin to have their say. I have never seen a group so hang onto every word. Every one of them seemed to be giving me total, dedicated attention at every moment. They looked at me intently, concentrating hard, for my accent was unfamiliar to them. Sometimes, in the first day or so, I saw that they didn't comprehend what I said, and I would say it again, wondering why it had not been clear.

After a couple of days, they had no trouble following me. Probably their ears had become more attuned to my Australian accent. But no doubt my speech had also been increasingly modified by the kind of English I heard around me. As a child I could amuse the adults by my accurate imitations of the different ways of speaking I heard among them; I was brought up amidst many ways of speaking (Hungarian at home, English outside; even as a child I was intrigued by the varieties of English – my working-class suburb, the accents of other immigrants, the private school, the ABC, commercial radio, people you'd hear on the train); and in India I was often told I was more easily comprehensible than many foreigners. In the coming months in India, an American friend had to hand me the phone when she tried to get some information from an English-speaking doctor whose speech she could not understand; when I'd finished she said she could not understand what I was saying as I spoke to him.

Whatever it is I do is subject to an unconscious process.

I think it can be an advantage, to write in a language that was not your first. I think it has unconsciously helped me with writing dialogue. I think it's useful for a writer to listen to the most familiar language as if it were foreign.

Their silence was not the blank-faced or distracted silence I'd seen in Australian students. They looked at me intently and expressively, their concentration evident, smiles of recognition, puzzlement or thought playing on their lovely young faces.

I saw that in the break and after class they had plenty to say to each other.

In the final week a moment would come when I had to ask them to be quiet and listen. We had a laugh over that.

## Ω

Within a couple of days, everybody has a notebook, and so we can begin to talk about something we all do now: notice. Keeping a notebook is good for that, because it makes you notice, makes you notice that you're noticing, and it also is practice in using language.

We make notes on the things we hear: dialogue and ambient sounds. We think about language and how it used every day. We think about how it changes. We use our notebooks to make notes on taste and smell, fantasies and memories.

And for writing exercises.

More non-stop writing, ten minutes.

Write: think about the first place you lived in: everything you remember. Any questions?

Someone asks, should it be in past or present tense?

It doesn't matter! Up to you. Be free, use what feels right, don't think about tense, no-one will see this, write freely.

That moment while they look hard at me, taking that in. My directives are contrary to everything they have ever heard from a teacher.

Speaking in a sweeping generalisation: the Indian education system is far more hierarchical and formal than ours in Australia, in the West.

Even at the tertiary level, where teachers are treated with systematic deference. And students sit silently. And where what is counted as good scholarship is close to or is what we would call plagiarism: replication of other people's work. The kind of original thinking that depends on questioning, even challenging, received opinions and on the value of individual response is not nurtured. Quite a contrast to the Australian students I've known to whom it is a precious credo that whether you're talking about classic literature or their own writing there is nothing but opinion and theirs is as good as anyone's.

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Write: that place you first lived in, how that made you the person you are.

And we go on to talk about what a story is, what are the elements of a story. About setting in a story: does it come first? It does for some writers, not for others, some stories not others. Setting is not only a place but also time, culture, society, and what matters is how all that affects your characters. Think about the setting of your story.

Ω

That first week, as we talked about notebooks, the group began to venture remarks or reports on keeping a notebook. I thought (though did not say) that even if they only *thought* about making notes, that'd be something. I guess my championing the notebook practice is a belief I name only now, that it helps your writing - or is part of being a writer - to look at the meaning of life being to provide material for writing. That examining your self and your world is worthwhile. (Email has displaced or replaced a lot of my own notebook practice.)

A girl who says how much she now enjoys listening to people on her bus ride home.

Often a long bus ride, where buses tend to be very crowded, seats hard and narrow, roads bad after the rain, detours necessary and already they're getting home much later than usual, after dark. Often it is raining as we conclude for the day, and the girls, in their variously coloured salwaar-kameez outfits, disperse, trying to cover their heads against the downpour, a muslim girl throwing on her burqua for the streets outside. The other ma'ams are dressed in saris, they have to be, it's compulsory. The exotic, graceful sari much admired by foreigners. There are stories in the newspapers about the requirements for teachers to wear saris. The 'proper' garment for a ma'am and yet not only more restrictive than salwaar suits but, ha ha, more revealing. Ah the idiocies and hypocrisies of patriarchy. It's headmasters who insist on saris.

We go home to homes we others can not know. We write and we read to know about them. I want the stories this group can tell, I want them to tell me about their inner lives, family politics, fantasies; what they think about clothes. I want to see what they will do with a language they must claim as their own and shape to their own purposes.

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And so in the weeks together we talk about writing, we practice writing.

About writing about dreams. About how new technologies change our language. About changes in the culture. What is the difference between fiction and non fiction? What is the status of each? What makes a story? What is a plot? What kinds of chronology are there? How it's useful to think of narrative as made up of scenes. The influence of films.

The films they know would not be the films I know but there is also a universal film language. The medium is the message. Part of the message at least.

Our world is full of stories, characters, dialogue, and intriguing questions about life. We make notes, we note, we notice that we are noticing. Things you overhear. The actual way people talk. How language changes. The many versions of a single language.

We talk about women's writing, the subaltern, the question of who speaks? We talk about gay lit, women's lit, identity politics.

## Ω

It's the end of the first week. In one week they must hand in a story so let's make plans for the weekend.

I say, You must commit now.

They say: new ideas come all the time.

They do. Ideas that want to change the very basis of the story you are writing. Make a note of them and use them for some other story. As I, writing this, see too many opportunities to write about things that will take me away from finding out something about theory of writing. I could write so much about my other memories of that time, those three weeks in Chennai: my room, my friends, the recollections of previous long stays in that city, the warm and intense discussions after class with the ma'ams who had practiced writing for a longer while and teaching too, who asked for more from me, and

told me about saris, and how this time everything was affected by the fact it kept on raining.

Next: how will you know where it ends?

## Ω

One of the pleasures of being in India is to read its English language press; while there I normally read at least two newspapers a day and three newsmagazines a week. One morning, reading the local paper, *The Hindu*, with my breakfast of coffee and idli, I saw this headline:

### **Playwright Takes a Prize and a Jab at U.S**

Harold Pinter had won the Nobel Prize. Some of the speech he made was reported. Pinter has been outspoken in his disgust with the USA under Bush, articulating for many what must be said. It's not such a controversial or disputed stand here in India. Many of my trips here have been in recent years and the difference in the way the world is reported is obvious. There just isn't such a pro-USA bias in the mainstream, not in attitude and not in content, not in any idea of importance.

I took the report in to the college that afternoon, to begin a discussion on how writers might reach such a point of influence, or if not influence the ability to articulate the thoughts and feelings of society, or a part of it.

Who he was and what he'd written and the kinds of things he said. How people – media – and its consumers - usually did not seek or much pause over what writers might say even if writers do think a lot.

There is so much to say about writing and politics. Let us say some of us do not avoid politics even if you really could.

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Should a story have information? Must it have a title and should you know it before you begin? If you base it on something true how much can it change?

We discuss voice, character, language. What you discovered about yourself when you wrote about yourself. What you might discover as you write fiction.

There were questions about starting: how should a story start? What type of sentence is best to start with?

You wouldn't get questions like that in Australia.

There are different ways a story can begin. Try it: 1 dialogue 2 description 3 some other way.

Question: how to choose a topic sentence?

Me: forget about topic sentences! Writers do not talk about topic sentences! Those prescriptive notions are from schoolrooms. This might look like a schoolroom but it's important for a writer to know you are not in school. It is not the business of creation. What are you really asking?

Writing is unlearning as well as learning.

The theory is this discussion, it cannot be fixed or finalised, it is the ongoing examination of the practice and meaning of writing.

Ω

For whom do we write? Too many of you have said “everyone”. How can you write for everyone? I don’t think you can. See your set stories – what kind of reader do they imply, require? It simply can not be every reader on earth. Really, what qualifies your reader to read your story? What do you expect them already to know, already to have read?

Ways to think about your reader. Ideal reader, model reader. Yes, there are terms for these things. The ma’ams know what I mean.

It is all right not to write for everyone. They say novelists write their novels for a small group of friends.

## Ω

Remember I told you how it’s often said a short story is about a moment of change? (Those who assiduously take notes throughout flip back some pages to check.)

Read your set story *The Homecoming*. Note what you think is that point, that significant moment. Set in a poor, low-caste family where the mother toiled as a lowly servant, washing floors, this story, by Shashi Deshpande, was required reading in many an Indian schoolroom. Mother toils as she must, one sister Suman helps her, other sister Anju, fond of a mirror, discontent and ambitious, suddenly takes off with a flashy man seeking a better life.

Most girls say: when Anju went off to be married.

One of the girls says, the moment Suman sees Anju differently.

Sri Devi ma’am has plenty to say about that. That moment is inauthentic! she declares. Girls from that class would never see Anju as “loud” and “gaudy”. That is the author’s own perception.

We know the author is not from that class. She's from what in Australia we would call middle class (which barely has an opposite these days) or upper middle class or very privileged class.

Usual old ideas of class just don't work in Australia, we have to say socio-economic background, but here, oh boy, they say no wonder the British formed such strong alliances within this jewel in empire's crown, one rigidly class-divided society shakes hands with another. Even more so than the British, even back then. And how it's not caste exactly but not unrelated.

Questions of identity politics, we didn't call it that at this point of the discussion, would have Indian complexities that even most Indians wouldn't be able to parse.

How much can we know about someone not from our own class/background? Is observation enough?

To what distance beyond our personal identity can human empathy go? Can imagination reveal truth?

These questions seem to have extra resonance as this foreigner works to develop the discussion. Will I be able to judge the authenticity of their descriptions?

In any case, look at us, all part of the one single big conversation about writing.

## Ω

Over the next days each girl shows us a piece of writing she admires and tells us about it.

Most of the chosen pieces are from texts they have been made to read in courses at college.

The point of all this was to learn to talk about writing, to understand what you admire, to see that the understanding deepens not destroys the pleasure even the magic.

To be inspired to read more. There is a library here, not great, but you'd find something.

## Ω

Remember how I keep saying that you are the first reader, the first editor, the first critic of your work?

Remember about writing needing isolation and also needing company.

I tell them about how helpful, how necessary, other writers, friends who are writers, have been to my work and this is common; probably there are no exceptions.

Nowadays we are more likely to acknowledge all the readings, discussions, suggestions, advice and moral support from others that enable our writing but you can bet writers've always had it. Wives for example.

What kind of reading helps a writer and what does not?

Learn to give both spontaneous and considered responses. This is likely to make you better at doing the same to your own writing. In any case you are doing something for someone else.

Understand that writing is rewriting. That's up there with you have to read a lot. Probably those are the only two rules for new writers.

So you get into groups of three. In turn each person is the focus for a set time. She reads her story to the other two, who also have copies of it. They in turn give her their overall response, note any notable features, and discuss what might help develop the story.

Things like how it begins, exact words, better sentences. Would we see a character more clearly if they were shown in action, in relationship. Where the story might go.

The most powerful question is *what if*. Ask it freely.

## Ω

Over three afternoons in the last week, while they go off and work in their groups of three, to talk about whatever might arise, for I have learnt that whatever writers talk about they're talking about writing, that talking about writing is talking about anything, I see each of the fifteen writers in the group, the twelve girls and the three ma'ams, one-on-one, for 20-30 minutes each.

She sits next to me and I read aloud her story to her. I read it exactly as she has written it, changing not one word, correcting nothing.

The English in these stories is very idiosyncratic, much riddled with oddities of usage. I do not want to 'correct' any of it. I might suppose that all these oddities are solecisms, errors based on ignorance, inexperience, even carelessness. And yet, any of them might well be a choice, a deliberate expression a writer might want to defend once she has the power to present what others find mere obscurity.

Any of the girls might become a writer. There are a few, as in any group, who stand out. But you never know. It's not necessarily the most talented students who emerge as writers and writers were not always the one you'd have picked in the past.

The many Englishes that make up the world language English (that problematic singular) revitalise and transform it. A writer a.k.a. 'a *real* writer' has an excellent ear for the way the language is used and in her writing will create unease, censure or delight if that way is not easily recognised.

Editors, reviewers, critics: among them they have tin ears and fusty ideas about what you can or can't say that in future they won't be able to defend.

The writers in this group are or are going to be way better than I as representatives and judges of the form of English that is authentic for them, for their readers.

I remember reading *Midnight's Children* in India in 1986; I'd been there a few months and the rhythms of the language around me that I heard captured in Rushdie's lexicon and syntax, his riffs and melodies blew my mind. English became a richer and more various set of languages.

To insist on foreign forms of correctitude, or native-speaker fluency, compromises – or might compromise - the genuineness, the truth, the unique value of writing from outside the gate.

Once I'd read the story, we talked about it, same kind of thing I said they should do in their little groups. What it made me think, what the story was saying, where it might develop, and many a *what if?*

Expressions of amazement, understanding and joy.

Those little meetings were the single most valuable thing I could do there.

To begin to write you must be free to write. And writing meant for others to read needs a reader, that's my theory. Maybe a critic, later, maybe an editor, but a writer might not know what she really means until she is read.

Our last of many writing exercises. Write without stopping. Begin with and keep coming back to the word rain.

And outside it is raining again.

[ends]