

A review of Kevin Brophy *Explorations in Creative Writing*

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A few years ago, I attended a session given by Kevin Brophy at a conference for teachers of Creative Writing. I was an admirer of Brophy's 1998 book, *Creativity*, with its discussions of many aspects of the construction and meaning of this popular term. One of the things he did in this session was give us all a poem of John Ashberry's with many of the words taken out. In this new book, *Explorations in Creative Writing*, this experiment is repeated in a chapter on poetry, what it is, how it works.

And still it rains again, a [adjective, [adjective] sort of rain.
Outside of that, everything is more or less normal.
[adjective] [plural noun] are seen to enter the gate,

and so on. The point is made, then, without pre-empting our response, that the missing words are in no way predictable. This can be disorienting, but poetry works by "delaying closure", fragmenting the normal procession of language, thought and experience. Many examples from a range of poets are given, critical insights are melded with personal accounts of a poet's practice, and you gain valuable insight into the pleasures of poetry and how it is made. And some notes for your reading list.

This chapter on poetry is one of the many engrossing and illuminating sections in a book that succeeds, as Brophy does in the classroom, in getting you involved in Brophy's inquiries into what writing is for and how to encourage its appreciation.

This is not a "how-to" book on writing, but a collection of pieces, a mix of forms - essay, journal, personal and critical writing, ranging over many ideas about the place of writing in our lives.

As both a writer and teacher of writing, I respond especially to a dilemma or contradiction or paradox that Brophy keeps returning to: how to reconcile the freedom, the subversion, the creativity of writing with the

institutional context in which it increasingly is practiced, taught, discussed. We want to say that we can say anything, take risks, practice an ultimate freedom. But in a classroom, that's not a simple matter.

It does seem that writers ... are engaged in a project of discovering what it might mean, not to say anything, but to put oneself in a position where it is possible to say anything. [p. 219]

The editors of a small magazine Brophy once co-edited were required to define their Editorial Policy for grant submissions. "Surprise us," is what they called it. "Give us what we could not have expected." [p.118] This is a useful. Tell this to students and new writers who - and this is one thing that's a worry in writing in institutions - are too willing to please, to do their writing the "right" way, to want to provide what someone already thinks they want. Where is there space for the anarchic, the experimental, the naïve, the foolish? It's in the unwillingness to embrace the unexpected, even to meet it half-way, that literature becomes something less, just another commodity to keep people relaxed and comfortable. True pleasure has more edges, more complexity, more rewards.

Explorations is a collection of pieces about writing, about reading, about issues debated in classrooms and around bars or kitchen tables, wherever passionate readers and writers meet to talk about the things that have always mattered. It's about the very particular circumstances of contemporary contexts, and also includes pieces from Brophy's own creative work. It is a testimony to Brophy's long engagement with these questions, his intimate knowledge of works of literature, his own long practice and willingness to experiment with form. Reading this book, you are invited in, made to respond, become part of this endless conversation.