The playwright Samuel Beckett writes that ‘The author is the worm at the core of the apple’ (Waters, 2010, p.1). The writer works in an instinctive, detailed way, from a private core towards the light of public showing. The playwright Steven Jeffries, in his playwriting masterclass, suggests that playwrights need a bird’s eye view, an overview of structure and narrative without which a piece of work can founder. There is a place for both the worm and the bird in writing and in teaching. The screenwriting students that I work with, writing imaginatively, need an understanding of structure before they can work more instinctively with dialogue and with visual image to create a final draft. In the classes I teach, I aim to help the students excavate their own unique experiences and themes to inform and inspire their writing.

This chapter tells a story of my experiences in and out of formal education, in an attempt to explore the ways in which creativity has informed and inspired my teaching. Like all professional writing, it is shaped by a deadline, a word count, and an intended audience.

FAMILY STORIES, READING AND WRITING

My Grandfather, who used to joke that he was educated at Borstal, was a captivating and funny storyteller (‘Did I tell you about the time we played motorbike football?’). At Sunday lunches he was often the centre of attention. Many family stories are recycled and retold by different family members.

I was one of five children. Mum dressed all four girls alike, and each of us struggled to find our own niche. Jane’s niche was ballet, a way to get close to Mum, who loved ballet; Kate’s love was sport, impressing Dad. Lucy, who was much younger, found music and was encouraged by mum, who considered herself tone deaf. My passion became reading and writing, a way to get close to both parents.

Four sisters in flowered dresses, ducklings following mother duck, waddle into Hagley Village Library, Lucy still in her pram, Kate running up and down the book aisles. There is a smell of dust, old books, polished wood. Jane chooses a book on Margot Fonteyn, I head for the children’s books, and cross-legged on the floor I...
take my favourite: the beautifully illustrated ‘Pookie the Rabbit with Wings’ by Ivy Wallace (1945). Pookie is born with wings and this makes him different from the other rabbits. He has many cold lonely days before he finally finds the love he has always been looking for. It is a story in which I see myself.

At the counter, I stretch up to hand it to the librarian, with her long hair and big glasses. She stamps the date in red.

At home, I am on Mum’s lap, reading the book with her, snuggling into her warmness, her cushiony bosom.

Later, on the kitchen floor, with felt pens and wallpaper in a long strip, we write, in big bold letters, WELCOME HOME DADDY! All four girls colour the letters in and Mum sellotapes it to the hall wall.

Dad is arriving home from Sri Lanka, where he has been in the finals of the World Billiards Championship.

Dad, born in Worcestershire in 1937, remembers seeing Coventry burn from his bedroom window as a young boy in the war. He was a grammar school boy from a Tory working class family. He was forced to be in the cadets at Worcester Grammar school, which he loathed for its authoritarianism and scratchy uniforms. He failed Maths O Level and retook it seven times in order to get to University, the first of his extended family. He thus avoided National Service. His mother, whose baby daughter died of septicemia from breast feeding, suffered a mental breakdown and underwent electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

My grandfather’s inability to handle this led to great marital tensions, and Dad was often asked to be the intermediary when they refused to communicate with each other. His anger and passion was channeled into snooker and school. He played snooker at the local YMCA to avoid going home to such a hostile environment. He was the under 16 England snooker Champion, and went to Cardiff University to study English Literature in 1958-61. After what he calls the ‘misery’ of teaching Liberal Studies to car mechanics at Technical College, whilst writing sports columns under pseudonyms for the Birmingham Mail, he took the plunge and became a self-employed sports journalist and professional billiards player. This was a gesture of self-determination which took him away from home for months at a time, but gave him a sense of purpose and vocation. At seventy-nine, he still works as a sports journalist. When I was a child, he was on television, as a snooker commentator, talking to the nation, though inaccessible as a Dad. As an adolescent, I remember him behind a newspaper or a novel, or behind the door of the billiards room above the garage.

Mum, who was born in Birmingham on the day that the Second World War broke out in 1939, attended a Rudolf Steiner boarding school. Mum’s education faltered when her mother died suddenly around three months before Mum was due to take her A Levels, which she failed. She re-took one at Birmingham Technical College where my Dad was retaking Maths. So it was through failure at school
exams that they met and fell in love, fifty years ago, which goes to show that passing exams is not the only measure of success! She became a capable, kind and practical mother of five children. A legion of other women helped her: Auntie Eva, and Edith with her false eye, Mrs. Parker with her sharp hand, Nana with an eye on the dust. Our family was, until the birth of my brother, one full of girls and women. There was always a lot of competition for attention, all the girls wanting to be acknowledged by Mum.

_I am in a snake of six year olds, being counted off into the hall for lunch. I am anxious, unbearably so. I need my mum. I step out of the queue, and open the door. I walk across the playground, waiting for a shout from a patrolling pink lady. I slink down the path, through the lychgate and out. No one sees me. I look back for a moment, then, unsure what to do, walk all the way up School Lane. I need to be home with Mum. At the top, I cross the busy dual carriageway and walk past the war memorial. Finally at the bottom of the close, so near to home, I sit on a neighbour’s wall and wet myself as I have run away and know I have done something quite wrong. The neighbour phones Mum and she collects me. Later, in the headmistress’s office, I lie instinctively to both her and to Mum, saying that a lady in a flowered long dress, driving an orange mini had offered me a lift home and I had gone with her. The process works: from that point on, Mum collects me at lunchtime, cooks spaghetti hoops for lunch, and then takes me back to school._

The adventure, of breaking a taboo by running away from school, and then making up a story of what happened, led me to achieve my aim of having lunch at home. I have come to see writing itself is an adventure, as a breaking of taboos, as storytelling with a purpose.

As a September baby in a small village school in the West Midlands, I was the first girl to complete the Peter and Jane reading scheme and had early encouragement for both reading and writing. My first poem, ‘Happiness Is’ was read out in the school assembly. In Middle School, my poem about a Spanish Bullfight (my grandfather took me to one) led to compliments in the Headmaster’s office: (“Well done Daffodil!”) A rhyming poem that I called _From my window_, was published on the Children’s Page of _The County Express_ newspaper and I was awarded with a ‘fine pen’ – a navy biro with the paper’s logo on the side. My aunt typed my poems and put them in a binder.

I loved the privacy of writing in my bedroom, an escape from the downstairs noise of four quarrelling siblings. There was magic in my story writing: girls got to swim across rivers and befriend lonely dragons, bad people got sucked down plug holes. The magic of story, written in privacy, is still vital to my writing. At the same time, reading aloud, captivating my audience was also vital and affirming. This same experience is part of my teaching, planning lectures and seminars, the privacy of thought, imagination and research, giving way to the lecture theatre where, if I am lucky, something transformative and thrilling happens. When it
works out well, I feel that I have captured the imaginations of the students with the narrative of the lecture. I have entertained them as well as informed them.

“QUIET, LITTLES!” At six foot three inches tall, Dad is a dragon, coming out from his lair, standing in the doorway of the lounge. We are playing a game which involves me as witch, my sisters as fairies, screaming. This strange Dad bellowing, terrifies me. Later, contrite, he suggests a treat.

I follow him, up the musty back stairs above the Greengrocers on Birmingham’s Hagley Road. Shelves full of his magazine ‘Snooker Scene’, his secretary at her typewriter, a smell of leather, un-hoovered carpet. A professional journalist’s office.

“You can sit at my desk if you want to write there.”

I swing round in the chair. Take out my story, “The Lonely Dragon” which I am writing for a competition at the library. I place the paper and pens on his blotting paper desk top. I begin. Two writers together. A girl leaves the comfort of her family in an attempt to reach the dragon, in his lair. Despite her fears, she understands that his fierceness masks his loneliness.

HIGH SCHOOL

Haybridge High School, a village comprehensive, was brand new in 1978. There were only four hundred students in total. I once interviewed the headmaster, Mr. Hobson for the school magazine. His hero was Enoch Powell. Hagley, part of Bromsgrove, voted Conservative in big numbers in 1979. (Its current MP is Brexit campaigner Sajid Javid.) Thatcher came to power when I was fourteen.

Citing a knee injury, I avoided PE for the whole of secondary school. Unconfident about my adolescent body, I was beside myself with anxiety about the expected humiliations of competitive sport, and forced communal nakedness in the showers. I took refuge in the library; overweight, frizzy haired, studious, a school librarian. I devoured the books there: Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, Stephen King, Neville Shute – anything that had a good narrative. Other people’s imagination, expressed through literature, fed my own. My extrovert younger sister Kate, who was a sporty, curly permed blonde, was my nemesis. She was in the county tennis and netball teams, dated boys in my class. Physically, I felt I never had a chance against her. I focused on getting attention by excelling at exams instead and became a Grade A student.

Performing in school plays allowed me to become someone other than the swatty girl. I successfully auditioned for the part of Mrs. Bumble in Oliver; learned the script, and got to sit on the lap of the desirable Robert Hamblett’s Mr. Bumble, singing “I shall scream!” There was a set, music, audience. The thrill of this captivated me and inspired me. The immediacy of stage performance, the visceral response of the audience.
UNIVERSITY – ESSAYS AND ANXIETY

My grandfather, who lived with us in his last months, died of cancer while I was taking my A Level exams. I arrived at Leicester University to begin my degree in English Literature in 1984, grieving. This was the time of miners’ strikes, IRA bombing campaigns in England, agitprop theatre, women’s self-defense. University was free, a luxury hard to imagine now in our world of the neoliberal university as corporation.

I did what I knew I could excel at, read widely, loved the lectures, joined the Literary Society, became a student rep, and an expert essay writer. Medieval Literature, Milton, Middlemarch, William Morris, Dickens, DH Lawrence, Literary Theory, James Joyce. Feminist and Marxist literary theory opened my mind intellectually, but my creativity went totally underground into private diary entries, rhyming couplets about my excruciating social phobias, panicking about the attention of boys. I suffered with anxiety and loneliness.

From my diary in 1984:

_Came home on the bus, and felt totally fed up. Lots of work yet no work, the ever oppressive cloud of extra reading hovering. Lost a book. Dare I say the dreaded word, depressed (ugh!) Everything too vague to be able to sort out. Jonathan threw stones at my window and asked me for dinner. I can’t bear the claustrophobia. He came on his own tonight, and it was all so painful, embarrassing, straining. Keep the conversation going, don’t touch on awkward subjects, entertain, and don’t get too deep, be natural. The thought of having to sit there at the meal makes my heart beat and my stomach churn._

Just before finals, I cracked up, unable to stop crying. My focus on work had a high price. I excelled academically rather than making connections and relationships or real intimacies. I hung on and came out with a first class degree then got a bursary from the British Academy to study for an MA in 20th Century English at Sussex University. Without pausing for breath, I arrived in Brighton on 30th September 1987. I lodged in an attic room of a family house in Hove, knowing no one except my fellow MA students. Things began to unravel again. In a new town, at a new university, on a new course where half the people had first class degrees, I ran out of steam. When my first love relationship ended badly, the disciplined inner world in which certain aspects of life were repressed in order to succeed academically fell apart. At 3am on 16th October, 1987, the sound of the wind and tiles hurrying from the roof was deafening. I stood, with the family, watching trees uprooted down the street, falling on cars. Reflecting on the fragmentation of that time, and the failure of my rational mind, led to this poem in which a short prose has been re-ordered alphabetically
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Hurricane.
Attic room
Beach huts smash. Blatchington Road a war zone
Burn Clothes. Black.
Chanctonbury Ring
Curtainless candlelight
Frank’s Wild Years.
Falling, falling, falling.
Guitar
Innocent when you dream, when you dream,
Memories, nightmares.
Scaffolding smashed
Scary sex
Silk underwear
Tumbling
University full of static.

Emotionally and academically exhausted, my life no longer fit for purpose. I went to visit Dad (the lonely dragon) in the empty auditorium of Reading Hexagon Theatre, where he was reporting on a snooker tournament. He listened. He told me that he had been helped by psychoanalysis for ten years, since suffering from depression relating to his childhood and after a spinal injury at the height of his snooker career. He suggested that I could use some money left to me by my Grandfather to have some therapy myself.

The experience of being in therapy was a challenging, liberating journey of self-discovery for me. I reconnected with my desire to write, and in many ways the therapy impacted on the way that I thought about- and how I began - to teach writing. Susie Orbach recently worked with improvising actors in a radio series called ‘In Therapy’, an attempt to show what goes on between the therapist and the ‘analysed’ in psychoanalysis:

In therapy, you don’t just learn a new language to add to your repertoire, you relinquish unhelpful parts of your mother tongue and weave them together with the knowledge of a new grammar (Orbach, 2016, p.101).

This was it - abandoning unhelpful bits of a story in order to re-edit and revise so that a new, more empowered story could emerge. It was a different kind of learning; a collaboration between me and the psychotherapist. He offered a bird’s eye perspective on the seemingly unconnected bits and pieces, the jigsaw of my memories, experience and dreams. Together we pieced together a story of my life. Underlying themes emerged and I realised that I could change my story.
HOW DID PSCHOTHERAPY HELP ME TO BECOME A PLAYRIGHT, AND TO TEACH AND HELP WRITERS TO WRITE THEIR OWN STORIES?

Therapy involves being able to see the different parts of the self with empathy and I could draw on these, for characters and stories as I discovered the complexities of my own psyche, and the complexities of others in my life. I gained an understanding of the subtle subtexts and backstories that motivate behavior.

Therapy is a collaborative venture. Trust is developed and metaphors are co-created to bring meaning and poetry to the inner life. An increased ability to create healthy boundaries around one’s self. Screenwriting and playwriting are also fundamentally collaborative, requiring poetry, empathy, trust and boundaries, as actors bringing new dimensions to the material, as do set designers, directors, and lighting designers.

Therapy requires courage and resilience. It is at times a painful process. A writer needs courage to express themselves with others. They also need resilience to carry on. Creative failures are inevitable for a writer and resilience helps a person avoid taking this personally. In fact, failures can be instructive of new ways to approach pieces of writing, new questions to ask of the work.

The sociologist and writer Brene Brown puts it like this: “I know I’m ready to give feedback when I’m ready to sit beside you rather than across from you, I’m willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us or sliding it towards you” (Brown, 2012, p.204).

WORKING WITH WRITERS

I completed my MA in 1988. My MA thesis on Working Class Women’s Autobiography involved reading Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman (1986) as a case study. Steedman’s book details the relationship she has with her mother. Her mission is to particularise with detail and historical specificity of the landscape of her mother’s life, and then to theorise a way of telling life stories of people who are marginalised or exiled from the mainstream, like her mother. I was interested in the way certain stories are easily told and others are not. In a broader, cultural sense who gets to be centre-stage?

Dave Morley and Ken Worpole’s book The Republic of Letters: Working class writing and community publishing (2010) radicalised me. The authors suggested a way in which the writing and telling of certain stories, links with social and political change, working class writers in charge of their own publishing. As a young writer I found this book empowering. I saw how, in mainstream publishing, some types of writing are considered to have greater literary worth, and that this consideration was political; working class stories, and stories by women were often dismissed as having little literary value. The socialist approach of the community publishing movement appealed to my belief that a range of silenced voices deserve to be heard.
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I bought an Amstrad computer to write my dissertation. The internet did not touch my life until many years later. It has transformed the experience of writing. There is software for formatting work, online learning and writing communities and many ways to get work out into the world. Students are way ahead of me in this respect. Technology has moved on since I was a student handwriting my essays. Undergraduate students working with me on a ‘script to screen’ module make films of their own fiction screenplays and upload them to YouTube or Vimeo; my journalism students work with local community radio stations to broadcast their writing. I often feel very behind the times with what is available to learners.

In 1989 I became involved with local community publishers, Queenspark Books. I was looking for a writing group. The facilitator was leaving and she asked me if I would consider taking over from her. I met the group and with their agreement, I became the new facilitator. I was twenty three and enthusiastic to learn about creative writing. I reused and recycled exercises from Arvon courses, books on writing and through the annual weekends of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers I learned from, and was encouraged by, workshops with Jimmy McGovern, Winsome Pinnock, Sarah Kane, and Michele Roberts. The idea of recycling, experimenting with and refining exercises continued to be part of my repertoire as a teacher. Through Queenspark, I became part of a community of women writers, a world of women with powerful stories to tell. Our backgrounds were very different, yet we were connected.

I am
A hamster, a tiger,
A comfortable old armchair which needs re-covering
A candelabra
An unopened chest full of precious stones
A fur coat, nothing underneath
A purple negligee
Black Doc Martens
A worn pair of my mother’s pyjamas

Initially, I wrote alongside the other group members. I didn’t want to place myself in a position of authority. But I came to realise that this led to a lack of clear boundaries, and I had to change my approach. In 1989 I attended an eight week Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) adult teacher training course. The course provided me with a bird’s eye perspective, clarifying my role and the role of students in our different responsibilities for learning. I became able to facilitate a safe space for writers, and to offer guidelines for group feedback. I learned to structure sessions and programs of work, and I kept my own writing and need for
feedback and sharing, separate from the group. I also asked students to think about how they learned from each other.

In the late 1980s, the Department for Health and Social Security came up with a scheme called Enterprise Allowance which was aimed at reducing the unemployment rate by supporting people on state benefits to set up their own businesses. With a business plan as a freelance writer, forty pounds a week was mine. I lived in a housing co-operative with cheap rent and began to write journalistic features and reviews for local and London listings magazines. I made a short film with other women. I was just out of Sussex University, with pink hair and plenty of attitude. We made a feminist film about witches and food called High Tea and I learned how to film and edit. I interviewed the Brighton and Hove Albion Football team, and the piece that I wrote led to writing and performing a monologue on women and football on Radio 4’s ‘First Person’ strand. I continued to teach creative writing evening classes at Brighton City College as well as at Queenspark Books. I made money from freelance indexing for a Hove-based educational publisher. It was a time of great creativity and growing confidence.

I developed a portfolio career, combining one or two commissions for theatre, radio and television, working in youth theatre, teaching evening classes at Brighton City College. Later I worked with Lighthouse Film and Video in Brighton, teaching scriptwriting alongside my writer-in-residence work in schools and in community settings. Writing careers are often like this. Goodson describes these flexible, specialist careers:

Now a worker may only be employed for specific tasks - say, writing an article...... The work is put out to workers who are not part of the core employing unit. These conditions of constant flexibility and disruptive change mean a seismic shift in the way people experience and indeed manage their lives (Goodson, 2013, p22).

In 1991, riding the wave of my work in film and the journalism, I attended a workshop at the Gardner Arts Centre at Sussex University which was run by the Royal Court Young Writers’ Festival. An established female playwright, Charlotte Keatley, encouraged us to see that the most valuable thing was having something to say, to take risks, to be bold. I plunged in and wrote a play I called Pig in a Poke which was a semi-autobiographical, surreally comic, coming of age story about a repressed studious teenager who wants to find out about sex - to be like her friend Ruby: carefree, and sexually confident. Then, she finds a wounded, fantasy pig which she rescues from the fridge. This pig, who sings a puggy version of Shirley Bassey’s Big Spender (“The minute you brought in the joint, I could see you were a cook of distinction, a real Pig Spender”) is larger than life, carnivalesque. I had a lot of fun bringing the character of the pig to life, and writing the dialogue.
Sometimes I feel so afraid when I talk to Ruby, and I don’t know why. It’s as if there was something I wanted to say and I can’t speak it.

Ruby has gone downhill Angela. She had a lot going for her once. Very polite. But do you know, I popped down ASDA for the puddings and I saw her with red hair in the carpark with John Robinson. A very rough sort. I don’t know what they were laughing at but she wasn’t going to look my way however long I waited by the car. All those boys who left school with just a handful of GCSE’s, I never think red hair suits. You know me Angela, I’m very broadminded, but she’s letting herself down. If she could only see herself!

Ruby’s always been a bit like that mum.

Come on, don’t be a sausage. She’s not our sort. It all works out for the best, look at me. Now go and get yourself out of that uniform. Why don’t you wear that tartan skirt I bought you? And clean out the rabbit. That cage is absolutely filthy. And a clean out is very therapeutic.

Later in scene 2, Angela finds and rescues a pig from the fridge; an all singing, all dancing pig:

Ooh but it was chilly in that fridge. As cold as a butcher’s bollocks. What I wouldn’t do for a pair of stretch nylons with a wide gusset.

Perhaps I should fetch mum?

You saved my bacon back there Angela, stitched me up a treat. I knew you would, there’s something about you, something in the way you move.

I have to work!

I think we need to change your outfit though. It’s no frock for a woman in the bloom of her youth. Come on, give us a twirl, and don’t be shy.
ANGELA Where have you come from? Tell me, please, before Mum comes down.

PIG. I get around a bit. Let’s just say, I’m a friend of Ruby’s. And I’m here to give you the time of your life.

The play won the competition and I was catapulted into a new, professional world. It was unforgettably empowering to see and hear actors say my dialogue on stage at the Royal Court Theatre in front of audiences and critics. Being bold and adventurous, and having a go with nothing to lose, had great results for me. I am still addicted risk-taking through a desire to try new things with the hope of a bit of magic, in my own teaching. Mostly it pays off, though flying by the seat of my pants is not what works best for me. Structure is needed. The success of my first play was followed by failures as I struggled with ideas and lost confidence in how to structure a script. Nothing worked. Ideas did not come to fruition.

In 2003 I trained to teach the UK Film Council’s foundation in screenwriting course which gave me a huge file of extracts, screenplays and teaching materials. I also undertook script editor training, through a European Union-funded scheme. These two training courses are the core of my current teaching, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, giving a sound basis from which students can experiment and develop. Seminars combine mini lectures, film clips and analysis, and practical writing exercises, towards complete short films and pitches for features. The short piece gives students the tools for longer work - how to tell a story visually, create dramatic characters, write effective film dialogue and work with genre.

RETURN TO ACADEMIA

In 2009 I began to teach at the University of Brighton. I took the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, with the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Brighton. The course involved being part of an action learning group, reflecting on my own teaching, writing up peer observation sessions in which I observed two of my colleagues teaching. This has been invaluable for me as a reflective teacher, giving me, for example, and ideas about ways to get students to work together collectively, and observing other lecturers’ teaching styles. Having been away from academia for fifteen years, I was challenged, as are my students, by the rigours of the academic essay writing process. Writing the essays for the course involved both the bird’s eye view, reading and researching, referencing and learning about submission technicalities, and the worm, typing, deleting, and revising my evolving thoughts about how my experience linked to the wider research.

In 2017, as a Senior Lecturer, there is a rhythm to my work, a mix of admin, lesson or lecture planning, classroom engagement, tutorials, marking, departmental meetings, research articles, and chapters such as this one. As a module leader for
several modules on various aspects of drama and writing, I plan obsessively to help
with nerves during the first teaching weeks, as I meet with new students. They too
are nervous about the course and what challenges it might bring. After a couple of
weeks, trust and rapport is established and we all relax. Writing should be fun as
well as hard work! Stories remain at the heart of my life. I teach students to write
fiction scripts and journalism and ask them to think about audience and purpose,
but more broadly I think critically about the available narratives of what education
is for, for whom, and how one might succeed. Creative writing courses are thriving
at the University of Brighton, with new undergraduate and postgraduate courses.
Creative approaches to learning and assessment proliferate across the humanities.
Creativity is about creating something out of nothing. So is teaching. With
imagination anything is possible: Pookie, the rabbit with wings, can fly; pigs can
sing; lonely dragons can be reached; birds and worms might live happily ever after.

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