

***Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education  
Programs and Practices That Work***  
**Stephanie Vanderslice (2011)**

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*Reviewed by Laura Valeri*

**A Blueprint for the Future: Vanderslice Envisions Writing  
Programs that Change with Our Changing Times**

In the Afterword of her seminal book, *Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education: Programs and Practices That Work*, Stephanie Vanderslice, writer and director of the MFA program at The University of Central Arkansas, admits that this is the book she had to write, the book that has moved from inside her with that primal urgency that comes from creating our most important works. And the passion of her dedication for the precarious and thorny subject of creative writing in academia is what makes this book an instant classic, a must-read for anyone and everyone involved with creative writing, whether as a teacher, an administrator, or an aspiring professional writer.

“We want those who join us there to have some sense of what has been said before, to lurk a little while before jumping in” (p. 148), explains Vanderslice, who has spent many years studying, annotating, and writing scholarly literature on creative writing. To Vanderslice, the problem with creative writing as an academic discipline is not so much that it lacks a history, or, as some critics of creative writing programs argue, that its signature pedagogy, the workshop, has failed to evolve since the inception

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of the Iowa Workshop in the late 1940s. To rebut these accusations, Vanderslice is able to draw from and elaborate on discipline-related theory that has existed solidly and consistently for decades to prove that creative writing theory and pedagogy have evolved quickly and effectively. In fact, creative writing pedagogy has positively influenced in the past many other academic disciplines, and continues to do so now.

Scholarly literature on the subject of creative writing is extensive: in *Rethinking Creative Writing*, Vanderslice quotes from it frequently. But the literature has not been adequately documented, and this lack of documentation creates the impression both among creative writers and among scholars outside the discipline that reflexive criticism on creative writing is rare. “Despite their necessities,” Vanderslice acknowledges, “bibliographies are hard work, and not intellectually glamorous work at that...the literature review in creative writing pedagogy essays often remains spotty, and very occasionally, doesn’t exist at all” (p. 121).

Furthermore, Vanderslice argues that even when scholars do take up the work of reviewing the literature, they come into the subject with insufficient knowledge. In response to an essay in *The Writer’s Chronicle* that appeared in 2009, titled “The Rise of Creative Writing and the New Value of Creativity” (Healey, 2009), Vanderslice comments with respect to the author’s remarks with a correction:

Steve Healey at once tells us that “what has been missing from the impressive success story of creative writing is an equally strong attention to its pedagogy and theory...” (2009, p. 30) and then acknowledges that some ground clearing has been done in the growth of a nascent body of reflexive criticism about creative writing” (p. 38) This characterization of creative writing, while accurate on some levels, is distinctive for what it leaves out. Nascent, in fact, implies “something that is just beginning to develop, to grow, to come into existence” ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). Rather, I would argue that Healey’s essay begins, as most good narrative do, in media res, after much work *has* been done reflecting on creative writing theory and pedagogy. (p. 122; original emphasis)

As Vanderslice clarifies, a few pages later, “Indeed, beginning with Moxley’s *Creative Writing in America*, Creative Writing as a discipline might have been most accurately described as ‘nascent’ during the 1990’s, when a handful of figures gathered to light the fire that would become the discipline and labored to keep it burning” (p. 123).

According to Vanderslice, certain questions are too frequently discussed in academic journals and conference presentations: *Can creative writing really be taught? Is the workshop method outmoded?* These questions, Vanderslice points out, have been thoroughly examined and answered satisfactorily by many able writers and scholars already. Creative writing

discourse does possess a history, but because the literature has never been comprehensively organized, the discourse has had little opportunity to evolve beyond these few and now nearly exhausted issues. The author recalls finding inspiration during a keynote speech by noted writing scholar Wendy Bishop, who, after bringing up the problem, impressed upon her listener the need to create a comprehensive bibliography. “I am still not much of a bibliographer,” says Vanderslice, “but I am a storyteller and this is one story I feel compelled and qualified to tell, since, along with many of my mentors and colleagues, I am part of it” (pp. 122–123). To that purpose, an extensive section of *Rethinking Creative Writing* examines and synthesizes the history of creative writing theory. While Vanderslice warns us that her bibliographic work is only a first step, she nonetheless makes a laudable attempt to put a nail in the coffin of old questions. Hers is an effective synthesis of the most important ideas in our field, one that includes both classics and recent publications which should be of interest to any teacher of creative writing. Let’s no longer ask whether or not creative writing can be taught: Vanderslice’s book invites us to get acquainted with our past, and to move the conversation forward.

That is, in fact, the author’s self-proclaimed second objective of the book: to invite teachers of creative writing, program directors, and administrators to reflect upon what we already know about what we teach and practice, and to consider it within a more contemporary context, especially in terms of our economic reality, our changing educational practices, and the evolving literary market.

Much of *Rethinking Creative Writing* is therefore dedicated to examining the history of creative writing programs, from the inception of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, whose original objective was not so much to teach writers to write but to offer authors with emerging publications an opportunity to be exposed to criticism, to the proliferation of numerous degree programs – BFA’s, BA’s, MA’s and MFA’s – of creative writing in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Documenting the increasingly high demand for programs of this type, Vanderslice points towards the evolution of the more successful institutions, ones that have undertaken innovations aimed to transcend the traditional focus on craft by including the acquisition of skills in publishing, in community work, and in new media production – experiences that will expand a graduate’s opportunities after degree completion.

Vanderslice says, “In a sense, creative writing is a victim of its own success” (p. 16), adding that “when it comes to creative writing programs in higher education, ‘if you build it, they will come’” (p. 16). She uses that iconic quote by author Kinsella (1999) to indicate that MFA programs have become cash cows, providing degrees that are “far less expensive than,

say, outfitting a Physics graduate program with millions of dollars of lab equipment.” Unfortunately, she argues, “Such rapid growth can – and did – lead to many hastily-constructed programs that served the cash cow they represented rather than the hopeful writers they represented.” She examines the claims of Association of Writing Programs (AWP) executive director D. W. Fenza and of others who are of the mind that advanced degrees are not to be pursued for the purpose of gaining employment. She suggests that such attitudes, while not entirely wrong, can also be used unfairly to absolve programs of their responsibilities to students. Pointing to the scathing criticism aimed at creative writing programs that describe such programs as expensive detours into frivolous artistic activity, she says, “I maintain, again and again, it doesn’t have to be that way. The landscape can and must change” (pp. 17–18).

To persist in viewing creative writing studies as an art appreciation program, where no one is expected to emerge professionally except for a chosen few gifted students, may at first blush feel like a noble proposition; but the ethics behind such a vague objective become dubious when examined in light of the pressing economic realities and the rising cost of education. Controversially, Vanderslice challenges even the most secure and well established among us to reconsider our assumptions. For those teachers of creative writing who harken back to the early days of MFA programs, she reminds them, “It was enough, during these workshop sessions, simply to sit at a long table with these famous authors, hoping to catch pearls of wisdom from their mouths as they shared their take on the work under discussion” (p. 75); but such days are well behind us, with government regulations and pressure from administrations to make all writing programs accountable via student success in the job market.

To persist that the primary value of a creative writing degree is to gain an insight into the aesthetics driving creative writing is to commit professional suicide. Citing a 2003 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (Kupfer, 2003), Vanderslice summarizes the claims of a creative writing professor, Fern Kupfer:

whose students, she despaired, longed to live the kind of life she led, making their living in the world of words.... The kind of work she did, this professor implied, was reserved for the elect whether by faith or works, and her students, she was fairly sure, could never be among these.... [Y]et [she] rationalizes that her students still “get their money’s worth” because what she really teaches is “writing appreciation”. (p. 41)

Vanderslice makes clear her stance on these notions: “youth and their misconceptions about reality aside, if I thought I was educating my students to pursue a life like mine, only to lead them to a locked door, I couldn’t do it. I’d have to find another line of work” (p. 43).

Professors whose salaries are justified by student enrollment ought to consider the needs of the students whose interest in the subject supports the existence of creative writing programs. Those of us who teach in these programs ought to move beyond high-minded art or writing appreciation and towards more practical goals. No doubt, this highly charged contention will agitate some readers, but an open discussion of practical matters having to do with the value of creative writing study may be necessary if we consider what's at stake.

Increasingly, academic administrators demand accountability, requiring degree programs to demonstrate student success by offering practical skills that will be valuable in the workplace. On the other side of the equation are students who are more pragmatic than ever before, who want access to opportunities beyond what may have been traditionally expected from a writing degree. Those of us who teach creative writing are no longer teaching only one type of student, nor should we assume that our objectives are aligned with the objectives of everyone enrolled in our classes. Students who have full-time jobs and carry heavy loans to pay off their tuition desire lucrative careers in a field related to books and words. This seems like a reasonable and noble expectation, one that Vanderslice urges us to take seriously.

Some already have. Vanderslice provides numerous examples of innovative pedagogies born out of a need to address the growing number of students interested in creative writing and the varieties of backgrounds and dreams that these same students bring to the classroom. She advocates in favor of courses that teach graduate students how to teach creative writing; for undergraduates she encourages faculty to publish competitive anthologies of students' work. For both graduate and undergraduate programs she advocates for strong ties with the publishing world and for inclusion of outreach efforts in the curriculum so that students' field work may lead to creating more organizations like the Arvon writing retreats in the United Kingdom and the nonprofit tutoring service known as 826 in the United States.

Even our former success with teaching the craft of creative writing ought to be re-examined, according to Vanderslice, as publishers criticize graduates of MFA programs whose writing, though polished, seem to be able to address only an elite audience of other writers. Traditional attitudes about the appropriateness of literature in the academic environment such as may exclude commercial writing and exile genre writing from both workshop and literature classes may be more destructive than productive to creative writing students. This contention will no doubt cause some traditional literary writing professors to raise an eyebrow or two; but

Vanderslice's argument is balanced and eloquent and full of pragmatism – and well worth reading and considering.

The examples that Vanderslice cites of creative writing programs that have transcended the limits of craft studies are so inspiring as to alone be worth the cover price of the book. All of these programs feature faculty who are willing to expand their efforts beyond teaching the craft, and who make it a point to expose students to the publishing world and to involve them in not-for-profit work. As part of their pedagogy, many of the programs listed offer a curriculum that balances courses in creative writing with other types of courses preparing students for a variety of careers, not just in writing, but in publishing, technical writing, advertising, and other fields. Moreover, all of them seem to embody an ideal that is both practical and inspiring: if we want to create a community of readers, it is writers who need to make all necessary efforts to ensure that such a community thrives.

The message is one that most writers will support: to become advocates for creative writing is to ensure a future for all of us. Vanderslice treats the reader to example after example of individuals and institutions that have reached out to their communities in productive and creative ways, not only ensuring that their graduates have valuable hands-on experience applicable to a variety of careers, but also enriching the quality of life and literacy standards for the communities in which these programs are housed.

Finally, there is also a changing literary landscape to account for, including, to name a few trends: a marked decrease in literacy skills, a decline in reading habits (Pew Research Center, 2011; 2012), and an overflow of mediocre literature arising out of a democratized internet-bound literary venue. In this regard, Vanderslice proffers a warning to those who still consider the MFA program a refuge for the rarely gifted, pleading for us to re-evaluate our criteria for what we consider talent and encouraging us to question a professor's ability to recognize that talent within the restraints of a short academic term. Students may surprise us, she reminds us. Do we have a right to be the ultimate arbiters of their creative futures?

Throughout the engaging pages of this comprehensive work, Stephanie Vanderslice manages to consider all points of view, responding with such a contagious enthusiasm that it is hard to resist her call for more comprehensive, more rounded creative writing programs. In spite of the many claims she makes that no doubt quite a few in the academy and beyond will find controversial, the author always maintains a practical optimism and a respectful appreciation towards even the most scathing critics of those same creative writing programs which she defends and whose future she so inspiringly wants to ensure.

With *Rethinking Creative Writing*, Stephanie Vanderslice offers creative writers in the academy a guide to reflect upon our scholarship, to understand what has changed in our field and what is at stake, and to lay out for us a blueprint for success so enticing and thorough that only the most stubborn would fail to appreciate the care and insight that went towards creating that blueprint. *Rethinking Creative Writing* will soon become a classic among professionals and a must-read for anyone aspiring to or already thriving as a creative writer in the academic world. We can only hope to be so lucky as to see that future which Vanderslice so boldly envisions realized in the creative writing programs of the hopefully very near future.

### About the Author

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