

Creative Writing

When I was going to university, UBC was the only school in Canada with a department of writing. Now people can take creative writing courses for credit anywhere in the country. My daughter has been taking creative writing at primary school! When one asks a school teacher why the children are doing creative writing rather than spelling, the teacher will usually say that it is done in order to foster the children's creativity. When asked what that means, the teacher will more often than not reply that it means giving the child a chance to express herself.

When university students, thinking that I teach creative writing, tell me they want to study such a thing because of their desire to express themselves, my heart shrinks. Poetry is

not yourself, I tell them; poetry does not come from inside. It comes as it always has, from the world. The poet's job is not to disgorge, but to read all the great and good writing that has been granted to the human race, to learn all the mechanics of our language, tune his body and then listen. The poet is not an ex-presser but a reacher. The poet Jack Spicer was one of our teachers beyond the creative writing department. Poetry-writing is what Jack Spicer called it, the practice of outside.

Writing from outside.

I am sure that there are more creative writing courses than there are good writers in the country, so there are probably creative writing teachers in high schools, in community programs and even in the universities, who encourage their charges to express themselves. I know from my personal observation that there are teachers who support two bromides just as pernicious as the notion of expressing oneself. These are: "write what you know," and "find your own voice."

If I were really a creative writing teacher I would get a senior course and try to deprogram the students who had learned to be satisfied with these notions. Find out what you can learn by writing, I would say. A writer's reach should exceed her grasp, or what's a pencil for? Try to forget your own voice, I would say, and listen hard for what the language is saying. If someone asks you, as citizens are always asking writers, who do you write for, who is your audience, be in a position to answer truthfully what when you are caught in the act of writing, you yourself are the audience, hearing a voice you've trained your ear to receive.

I was told near the end of one writing course that at last I had found my own voice, and at the time I felt warm and gratified, a dangerous condition for a writer. Fortunately I didn't continue to write that way. A writer who finds his own voice is likely to stay with it, turning out the same book over and over. That is what readers of schlock are looking for. If their favourite bestselling author tries a departure they

become disappointed, and any writer interested in moolah and power does not want disappointed readers.

Similarly, writers who write what they know will keep on writing it, and they will tend to know little more late in their careers than what they knew after their first books. They will be what the semi-amateur newspaper reviewers are always looking for: writers who are "in control of their material." Now really, isn't that a dreadful phrase?