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Editorial: Creativity and Uncertainty

The Creativity and Uncertainty Papers: the refereed proceedings of the 13th conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, 2008

This collection represents the second time that the Australian Association of Writing Programs' (AAWP) annual conference has generated a set of refereed papers and gathered a selection of those papers into a published proceedings. These articles provide further evidence of the diversity and quality of contemporary research in writing, and allow the rich conversations initiated by the conference to continue. Their production—refereed by University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), the institution which convened the 13th annual conference, edited by Lucy Neave of the Australian National University and Donna Lee Brien of Central Queensland University, and published by UTS—is a reflection of the collaborative and cross-institutional nature of much of the higher education discipline of writing in Australia.

Since the inception of the AAWP in 1996 the association's annual conference has been a welcoming and inclusive forum for all those involved in the academic discipline of writing, whether these delegates be teachers, advanced students and/or writers. These conferences give those in the discipline a space to discuss the burning questions of the day, debate the issues that shape our units, programs and the discipline itself, and release and test both blue sky and applied research findings.

These are uncertain times, say the media when speaking of the financial crisis, and Australian academics, of the academy. And it is true that 2008 looks to have been a particularly jittery year. With the change in the Australian government came the end of the Research Quality Framework deliberations and the introduction of the cognate, but different, evaluation exercise: the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative, the ERA. With it has come uncertainty: uncertainty about how research will be assessed, and what this will ultimately mean for academics, and particularly for academics in the creative arts. While there is real hope that there will be more funding for the chronically-starved tertiary sector as a result of the just-released Review of Higher Education (the so-called 'Bradley Review'), the amount of money that might come to universities and how it will be allocated is still far from certain. In addition, the world financial crunch, while yet to be fully felt in Australia, is already having an effect on book and journal publishing – as will the environmental crisis and its manifold implications. The extent of these impacts is still to be determined, a factor that in itself opens up into more uncertainties.

What is certain—and this demonstrated again and again in these papers—is that academics, teachers, students and practitioners in the discipline of writing will continue to revel in the truly creative act of ‘juggling cats’ as Jen Webb put it in a 2004 *Text* article; will continue to see *themselves* as works-in-progress; although perhaps with multiple personality disorder, as Jeri Kroll wrote in her 2006 essay in Brady and Krauth’s *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*. Writers and academics continue to write creatively and critically; we question not only how we teach, but what we teach and why; as well as what and how we read and write. We investigate new theoretical frameworks. We also find new ways to make the scholar-author duality work—as well as how to harness the teaching-research nexus in all our endeavours. We work to ensure that all aspects of our research higher degrees are continually questioned, explored and renewed, with the aim of making the experience of studying, teaching, researching and writing fulfilling, stimulating and creative.

Moreover, we do not simply tolerate uncertainty, we embrace it, in both tangible and intangible ways. Among these papers, responses to uncertainty in the academy include advocating for practice-led research as a means of gaining recognition of creative work, and using flexible delivery for teaching to increase student access to writing courses. Responses to uncertainty in the publishing industry include exploring the possibilities of online or collaborative writing, and resisting dominant modes of reading and writing. New degrees are posited, and established methods of working interrogated.

While the papers were grouped into conference sessions, when considering these papers, we have found a range of ways of thinking about them. Readers are sure to find their own.

A number of papers address various issues in teaching writing, a long-established concern of the AAWP. Benjamin Chandler explains how the genre of modern fantasy can be harnessed to the task of teaching the basics of creative writing, while Joshua Lobb describes innovative ways for overcoming student resistance to theory. Ffion Murphy’s compelling and discomfiting paper discusses the problem of emotionally disturbed and violent creative writing students, and suggests some possible ways forward. Offering an important overview of teaching practice, Shady Cosgrove examines the role of uncertainty and praxis in the creative writing classroom, paying particular attention to the role of prose workshopping. The problems and possibilities inherent in combining internal and external students, and teaching them through a combination of online and face-to-face modalities are discussed by Janie Conway-Herron and Chris Morgan, who find that student responses to flexible delivery teaching arrangements are mixed. Ross Watkins surveys undergraduate students enrolled in creative writing at University of the Sunshine Coast, substantiating the theory that students occupy an ‘uncertain duality’—that is, they, like their teachers, feel themselves to be both scholars and authors—and using this knowledge to actively develop more informed approaches to course construction and delivery. Drawing on longitudinal studies of English and American undergraduate creative writing students, Steve May concludes that there are areas of undergraduate education which require attention, including facilitating understanding of

writing industries, and raising awareness of the skills attained through active participation in workshops.

Postgraduate teaching and supervision, and uncertainty regarding its quality and relevance across the sector, give rise to discussions around the various degrees available, approaches, and how best to serve the aspirations of all stakeholders. Asking important questions about the role of honours in writing, Dugald Williamson and Rosemary Williamson examine the usefulness of a rhetorical approach, arguing that it can enhance students' capacities to engage with writing practices relevant to further scholarly research and contexts beyond the university. Recognising that, in the current higher education environment, competent supervision of research higher degree students, informed by knowledge of disciplinary best practice, is increasingly important, Rosemary Williamson, Donna Lee Brien and Jen Webb present a first step in formally developing a theoretical and methodological framework to inform, support and enrich supervisory practice. Having identified wide-ranging variability across all parts of creative research higher degrees, Janene Carey, Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien consider if it is possible or preferable to find a standard for a form that is both bifurcated and depends so heavily on practice, and seek ways to work towards certainty, equity and professionalism in thesis examination. By auditing the available data on PhD by Publication, Donna Lee Brien outlines a range of issues and implications for stakeholders to interrogate whether this degree can provide an individually, institutionally and disciplinary viable alternative for some higher degree candidates in writing.

Reading writing is another central concern of every AAWP conference, and in this collection, Jeremy Fisher presents a fresh exploration of the second person narrative voice, its challenges and difficulties, by focusing on the important, but little known novels *No End to the Way* by G. M. Glaskin (Neville Jackson) and *The Treatment* by Peter Kocan. Lucy Neave examines statements by Helen Garner and Sonya Hartnett on their writing processes, reading Garner's and Hartnett's essays alongside their novels and theories of process and creativity. Josie Arnold looks at 'family saga' novels written by, and for, women so as to interrogate issues raised in their content, using the prism of feminist-postmodernist critical theories, while Manisha Amin interrogates the fine line between authenticity and exoticisation for readers and writers.

Writers writing links another suite of papers. Considering the novel as an art form first and foremost, Sallie Muirden breaks novel writing and creation down into five crucial features to discuss some of the novel-creating qualities that might be useful for teachers or supervisors of the novel to discuss with students. Mark Rossiter describes techniques for writing the young narrator, drawing on texts as diverse as Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* and *Hideous Kinky*. Vahri McKenzie gives an account of recently and not-so-recently published collaborative novels, and argues that successful collaborative novels have resulted from close physical (rather than just electronic) communication between writers. Framed by an overview of the emergence of the surfing memoir and books about the spiritual nature of surfing, academic, blogger and

poet, Lynda Hawryluk explores how her own recent conversion to the sport has influenced her writing.

Research and theory in, and of, writing as a discipline – and how we define and articulate these – are another common theme. Beginning with the descriptors used for research itself, Jeri Kroll discusses the terms currently used about research, in an effort to find a consistent nomenclature for creative writing. In the process, she posits a form of practice-led research that relates to conventional formulations of research without misrepresenting how writers perform. Sue Joseph grapples with the problem of defining creative non-fiction/literary journalism, and advocates for narrative non-fiction, arguing that the genre demands serious consideration by editors and academics. Mike Harris questions the usefulness of ‘reader-and-text’ theory, and argues that the discipline of creative writing needs to invent a theory to take account of writing process. Investigating writing, teaching and reviewing, Gay Lynch argues that metaphors can be more than evocation and more than rhetoric, that they can signify deep thinking and the creation of new knowledge. Studying uncertainty in the academic context, Theresa Anderson asks questions about when taking creative risks is productive for researchers, and when uncertainty and risk are intolerable. Gaylene Perry looks at what non-verbal creative arts disciplines, such as dance, can offer creative writing in exploring modes of knowledge production, concluding that creative writing practitioners and researchers have work to do in understanding our particular modes of practice-led research. Using Dr. Alan Kirby’s essay, “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond”, Delia Falconer discusses Kirby’s claim that we have passed from postmodernism into a post-postmodern era, and considers what this means for the teaching of postmodern texts in creative writing courses within the academy. Finally, taking a sectoral view, Dominique Hecq argues that a pragmatic approach to creativity and innovation, as evident in management and government discourse, is problematic, because it equates creativity with outcome, and fails to take account of the complexity of the creative process, subjectivity and the unconscious.

Included in this suite of papers is Helen Garner’s keynote address, a serious and witty discussion of the uncertainty inherent in the writing process. This important address was not only a highlight of the conference for attendees; it also attracted considerable interest from non-delegates—resulting in a capacity audience in the large venue, and prompting much spirited discussion afterwards. It is with great pleasure that the editors to include this address in this collection and give others the opportunity to engage with Garner’s ideas.

Taken together, these papers demonstrate that it is possible to make the most of the current uncertain climate. Uncertainty, it is argued again and again in these papers, provides space for creativity and creative thinking. Uncertainty itself perhaps drives the need to create. Indeed, it is often what is most uncertain, unspoken, and subjective that may be most productive for us all, as writers and academics.