

## THREE SHORT PIECES ON WARWICK UNIVERSITY'S CREATIVE WRITING MA

### 1. Campus Politics

Last year I took an MA in creative writing at Warwick University as a mature student (if only in name). What you learn on such a course is anyone's guess but in the end simply being on a UK campus for a year was a lesson. I was fifty and came in from Hong Kong where I'd been living for five years, seeing there the Goliathan struggle between students and the mainland Communist Party, acted out in the High School revolt on the National Curriculum and in the 79 Day Umbrella Revolution. My ideas about British students were contradictory. I had heard they were hard-working and wore old heads, coming into a world which offered few free rides, and they were mutually protective, closed to debate, mocked as being a snowflake generation.

Warwick, founded in the 60s, sits in farmland a few kilometres south of Coventry, expanding and preponderantly modern today. I suppose the campus was always left wing. As a lecturer in the English department Germaine Greer, vanguard of her time, wrote the scholarly and close to the bone, *The Female Eunuch*, in around 1970. Yet today, of course, Greer is not welcomed by students. Some have tried to debar her from speaking, in particular the Woman's Officer of the Student Union at Cardiff University who called for her to be 'no-platformed' - that verb of the modern-day campus which fits alongside the noun 'safe-space', and which prompts grown-ups to use the caustic phrase 'virtue signalling'.

A module in fiction gave an early flavour of the obsessions typical in the ambitious contemporary academic. The convenor was a lean associate professor in her late forties who gave off mixed signals, her hair long and pinned down in the style of a Victorian lady at home, her feet clad in the marching corps boots of the feminist militia. Six of us lounged on the sofas while she sat on a classroom chair before us. She began by talking about Knausgaard, whom she had been reading professionally rather than for pleasure to learn what the fuss was about (and we would be asked to do the

same of other books). She joked that she wasn't sure she wanted to read twenty pages on the washing up but added that nevertheless washing up was important: it was at the heart of the political argument between a husband and wife. Discussion followed and the person next to me on the sofa, a semi-retired primary school teacher, the oldest and so in a sense the senior person in the room, said she didn't want to get too political about it all. The course leader quickly rebutted her to say, like it or not, every transaction in life must be recognised as political, even doing the washing up. Then the discussion moved into gender politics and we were told that no man or woman was simply male or female to match, but gender fell as it may, and if one of her male students turned up in a dress or was very camp, or if a female student dressed like a man, this associate professor was not going to turn a hair. On another sofa a bearded, lanky man in his early twenties wearing two-inches of underwear above the waistband of his trousers boasted he had been regularly set on at school for wearing mascara and she gave him a sympathetic approving look. I remember thinking he was going to get on a storm with her, but the lady teacher and I were not necessarily going to be such favourites.

We were a mixed group. Four had lately been undergraduates and were, I think, well-versed in campus politics and its orthodoxies. Beside the two I have mentioned there was a brainy Romanian young woman, a plain-speaking sparkling Taiwanese young woman and a lively Brummie woman. I think the school-teacher and I sounded to them like parents whose life experience was plain wrong. One wrote in some margin notes against my text that she smelled misogyny. Slightly hurt, I pointed to ageism in hers. Such an exchange was both good humoured and underlaid by a morass of frustrated generational misunderstanding.

Canadian geese and magpies were part-owners of the campus. In the eating places it was chips with everything. The West Midlands traffic flowed around the wildflower roundabouts on the margins. Autumnal leaves fell softly on the campus pathways. In hyperspace a third-year undergraduate published his thoughts. He had been invited to attend a Consent Workshop and loathed it. He stood clutching a sign reading: THIS IS NOT WHAT A RAPIST LOOKS LIKE. He was white and looked like a public school boy. He was a member of the Conservative Club. Playground war broke out. Angry people stalked him over the campus denouncing him as classist and racist. He couldn't go into the Union Bar or the Lecture Hall in peace. For the national press it was the next story of UK campus intolerance.

A week later, distinguished lifetime gay rights activist Peter Tatchell let out a tremendous groan in print.

His mistake: To stick up for free speech, putting his name to a letter in *The Observer* written by those worried about the climate of intolerance in UK campuses.

His punishment: to be no-platformed by a LGBT+ (!) Officer at the NUS executive.

He wrote in *The Telegraph*: ‘*The race to be more Left-wing and politically correct than anyone else is resulting in an intimidating, excluding atmosphere on campuses. Universal human rights and enlightenment values are often shamefully rubbished as the ideas of Western imperialist white privilege.*’

Oh God, I thought, here on campus I’m no more than *Western, Imperialist, White, Privileged* myself.

I carried this dis-quietening lightening bolt to one of the distinguished professors in the English department, half-British, half-German, deeply cultured and to all intents and purposes as *Western, Imperialist, White, Privileged* as I. He said he and other older members of the department lived in fear of being denounced. It was so easy to utter the wrong word, particularly keeping on with literary texts regarded now as politically incorrect. There were dozy totalitarian undergraduates just waiting to pounce.

So my mature-student time-travel to campus and brush with student politics made the whole visceral subject a little personal, and now I’ve finished the MA and am living in London, I sometimes think of trying a campus novel, and perhaps the campus novel of someone in late middle-age is always likely to be a satire. I think one generation is always liable to reject another in the continually changing circumstances of time. It is Greer’s and Tatchell’s distinguished faces that make their words impossible, I think, as if all old people have failed the world. Look at Turgenev, once so glad to have the approval of the nihilist students of Russia after writing *Fathers and Sons*, but the acceptance proved only temporary before the inevitable scorn set in.

By the way, the work among the other students on the MA course was like this: someone took on, in a short story, *The British Class System* among the people of Birmingham, someone else an honour killing in Damascus, presented in a tale and based on fact. There were pieces about loved

grandparents, about growing up in broken families, about maddeningly dominant parents, about loneliness, travel, love. And I suppose, one day, Warwick Campus may show up in their work too.

## 2. THREE SCENES

At the first gathering of the course, the introductory meeting in the Writers' Room, those of us who had quit our lives for a year and had been wandering forlornly around the campus all week met each other for the first time over a finger buffet in front of the staff from the Department of English concerned in some way with the MA. There were the professors and associate professors who ran the modules, a few superannuated figures who turned up to take a look at the new intake and show their faces, senior professors released for a moment from the burdens of administration, some young blood PhDs relied on for their energy and enthusiasm by the over-worked and weary, and a graduate from last year's MA volunteering to help and hoping to land a staff job.

After the sauvignon blanc and egg and cress sandwiches conversation stopped and the room divided into roughly two groups of fifteen, those addressing us unstacking school chairs around a table, we inductees lowering ourselves into three large sofas. The room itself was the Writers' Room on the ground floor of a newish building on the edge of the university campus and outside the windows was a small regulation car-park pressed on all sides by the usurped swale and spinney of the rank West Midlands lowlands. They had done their best to give the room's institutional shell the textures of a living room or even literary salon, with bookcases, lamps on tables, curios set on surfaces, notable past events commemorated on posters and other bits and pieces suggesting every member of staff had made a donation at some time.

The woman who gave the welcome speech, partly overwhelmed by a woolly jumper and donning spectacles to look at us, was Maureen Freely, President of English PEN, author of seven novels, translator of five books and Department Head. She began to talk to us in a gentle voice tinkling with humour and in a little while the great obsession of the department was apparent. They were in a small war with the university at large. This department was an anomaly, a fifth column in a growing science-and-automobile focused Corporate Warwick marketizing education. Whatever Senate House decreed, she told us, here we wouldn't be referred to as clients but as writers all. And as writers what we had in common was failure, because failure was the main experience of a writer however successful. So

we must be nice to ourselves and then nice to each other. Then she talked of David Vann, the American novelist and part-time professor whose modules many of us would be taking, who hadn't turned up yet, en route from his writer's eyrie in distant New Zealand. She built him up. He was a person you wanted as a friend, she said (not an enemy). Her worst nightmare was that he read one of her novels (and commented on it). Then she passed the floor to the next person. We heard from the lively PhDs and junior lecturers. A smiling old chap in a wheel-chair, one of the founding fathers of the course, was introduced as a poet of twenty published volumes. He wheeled himself forward and said almost inaudibly that he was a cottage industry. Maureen and he left as they had a long journey back to Bristol where they lived.

So the year commenced.

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The first session of David Vann's Fiction module began at six pm in the Writers Room. Eight of us were enfolded into the sofas while he sat in front of us on a classroom chair. He was in loosely laced plimsolls, slacks and shirtsleeves, and he talked in the easy classless way Americans talk. He talked a lot about himself and laughed a lot. He looked like the young Jack Nicholson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It was exciting to be addressed so intimately by a writer whose media image was that of a clued-in transatlantic professor and novelist yet he quickly painted himself in more ordinary colours. He hadn't had a beer until his early twenties and his upbringing had consisted largely of going out and killing things in the snow of Alaska and telling tall stories at table afterwards. The big thing in his life had been the suicide of his father. He was very modest and very articulate. He invited us all to introduce ourselves and then he began talking about his summer, kite surfing in South East Asia where he'd had so much fun and sprained a shoulder in a night club which meant that now to his frustration he couldn't work out. As he answered our questions we began to realise he knew every writer any of us wanted to talk about, either because he had come up with them in creative writing in California or because he had met them on stage at writing festivals or in the lobbies and breakfast buffets of the hotels put on by the organisers. His reading list for the course was all-American: Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne

Robinson, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Raymond Carver.

In that first session he recited parts of Beowulf (which he was four years into translating) and Chaucer from memory, making points about accentual metre and syllabic metre, about German and Latinate English. Then he took us over an extract of Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy. He showed us some of the sentences dwelling for effect on the landscape. If I recall his words correctly he spoke of 'how the beautiful was created by syntax, by extension, and that in that was the whole game, this was how theme was created and this was for the bank'.

He told us short stories never pull away from the main action and a novella is a short story that's been stretched. He told us that undergraduate writing often withholds orientation as a way of generating interest and in his writing the reader knows exactly what's going on and who is who by page three. He talked about content writing and grammar writing and said he tried to strip unnecessary grammatical morphemes from his prose. He said writing was about digesting the work of others so as to better produce your own work.

We came out at nine o'clock into the clear star-lit West Midlands night, all eight of us dizzied and eager to discuss our reactions in the pub.

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The après-ski of the MA were the gatherings before and particularly after the three-hour meetings, in the daytime at a campus coffee shop or canteen, after dark at The Varsity, the better of the nearby pubs. There was also an Anthology of the year's work to put together which involved unending committee meetings to discuss the title, cover, and organise the fund raising events to pay for its publication.

Some of the year were rarely on campus, those who were married and who were doing the course part-time over two years without disrupting their lives too much, and the core group who hung out with each other were the recent English graduates living on or near campus who didn't have to worry about drinking and driving or about getting back to feed the kids or beat the rush hour. Friendships were made, novels taken out of drawers and exchanged, personal websites shared.

For me, a mature student who'd always existed outside the arts, even as an undergraduate, I was an oddity among my group, but some of the staff were my age and I found rapport there.

Not that it wasn't fun to be a student again among a young group. Going back to that star-lit night after David's first session, we had all arrived at the Varsity pub. Chinese students doing MScs in Chemistry and Statistics were there ten to a table socialising with university volunteers and gagging on beer and beef wellington. We found a table and exchanged lively chat.

I recall one of our group querying the sexiness of a scene in David Vann's novel *Caribou Island* when a character walks out of the shower naked, shaved and in high heels, turns around, bends and looks at her man friend from between her legs. So now she stood on the Varsity parquet floor assuming the pose, wanting to know if that really was sexy. It was. Then there was the week someone was in tears because the excerpt from the trilogy they had been working on since they were sixteen and which no one had ever read was not good enough and they'd been asked to produce something else. They did and that was better. Then always there was agonising over whether this MA was worth doing, if time was being spent usefully. One student wondered if they shouldn't be in London trying to write comedy for television without wasting another second on education. Then for some the work-load was impossible, they were still young enough to have trouble getting out of bed before ten o'clock or into bed before eight pints of lager. And then conversations tended to move towards sex. People pulled out phones and showed Tinder lovers, Facebook profiles. Before long they were talking about dick size and the nightclub in Leamington Spa, and I got tiring of hearing the same dominant voices in the group, made my excuses and left.



### 3. THE WARWICK POETS

The vocation to be a poet, like a nun or monk, always seemed to me bad luck. There were a number of poets around Warwick and though I don't understand modern poetry and didn't get to know them very well, I saw enough of them to feel I got their predicament. These Warwick poets either had lecturing jobs or didn't, or were on PhDs or weren't.

There was something called Warwick Thursdays when invited speakers from around the UK came to the Writer's Room for an hour at lunch to talk to us. They were writers, agents and editors in the publishing world but mostly they were poets. Poets seemed to have nothing better to do than attend Warwick Thursdays, either as the guest speaker or as a member of the small audience. When editors or agents came they were always in a rush to get back to London, but poets seemed ready to stay all afternoon because no one was paying them to be anywhere else and there was nowhere outside the campus they needed to be. To the poets speaking at Warwick Thursday, being there was less a favour to the English Department than a rare opportunity to promulgate their work.

I liked them. They were sociable, easy-going people but I began to think they were burdened by the fact their linguistic virtuosity, if that is what it was, had no monetary value in the world, keeping them poor so long as they remained poets. They liked to be in the pub but as they stood their rounds I thought they couldn't forget their budget and couldn't drink exactly what they wanted. Probably shortage of money was a frequent topic of pub conversation and although money was not their object in life it figured in their thoughts obsessively. As they sank their pints as folornly skint as professional chess players I thought they must rue the fact they had chosen to be geek poets over geek coders (whose brains were surely similarly wired), opting for warm beer in the West Midlands over sun-glinting glasses of tequila in California and a life with the momentum that comes from a good income and rapid career flight.

In the department one was an archivist, another a PhD, and on one Thursday they invited a friend poet who was living in Manchester. He read his deep, witty verses and during the Q&A one of them asked, 'If somebody paid you *not* to write poetry how much would you need and would you accept?' This question sounded like part of their prior conversation in the pub, when the friends drank their ale and twisted the knife into each other. And the

poet, who was trying to raise a family on a poet's income, answered, 'If someone paid me twelve-thousand a year not to write poetry then yes I would gladly never write a poem again.'

Another of their poet friends was living in Sheffield and she came. She called herself the Modern Troubadour because some of her poetry was spoken word poetry and she had been on stage at the national poetry slam finals. It was poetry written knowing what an audience was and how to get it going and everyone in the room liked it and was energised by it. The fees were forty pounds here, a hundred there if you were lucky, she told us, and more often than not the performance was gratis.

Some poets came who were themselves professors. One was a Spanish poet and she read her stuff out in Spanish and her translator read it out in English. Another was a fine old chap from Oxford. He read in a dry voice and he was doing well, I thought, until he prefaced a work by telling us to 'just listen to the music'. He had been teaching undergraduates for forty years. I heard no music and instead of listening to his next poem I began to think that by all means talk of poetry as music but not the moment before you are about to recite it.

It seemed although there was no money in poetry there was room in academia for a small number of poet professors, one university making links with another with state funding, and it seemed that, when everyone who cared about poetry was collected together, which was the case on these Warwick Thursdays, then this world had its acknowledged high priests, innovators and stars, even if their splash in the wider world was a small one.

Next an American associate professor showed up who dressed like a New Yorker with friends in Park Avenue. Her poetry was laid out on the page like a drawing or architects' blueprint. She had been living in a place called Palouse and here encountered the last remaining Columbia River Pygmie Rabbit, asking herself, 'What is this rabbit telling me?' I was inclined to laugh at her about the Columbia River Pygmie Rabbit but she won me over. She was privileged, she worked hard, she seriously vocalised the world's problems and it was clear, though she never quite let her hair down, that she did bring poetry to her grandchildren's upbringing when they weren't being coached for Park Avenue.

Then a big American turned up, strong but gentle, hell-raising but knowing the trauma of loss. He spoke without status, easily articulate, carrying the room along with what he was saying. He was a big deal and our Warwick poets were all there lapping it up. He was an ex-everything: ex-

smoker, drinker, drug-taker. He was a surviving Bill Hicks who'd got through his self-destructive impulses. He read out a poem he'd written in Emily Dickenson's very room in Amherst Massachusetts. He told us, 'I'm fifty-six. The drama is I'm only as good as my last poem. Isn't that sad? That's my life.' He couldn't stay long. He was expected at Cambridge University for a reading that evening.