Books

Beyond the Writers’ Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction


It didn’t matter what genre our lesson plans said we were practicing with the thirty-one juniors in our fifth-period creative writing class at St. Paul’s Harding High School last spring. The seven teenage moms in the class always veered toward forms of creative nonfiction. We’d assign poetry; they’d write pithy and poetic birth memoir in prose. We’d teach clever tricks for structuring short stories (aligned with our state’s standards in “artistic creation and performance,” of course); they’d deliver scathing essayistic denunciations of absent boyfriends. We’d ask for “show-don’t-tell” descriptions of strangers on the street; they’d compose miniature word portraits of their infant sons or daughters.

We were slow to figure out what was happening; there was a disjunction between the ambitions of our syllabus and the writerly motivations of these young mothers. We were working toward building writers from the outside, through the application of technique as demanded by our standards and our own history as teachers. These students were working from the inside, defining life experience for themselves through writing. They wanted the class to be a place where they could follow Carol Bly’s directive to “be truthful.” As Bly puts it in her exuberant new book, “be truthful, tell things in your personal voice, and have your modus operandi be revealing your own life circumstances through anecdote or narrative and revealing the meanings you attach to those circumstances” (xvii). This is Bly’s definition of creative nonfiction, but it could just as well serve as a guiding principle for the teaching of creative writing in all its modes.

Beyond the Writers’ Workshop is a riveting critique of educational group-think methodology and the nonreflective “psychological habitats” in which our consumer culture prefers for us to hang out. Bly takes a close look at currently popular teaching techniques that rely on the “workshopping” of students’ writing, and she is not optimistic about what she sees. In many workshop situations, Bly points out, the group provides cheap advice about surface issues in the writer’s piece—if the group gets even that far. The writer’s attention is drawn to the top, toward technique and mechanistic “how-to” approaches. The writer is left alone to tackle the core issues of meaning that are most in need of thinking and revision. In some cases, the writer is even discouraged from delving too deeply into these central issues. The first draft needs more, she says, but it needs more from underneath, not from on top.

Bly offers more than curmudgeonly opposition to what is currently popular, however. Her writing is true to her book’s title. If we want our students to dig deep into the meaning and metaphor lurking in their real lives and in their writing, we need to help them puncture the crusty permafrost of what Bly calls our “American junk culture.” We need to plan our teaching so that we are helping students to “dig for the potatoes,” as Barry Lane puts it in his book Revise’s Toolbox (1999).

Bly writes that “A shockingly large part of our job as writing teachers is to save students from the junk culture” (134). To this she adds that a teacher’s purpose “is to awaken, and to give confidence to the imagination—imagination being the connection-making aspect of human intelligence” (51).

Bly goes on to offer an energizing and intellectually unified array of ideas for teachers who want to go beyond the writing workshop and stand up for our students against this “fascism of the simple.” Chapter 2, on the three stages of writing—inspiration, spiritual deepening, and literary fixing—is packed with helpful insights for teachers, particularly as she explicates the often forgotten second stage.

The second of these stages is where the real work of writing with meaning and resonance comes, and it is where thoughtless workshop approaches are least helpful. From Bly’s perspective, group critiques of early drafts too often simply direct writers to add to their inspiration. Seldom are writers asked to deepen or reexamine those inspirations. This is a deficit that goes beyond our classrooms, but can be at least partially remedied there, as Bly writes: “Most children today graduate from high school without having been asked questions about ideas . . . they learn mechanical data, but they don’t learn the connective principles behind those data” (4). She notes that:
American living rooms don't ring with talk about one's inner love of truth, or inner love of beauty, or inner love of goodness or one's inner hatred of meaninglessness or inner despair over or inner fear of cruelty. We count on . . . encouragement from elementary and high school English teachers . . . to light and to preserve our inner fires, if inner fires are to be lighted and preserved (42).

What student writers need during this stage is not more technical advice—that is appropriate later—but courage and help in becoming “psychologically sturdy.” All of us who want to write need to strive for the same in our noncontemplative society—a society in which, as Bly notes, “the very idea of using writing as a tool to become more deeply one’s own particular self sounds nutty” (xviii).

Bly is refreshingly honest and informed about the challenges public school writing teachers face, and she is not shy about stating some difficult truths. There is little more difficult work than conducting one-on-one writing conferences with students, she says. She reminds us that writers need solitude to do thoughtful work, that using small groups in writing classrooms as a way to deal with overcrowding is a fraud, and that American political leadership is negligent for not providing adequate funding so that “public school students can have the experience [of small classes] that goes on in private schools.” But her argument is most compelling when she offers specific ideas and provocative philosophical frameworks for writing teachers.

Her chapter on using empathic inquiry to deepen first drafts will be tremendously helpful to teachers struggling to move their students toward meaningfulness in their writing. Empathic inquiry is a five-step process that starts with teachers and students getting serious about listening. It teaches methods of setting aside our own points of view for a time for the sake of engaging in another person’s words, builds individuals’ capacities to ask open-ended questions, offers explicit instruction in paraphrasing, and then springs us to “look forward and plan free spiritedly.”

The chapter on how an understanding of psychologically significant stage-development theories of human ethical and intellectual growth can inform our approach to literature and writing is stunningly original, and Bly’s overview of contemporary neuroscience and its implications for writers and writing teachers made me want to read more.

The first half of the book is dedicated to these kinds of overarching themes. Bly invites her readers to ride along as her writer’s imagination makes connections. It’s a lively, fascinating trip, a kind of unified theory of teaching creative writing, with special attention to nonfiction, that’s meant to inspire us to build our own theories. It definitely encourages individual thought about some of the accepted, though often unexamined, tenets of contemporary writing pedagogy.

Bly takes a look at specific groups of writing students in the second half of the book. I found her chapters on teaching elementary, middle, and high school students especially pertinent. She’s taken her “empathic inquiry” approach to heart in these sections. Her suggestions for teaching creative nonfiction to children and high school students is based on careful listening to kids and teachers and is grounded in the day-to-day realities of classroom life.

“Children should not be allowed to write about anything they see on television,” she says. Not because television is all bad (though that’s mostly true), but because we want our kids to practice moving into “confident reflections arising in their own minds” (149) beyond the constant bombardment of engrossing stimuli that’s the lifeblood of television. She offers a progressive intellectual, ethical, and practical defense of having kids memorize stories (and, later, poetry), and she gives some forthright advice about conducting class discussions in which the speed of our kids’ responses becomes less important than the content of what they have to say. In addition, her examination of the monocultures in which many of our high school students live is apt.

In other chapters, Bly writes about teaching writing at the college level, participating in writers’ conferences, and the relationship of aesthetics and ethics in contemporary American literature—all in strong, clear sentences and paragraphs that move as crisply as sailboats in a fresh breeze.

The book ends with an eighty-four page collection of appendices that are so compelling and original that you’ll probably end up reading them aloud to your closest teaching friends. Here, Bly offers fifteen writing exercises that hold true to her call for teaching writing from the inside out. Most of the exercises can be adapted to fit the level of students you happen to teach, and all of them are pedagogically significant. (They’re also the most fun-to-read lesson plans I’ve ever seen, with such intriguing titles as “Writing Without Clichés About a Beautiful Place,” “A Writing Exercise for Extroverts,” and “An Irritating Person Exercise.”)
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The appendices also include usage sheets for helping teach the "literary fixes" stage of the writing process, a content-focused "Format for Writing an Essay" that offers innovative ways for student writers to organize their own thinking in ways more honest than the five-paragraph bore all those standardized writing tests so often encourage, and a truly inspirational "List of Useful Sentences for Writers in a Tight Spot"—a set of thoughtful sentences for writers to memorize and use when they need to fend off intellectual bullies.

Bly's final appendix, "The Robertson-Bly Ethics Code for Teaching Creative Writing to Middle and High School Students" is a call for honest talk about serious issues in the teaching of writing, a conversation those teenage mothers—and many other students—are continually inviting us to join. It's a great way to end a great book.

Reference


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