



Philip S Jennings' *Writers' Club*

The Tutor Confesses

This is the Writers' Club which used to be at City Lit. It is as strong as ever and remains unaffected by recession, poverty, excuses for depression or wealth. Writers' Club has merely moved. It is now at The Word Centre.

The format of the two hour class remains similar. There are anything from 10 to 12 writers of varying ability and temperament- on any given evening- who are usually engaged in the process of delivering a short story, novel, poem or drama; if not, they want to, or have a 'cautious idea'. That said, the Club also considers articles, features, biography, autobiography, research: the written word. By 'consider' I mean works of any genre, calibre, orientation, fact or fiction, are read and receive feed-back for which a writer joins a class.

Feedback usually falls in to one of three categories: personal emotive reaction, critical analysis, assessment and suggested guidance.

Although it is said that writing has to be a solitary occupation or obsession, a writer constantly refers to an inner voice or self which seems to know or be more sensitive to what will be fit for purpose. This is an area of feedback.

It is the fate of all human beings to be influenced by the living and the dead. It cannot be otherwise. Despised or revered, we are born into cultural traditions. There is never nothing to write about if you want to write. Writer's block becomes an absorbing subject for fiction.

The tone and content of our resident critics reveal who they are. And writers may find that some comments are more helpful than others; after all a Writers' Club attracts individuals from all walks of life. This is a club and quickly we get to know each other and anticipate, perhaps, a typical critical reaction with some eagerness or a wry smile. The truth is there is always something to be learned by the recipient mind, and the starting point of insight, discovery or research will often originate in an unexpected place-otherwise you would have found it earlier.

Criticism -in the popular press and teenagers of all ages- is often considered an ill wind of malice. In a writing class it is an opportunity for all to be made aware of methods of improvement. Criticism is a helpful process. It points out strengths and weaknesses conscious of the moot truth that it is easier to say what is 'wrong' than write what is 'right.' One of my corny jokes in the past was that we speak with consideration in class and tell the truth in the pub.

Some people say that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Criticism is not indifferent. But it does demand an honest heart. Only assassins are assassinated.

Writers learn from all kinds of criticism as we learn from all kinds of art, the good, the bad and the sad.

I remember a woman once wrote of a mother who bought her son, for his birthday, his dream, a motor-bike. And the next day he took the bike out for a spin and died in a crash. Tears flooded the woman's voice as she read, and this was one of the few



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times in many years that the class took a tea-break. Therapeutic writing had strayed into fiction. Critical faculties had to be turned off.

Another time a gaunt man with haunted eyes read a story about a man with Aids. When he had finished an individual asked him if he had the virus himself. I had to step in then and make the point that sources of fiction were only for disclosure if offered by the writer as relevant; even then they would probably only feed on a mind which thrives on shallow wonder, constantly seeking to be amazed. Amazing!

It remains doubtful whether television could survive without its power of three: amazing, incredible, awesome.

Newcomers to the class will meet old-comers who were once newcomers who stayed-for whatever reasons. This has never been a problem. Writers' Club exists for those who stay for years and those who join for a term or two. On several occasions someone has entered the classroom and I have said something like: Er, do I know you, have we met before? And the answer has been: I used to come to this class, might be about ten years ago. In this way we are a club where like-minded people meet and socialise. We usually eat meals together at the end of term. It has even been known for the club to see a concert, a play or film together.

Years ago after gaining my first degree and supplementing it with the ever- appalling PGCE, I abandoned the supply circuit and went to Jamaica to teach. I needed to shake- up my writing perspective.

In Cornwall College, Montego Bay I particularly remember a student coming to me with a newspaper containing a writing competition and a story he had written. 'Mr Jay, I have written a story called Eight and a Half Shady Tree Lane for the competition. I'd like you to read it.' I did and returned it later. The fourteen year old's story was exceptional in detail, sensitivity and consistency of style. It made me wonder if writers were born like greyhounds to run. 'Enter the competition, Michael, it's a lovely piece.' He did. Some weeks later the newspaper called me to ask if I'd had a hand in its writing. I told them truthfully No - and thought I wasn't that good, yet.

Michael won the competition and the prize: a trip for two to Florida. I still have the ashtray from Florida he brought me back. I recall this episode because it told me something I already knew: I knew about good writing, how to criticise effectively, the sustained focus involved in my own and other people's work.

After Jamaica I wandered up to New York and whilst walking the streets of Manhattan stopped in front of a book-shop where a literary paper promoted an M.A. in Creative Writing taught by Joseph Heller. This was the late seventies and creative writing linked to academia was not common. I was in fact shocked by the concept of creative writing, getting a Masters for it and being taught by a famous writer.

Now there are creative writing courses everywhere: hospitals, hotels, halls, prisons, pubs, libraries, community centres, schools, colleges, universities, sunny islands, cruise ships. You can even obtain a Ph. D. in Creative Writing. A long time after New



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York I obtained one from Lancaster University. Before this phenomenon Thomas Mann had this to say about writers and writing:

‘Anyone can be a writer but first they must go to prison’.

Someone else said: a writing course is as good as the person who tutors it. The only real education is the communication of enthusiasm.

In our second millennium when nothing has escaped its place in the retail drawer, writers do not necessarily need a coach, and money may not buy success. But for some it is a blessing and an opportunity to find an outlet of expression far from the madding mundane. Or like my student in Jamaica, a little feed-back and honest appraisal may suffice. There are individuals who find a writing course and think if they take it they will become a writer. That is not the case- though it can happen.

As for academic writing degrees, they may provide an individual with letters but no publication.

When capitalism and education slipped into bed together, zeitgeist changed. After all, how could a student fail a writing degree after paying thousands of pounds for it? What kind of deal would that be? Would failing a student be good business? Besides, who knows what good writing is anyway? Educationalists frequently don't.

Youngsters doing their GCSE's and A levels in literature are subject to a selection of drovels and microwave poems. Heaven help the examiners who are obliged to mark a student with a developing critical faculty – there is no place for either party. A student is taught by the structure of the system to play the game. Strange things happen.

I was having a little surf on the new Dell the other day and was surprised to find a number of writers who had attended Writers' Club, now held writing positions in residence – Good Lord! Some of them I'd cherished myself! One writer I remembered had no publishing record when she was with me, and as far as I could see, none since.

If you want to be a writer you have to practise and produce; if you want to be a footballer you kick the ball. When a writer's work is going well, the feeling is good, the world is a better place and inside, confidence builds and new ideas suggest themselves - as energy always breeds energy. Publication appears like a lovely galleon on the horizon but it may disappear in the mist or come to shore with golden doubloons- or something.

It is not to fall romantically in love with the idea of writing unless you are prepared to write until your pen runs out of ink or your computer breaks its heart. The writer is the hard drive.

You may as the cliché flies suffer for your art but it is far better if you enjoy it. What we enjoy, we continue. There are all sorts of joy. Creating something you are pleased with and having your inner pleasure genuinely confirmed by others, connects an individual with the human race and affords magnanimity.



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I have been writing, tutoring and editing for years now. With a number of other like-minded writers I turned to publishing for two years and Jennings Magazine was able to publish a variety of new fiction and improve my social life. I sent a magazine to Roald Dahl and offered him twenty-five pounds for a story shortly after he had received big cheques from television for Tales of the Unexpected. I keep his letter in which he explained he was no longer writing short fiction but considered the magazine excellent. He was a man with heart.

I still write stories and enter competitions –one year Bridport gave me great pleasure-for after all what else can you do with short fiction? There only ever were a few burrows and they were already occupied by the connected, the virtuous and others.

The term, Vanity Publishing, although of course it still exists with its stigmas, is falling out of use as the arena of publishing in general opens up and the heartless internet is big enough to take all to its bosom.

Writers in the second millennium who wish to have their work published, somewhere, can and may. This much has happened. How has this promoted literature, furthered understanding between peoples and found solace in the heart of the lonely hunter? I have been to Greece many times but have yet to visit the oracle in Delphi.

I have had approximately a hundred and five stories published, a little novel, some poetry and essays; and written five non-fiction works to order. Like everyone else who writes I still believe my best is yet to come. Why? – it is not because I am an optimist, or a pessimist come to that, nor am I positive or negative: those fore-head stickers mean nothing to me- it's just the way it is, or has to be. Sirens are calling.

FEES

Fee is £130 for the 11 week term, payable in advance to Dr. P. S, Jennings, 10 Mansfield Road, London EI7 6PJ.

A NOTE

Lesson 1,all writers, please bring 1-2 paragraphs of work in progress, perhaps a copy or two for the hard of hearing.

Philip Jennings