

Deborah Wardle, Julianne Van Loon, Stayci Taylor, Francesca Rendle-Short, Peta Murray, David Carlin, editors. *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2024, 195 pages. ISBN 978-1-350-18421-3 Hardback AUD\$160.00; Paperback AUD\$52.99

‘Weird, Wild or Wanton’

While the sheer number of creative writing handbooks is staggering, the fact is that the truly useful ones could be counted on one hand, and most of those are old, though not out of date. In more than 20 years of creative writing mentorship and teaching, I would inevitably recommend the same few, among which are Carmel Bird’s *Dear Reader*, Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, and (yes) Stephen King’s *On Writing*—all sensible, timeless, and practical guides for the emerging writer.

But it is 2024, and the reckoning that has arrived to challenge traditional ways of thinking and writing, the reckoning that demands an acknowledgment of the truth, a restoration of rights, and the dethroning of long-established forms of power, the reckoning that has brought us #MeToo and Makarrata, is now quite rightly at work in artistic practice. If the question *Is all writing political?* were posed, most would disagree. But all writing *is* a political act, especially published writing, since its production and dissemination rely on institutional powers and educational privileges that are not only denied to many, but are also deliberately withheld from them.

With this in mind, the editors of *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods* have approached their task in the conviction that “writing is inextricably linked with political engagement” (2) and produced a book that seeks to disrupt, question, and reinvent much about the process of creative writing. For a start, while the title might be straightforward, there is nothing straightforward in the contents. The format initially provides an “organising principle” (3) but the result is anything but a conventional A to Z of creative and literary terms and definitions. Students of the craft expecting topics such as Allegory, Ambiguity or Autofiction will be disappointed. Instead, entries commence with things like Archival-poetics, Atmospheric, Braiding and Bricolage, through to topics like Rites, Sensing, and Speculation, until we arrive at the final letter of the alphabet.

Secondly, the editors assert that creative writing “privileges the imagination” (3). There is little contentious about that, one might think, until we are reminded that many Western or Eurocentric beliefs such as imaginative freedom cannot or should not hold when trying to tell someone else’s story, especially when that story is the result of denial and disempowerment, and when ancient, Indigenous cultures might prioritise collective knowledge over individual stories.

Nevertheless, creative writing also privileges much else, including doubt, failure, the messy, the ambiguous and endless unanswered yet necessary questions, and these themes resonate throughout the book. In the Introduction the editors admit that at first glance the book’s method might seem “weird, wild or wanton” but they make a virtue of playful subversiveness, encouraging readers to be equally adventurous and to approach the book in a haphazard or “slant” manner (5).

And so I did. An invitation to disruptive reading is hard to resist. A non-linear challenge to the alphabetical form the project exploits is equally appealing, although the risk is over-fragmentation—fragmentation itself is obviously celebrated, even if it does not receive its own entry—and of the collage approach being overstimulating or even exhausting. However, the chapters are short, mostly under two pages, and many of them have titles so intriguing that they demand investigation if only to see what possible connections topics like Drawing, Fade Out or Yoga could have to creative writing.

I started well down the alphabet with Radical Effrontery in anticipation of something bold and provocative. This chapter situates its Wiradjuri author and academic Jeanine Leane amongst her people, Country and time and then challenges the euphemisms of settler colony language and its ongoing obscuring of “truths of invasion, occupation and continued settler profit and skin privilege.” In this context Radical Effrontery is a “style and practice of communication that is direct and one where the speaker/writer is prepared to run the risk of being described as abrupt” (145). Chelsea Watego’s *Another Day in the Colony* (2021) is cited as a prime example of such radical effrontery. As anyone who has read this book will know, Watego refuses to censor or “tone down” her language, radically and creatively using terms such as “violence” throughout her essays. “Radical effrontery is about asking difficult questions about who has the authority to tell someone else’s story; and what is the legacy of literary representation” (145–46). It is up to us, not Leane, to meet these challenges and answer such questions.

From here I moved back to Delia Falconer’s entry on Paragraphing, since the shape, function and overall logic of the paragraph have always fascinated me (though not so much as the Sentence, which somewhat disappointingly does not get an entry in the book). Here Falconer devotes attention to the materiality of the paragraph and suggests that the contemporary trend for tiny paragraphs (such as in Jenny Offill’s 2020 novel, *Weather*) reflects anxiety about our “age of catastrophic and rapid change” especially in relation to climate change (124), a sobering thought.

I then moved to Camping (by Finnish academic Soile Veijola) out of sheer curiosity, to find that this is a “method for writing oneself into a community of strangers” (27). A literal-minded reader might be expecting practical tips such as using portable solar power to keep the laptop running, but Camping, like many entries in this book, is essentially speculative and theoretical: “Camping as a method of writing leans on an ethical epistemology that is open about its inevitable narrative and constructed nature” (28). No advice about pitching a tent or building a fire then (though both activities seem very open to writerly metaphor).

Entries like Character, Preposition and Vocabulary only ostensibly belong in the creative writing handbook-verse. Instead these are meditative, questioning, riff-like explorations of the topic, some of which explode dearly held creative writing workshop tenets. Under Character, Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas from the University of Chicago offers a gripping scenario followed by many questions, culminating in anti-advice about developing characters: “Don’t give them hobbies . . . Don’t spin the wheel of attributes and interests. Rather, give . . . a reason to be or not to be.” She also challenges that egregious term “relatability,” admitting “there are plenty of characters I care about who are barely relatable” (31–32). I cheered when I read this chapter. Were I still teaching, I would make every aspiring student novelist read it.

Not all entries are playful or subversive. Sarah Holland-Batt’s chapter on Ekphrasis is a model of scholarly criticism offering a succinct and precise description of the topic, a clear sense of the boundaries of the term (ekphrasis is “not a literary form” with “set rules” or a “prescribed stance” 54), its historical origins, and its application to contemporary poetic practice. Dialogue (by Cath Moore) is another distilled and lucid explanation of the function of a major element of narrative that could easily be found in more conventional guides to writing.

In such an ambitious project (six editors and 58 contributors) it is inevitable that there will be chapters that are less successful, seeming contrived or arbitrary in order to fit the broader objectives. Archival-poetics seems mis-categorised, as its far more interesting key term used in this entry is “blood memory.” Queering, described as a “polyphonic, non-binary, irreverent conglomeration” (4) of a chapter into which all contributors were invited (via an online shared document), is either an inscrutable mess or a glorious collage, depending on how you read it. And

the one entry under Z is somewhat anticlimactic. Zim, a hybrid term from Singapore poet Alvin Pang, is simply another way of describing draft work.

Finally, as one who finds things like vacuuming valuable in stimulating the imagination, I read Aritha van Herk's entry on Procrastination as a joyous vindication. She has coined a term to be cherished: "menial usefulness." We all avoid the task of writing with varying levels of guilt but she argues that this "creative procrastination offers fertile ground for insight or discovery." Whether we disappear to the laundry or the kitchen (van Herk makes rhubarb chutney and sorts colours from whites) these quotidian activities are, like digression, a form of research itself, giving writers "leave to explore, and . . . to discover the crux of the writing" (139).

Who then will be the readers of such a book? While it is full of gems such as the above, it is unlikely to be set for undergraduate students, though their lecturers would learn much by using it. And almost certainly it is not for those who participate in community-college short courses or the workshop sessions now part of writers' festivals across the country. The element of eccentricity might limit its appeal, however the wide range of contributors and thus diverse opinions should find a broad readership within the creative writing discipline, especially amongst those who appreciate the weird, wild and wanton.

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