



Beyond Craft: An Anti-Handbook for Creative Writers

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Review of

Westbrook, Steve, and James Ryan. *Beyond Craft: An Anti-Handbook for Creative Writers*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

Steve Westbrook and James Ryan had a clear idea of what this book was not going to be: yet another manual with a list of suggestions for the reader-writer to improve the quality of their writing or their chances to get published. They offer little advice on how writers should or should not write; instead, they document the change of landscape in a journey across four main territories: where creative writing comes from; who creative writers are; how creative writers find their audiences; and self-publishing in the internet age. None of these territories are exactly uncharted: in fact, section one might read like a travel blog article about Paris or Rome; however, Westbrook and Ryan are very thorough in their presentation and in showing us not only the dazzle and the majestic splendour, but also the more stinky and dodgier places. While endeavouring to offer as many points of view as they can, Westbrook and Ryan do not shy away from condemning the flaws, the injustices and the contradictions of the practice and discipline of creative writing.

Far from proposing a black-and-white vision, Westbrook and Ryan are inclined towards a more nuanced attitude, starting from the title of the book itself. In their introduction, borrowing the metaphor of Schrödinger's cat, they claim that their book is both a creative writing handbook and an anti-handbook. This is quite a high level of trust they are expecting from a reader who has only just begun to read this book. However, it pays off to follow them along this path suspended "between paradox and possibility", as by the end of the introduction the spirit with which they are asking the readers to approach this handbook becomes a bit clearer.

In the introduction, the authors acknowledge that "having spent entire chapters being critical of others and their takes on the enterprise of Creative Writing", it would be hypocritical not to invite the

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reader to be critical of them. At the end of the introduction, and at the end of each following chapter, the reader is therefore presented with a creative-critical apparatus that enables them to reflect on what the authors have discussed and challenge their views. This apparatus is composed of four segments: discussion questions; a blank section to write “questions, concerns and creative-critical comments”; a prompt for a writing experiment, usually reprising one or more ideas discussed in the chapter; and a “deep reading” section with further reading recommendations. In its simplicity, this apparatus is precisely what makes this book a handbook and an anti-handbook.

While we have seen plenty of creative writing manuals offering ideas and prompts for exercises, this is the first time I have seen a creative writing book explicitly asking you to be critical of its authors. 50% of what this book could teach and share is in the reader’s hands, or rather in their willingness to engage in an active conversation. Considering the collaborative philosophy heavily promoted throughout the book, I wonder whether it would not have been even more relevant to include a way in which the reader could report their reflections to the authors themselves and complete a full circle of knowledge exchange.

While we are dissecting Westbrook and Ryan’s choice of words for their title, let us take a step back and look at the first half of it: *Beyond Craft*. Once again, the authors are keen to convince us that the time has come to be critical of several established trends in the way creative writing has been researched over the decades. One of these trends is a certain obsession with “craft”, manifesting itself in the form of books and methods preoccupied with aspects of fiction the reader-writer has to master if they want to succeed (whatever that means): ‘character’, ‘voice’, ‘conflict’, ‘point of view’, etc.

Such elements of craft are purposely ignored to make space to a much more urgent conversation about several ‘elephants in the room’. In the first section, we learn how creative writing workshops have contributed to a form of censorship preventing emergent writers from “discussing issues of racial representation” within wider investigations of “big ideas” and “big questions”, often barred in the ‘workshop’ environment. Both section one and two are dedicated to fact-checking fairy tales and dismantling myths about how authors write, touching on several stages of composition: from idea to manuscript, from manuscript to publication. A helpful review of the four main “understandings of where [...] the literature that writers produce actually comes from” – Romanticism, Expressivism, social-epistemic rhetoric, and process paradigms – followed by the conclusion that while these movements have always been seen as contradicting one another, perhaps there is value in recognising that they are “co-influential schools of thought”.

Perhaps the largest and most awkward elephant in the creative writing room is approached with scientific analysis and intellectual rigour sufficient to allow the reader to forget to feel depressed about what they are reading. This is perhaps the conversation that creative writing tutors tend to avoid the most:

you guessed correctly; it is publishing. In what I probably regard as my favourite quote from the book, the authors are not willing to ignore and justify the way the p-word is so carefully eluded:

We have frequently heard creative writing teachers suggest that students wait until they've polished their work to worry about publishing [...]. The problem is that all too often later never arrives. Questions get postponed indefinitely, and the perpetually deferred literary marketplace becomes all the more obscure and enigmatic in its absence, transforming into the stuff of mystery, like a scene from an Agatha Christie novel. We imagine Hercule Poirot sniffing around the writer's workshop, twitching his moustache, and looking troubled. "Where have the publishing opportunities gone?" he asks himself, and "why is no one talking about their disappearance?"

Providing the reader with an overview of commercial and small/literary/university publishing and self-publishing, the authors showcase plenty of successful examples proving that even in the most adverse circumstances, creative people "tend to defy depressing statistics on a daily basis". Despite the authors' intentions to sound encouraging, they do not sugar-coat the average chances to make it as an emergent author in each type of publishing, and some of the case studies they mention represent the exceptions, not the rule.

Not helping the reader-writer regain their motivation, a substantial gap in the knowledge presented in this section concerns a publishing area many emergent writers might be keen on learning more about. In chapter 7, which is dedicated to commercial publishing, several paragraphs explain in detail the rise to fame of best-selling authors such as James Patterson and JK Rowling, and the various factors that played a role in their success. Westbrook and Ryan, however, openly acknowledge that this chapter does not present case studies for many successful "mid-list" authors, i.e., authors who "make decent livings". Furthermore, one of the very few hopeful claims within this chapter could have benefited from deeper investigation: "There are many ways to define 'success' and the pool of writers looks more diverse as your definition includes mid-list and other sales figures". Then why not delve into it a bit more, I wonder.

"Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth," wrote Henry Thoreau. By the end of this book, the reader will feel that of all those things mentioned by Thoreau, perhaps truth is the only one that can be found here. Hindered by myths of literary greatness, conservative teaching methods and a hostile literary marketplace, writers receive very little love, very little money and very little fame.

However, a most powerful recurring thread in Westbrook and Ryan's anti-handbook makes amends for our open wounds. While the reader has to make a concerted effort to feel hopeful about the future of creative writing, in particular if they are aiming at publication and recognition of some kind, Westbrook and Ryan are excellent at uncovering gems, sending a positive message about how collaborative

writing might redefine our ideas of reward and success. Examples of exciting collaborative writing are scattered throughout the book and build up to an inspiring carousel in the last chapter, which features case studies ranging from Japanese international space poetry to *Voices from Haiti*; from poetry wrestling in Peru to the never-ending possibilities offered by new technologies, such as enhanced eBooks and augmented reality. Not only do these projects transcend the geographical boundaries of the American landscape – which still dominates research in creative writing – but they also contradict a certain narrative promoting the idea that art cannot meddle with social struggle and cultural intervention.

The prominent discourse on creative collaboration might not appeal to everybody; and I suspect that there are a lot of writers out there who are equally jealous and proud of their individuality as creative people and artists. However, Westbrook and Ryan have planted lots of suggestions across all chapters to help writers find their own way, not least with the help of the critical apparatus they have made available. This is perhaps the most powerful tool for reader-writers to get in the habit of questioning the *many* truths promoted in creative writing handbooks of this kind, and to follow the authors' final piece of advice: to do your thing, "regardless of what others tell you".

Beyond Craft is a carefully researched book capable of terrifying and inspiring writers all at once. Sometimes it is hard not to feel overwhelmed when presented with so many reasons to give up the practice; however, such brutally honest research not only contributes to dismantle unhelpful myths but also empowers writers to actively look for ways to change what is currently not working. For example, now that we understand how the image of the writer has been manipulated to promote harmful concepts like literary greatness and genius, we can get rid of such an awkward burden, and, as this handbook suggests, make room to new ideas reinventing what it means to be a creative writer in the 21st century.