

Japan Writers Conference Reports

Alice Champion and Collaborative Writing

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Sections of Neville Shute's *A Town Like Alice* (1950) fictionalise the Japanese invasion of Malaya, where the two main characters are held as prisoners of war. The Alice of the title is Alice Springs, an outback town in Australia, close to iconic Uluru – known as Ayers Rock at the time of original publication. Alice is also Alice Champion, a name chosen by five women for its Australian association. In an almost historical reversal, these Alices held the audience captive with their insight, style and wit at the 9th annual Japan Writers Conference in Kobe, late October.

How can Alice Champion be five women, and what does this have to do with literature in language teaching? As stated, Alice Champion is the pseudonym – chosen for its emblematic associations, and for the fact that “C” is eye-level when one walks into the book shop – for Jenny Crocker, Jane Richards, Jane St Vincent Welch, Denise Tart and Madeline Oliver. These five women from inner-Sydney co-wrote the novel, *The Painted Sky*, published by Random House earlier this year. Before their presentation at the conference, copies of *The Painted Sky* were prominently displayed but selling slowly. The weight of the tome and the three thousand yen price tag, a typical amount for a book in Australia but expensive elsewhere, might have had something to do with that. After their informative and highly entertaining session there was not a copy to be seen.

The women belong to The Book Sluts book club (they'll read anything), and after a weekend away enjoying what seemed to be a Dostoevsky cosplay, replete with vodka, they decided to write a bestseller to fund a shared vision of crossing Russia by the Trans-Siberian railway. Classified by St Vincent Welch as neither “chook lit” nor “chick lit,” but rather literature with an appeal to female rural and urban dwellers alike, *The Painted Sky* was the result

(K. Sullivan, 2015). That vision has led the writers as far as Japan, and to a publishing deal in Germany, though not as yet to Siberia's snowy climes. In any case, it has taken them a very long way from the "back of Bourke" – the Australian equivalent of the middle of nowhere – the setting for much of their fiction.

Highly irreverent, though not irrelevant, four of the Alices led us through their collaborative process. *The Painted Sky* was submitted to Random House without solicitation, and was accepted by the publisher as an almost seamless manuscript, two extremely rare occurrences. One member is a journalist, and another a documentary editor, and most have some professional background in writing so the ability to cull and tighten undoubtedly gives them an advantage over many aspiring artists. Even so, the voices of five women sounding so much like one narrator is quite a feat. How was it achieved?

The quartet (the fifth member had obligations in Australia) said it boiled down to genuine collaboration, writing, rewriting and writing again. A section of the work-in-progress might be started by one member but another member would rework it, and then another, and so on. Egos were checked at the door as rigorous peer assessment took place. Suggestions were readily given and for the most part taken, or argued against with reason. Ultimately, only writing the sex scenes caused major semantic arguments, but also led to comedic fodder. Initially each member's submission to the steamy and saucy was anonymously written in the same format, with the same font and size to avoid identification and embarrassment. However, efforts failed because the friends knew each other so well that individual authorship was easily recognizable. Much like the act itself, they just decided to get over their prudishness and get on with it. As they lost their bashfulness, even the notoriously difficult-to-produce lines of lust became a natural part of their craft.

The sensual and sultry aside, LiLT members can take the success story of the Alices as an example of the benefits of peer assessment and process writing. Even within our own writing classes, English as an Additional Language (EAL) students can contribute to other class members' work, despite being novices, though a feedback model is needed. The Alices themselves recommend "The Three S's": specificity, sensitivity and being solutions-focused (Jenny Crocker, personal communication, November 18, 2015). This can be adapted to the EAL field. Within this field, student responses particularly focusing on content are generally most

beneficial to improving writing, but student-driven evaluation can also be useful for locating format errors, and giving advice on the aims of an assignment (Soares, 1998).

Feedback indicates that some students feel they benefit from being exposed to different content, form and levels of writing skill through peer assessment, rather than regarding their progress as an exclusive dialogue with the teacher (Advanced writing, personal communication, 2012; Seminar 2, personal communication, 2014). This encourages learner autonomy and agency. This process also enables learners to view their own prose from the reader's standpoint, rather than the writer's, which can help develop their own work. Students can concretely experience the difficulty of trying to follow writing that is too egocentric. Consequently, possible awareness is raised of the same failing in their own drafts (Zamel, 1982, p. 206).

If similar collaborative concepts are employed, the scope of exercises involving student-generated literature can widen. If small student groups attempt to write sections of an original story and are then required to rewrite the work of their partners, similar well-honed prose might occur. If that is a little too ambitious, at least the activity has potential as a source of new ideas and is conducive to strengthening notions of teamwork.

A popular writing exercise is asking students to compose in the "voice" of a particular author. In this case, collaborative methods are perhaps a good way of helping students discover the craft and concepts of tone and diction. A deeper analysis of selected pieces of literature, at both a practical skills-based and content-based level, is a possible result. There is a chance for writing and literature to develop organically, both as process and product, through the mechanism ". . . of discovering meaning" (Zamel, 1982). Furthermore, if students truly work together to convey their "thoughts and ideas," (1982) they also combine shared linguistic knowledge, and this can often be observed in their output while undertaking a task (Swain, 1995, 2005). Language use and awareness, hopefully leading to improvement, can advance as a result.

Alice Champion was engaging and it was a delight to make the acquaintance of four of its members. Many thanks to Jenny Crocker's brother, James Crocker, the founder of *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, for inviting them to attend. James hosted this year's conference at Kobe Women's University in Suma.

Members, Presentations and Publications

LiLT members known to me at the conference were John Roberts, Wendy Jones Nakanishi and myself. Many more may have been in attendance. Wendy, *sans* scheduled LiLT member Simon Bibby, presented on the process of publishing their Japan-based textbook, *Real Reads – an Introduction to Literature*. As well as participating in a panel discussion on getting published with Suzanne Kamata, Sara Kate Ellis and Ann Tashi Slater, Wendy also presented independently on making the most of being an expatriate writer in Japan. Her murder-mystery, *Imperfect Strangers* (written as Lea O’Harra), was available for purchase. John Roberts and I co-presented with Jared Angel on the successful running of a writing event (Angel), or writing group (Sullivan & Roberts). I also presented on returning to writing after a hiatus, touching upon the lack of confidence that can sometimes crowd out creativity and productivity.

It was an inspiring weekend. The conference, though not directly related to language teaching, was definitely attended by many language teachers who are also writers, or vice versa. 2016’s writers’ conference location has yet to be announced. Contact John Gribble on [gribblej\[at\]gol.com](mailto:gribblej[at]gol.com) to be added to the mailing list. For more ideas on collaborative writing for fiction, a few of the Alice’s have guidelines and information at www.groupfiction.net

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Appendix A. Alice Campion

