

Book Review

Lacan, identity and creative writing in the classroom

A review of Zoe Charalambous's *Writing Fantasy and the Identity of the Writer: A Psychosocial Writer's Workbook*.

Palgrave. ISBN: 978-3-030-20263-7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20263-7>

Iain Maloney

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

Zoe Charalambous's 2019 book is the latest addition to Palgrave's "Studies in Creativity and Culture" series, and the subtitle suggests it is among appropriate company: other books in the series include *Everyday Creativity and the Healthy Mind* and *Creativity, Wellbeing and Mental Health Practice*. Dr. Charalambous received her PhD in Psychosocial Studies from University College London in 2014, and this book derives in part from her doctoral thesis. The qualifier "in part" is there because while the book does tick all the thesis boxes—literature review, methodology, results and discussion—it aims to be much more. Charalambous's goal is to provide a tool with which creative writers can explore their authorial voice and identity through the utilisation of exercises Charalambous has tried and tested on her own students. It is also a guide for teachers of creative writing on activities that have worked for the author.

Given that her approach is psychosocial, the emphasis here is very much on writing as process rather than product. The aim is to explore and "find oneself" (p. 40) through the practice of creative writing. As Charalambous writes: "The stance of the Creative Writing exercises presented in this book can function like an analyst—triggering one's writer identity to manifest in different ways" (p. 69).

In the world of creative writing research, identity and authorial voice are thriving areas yielding many interesting studies, yet we seemingly have only scratched the surface, particularly in the field of creative writing as a tool in language acquisition. Studies by Schrader (2000), Iida (2010), Smith (2013), Sullivan (2015), and Maloney (2019), to name but a few examples, have pointed towards creative writing being a powerful tool in the exploration of L2 identity for language learners across the world, so this book at the outset promised much that readers of this journal could use in the classroom and as a prompt for further research. Charalambous taught creative writing in Thessaloniki, Greece, in the local

language. She does not specify if her students were L1 or L2 Greek speakers. Her focus is on non-didactic forms of teaching, which echoes current creative writing practices, and the focus of her study is on pushing students to explore different voices and styles within their writing as a way of exploring their own identity.

The book is written more to guide writers working alone than teachers running a class, but as the study arose from the classroom, it doesn't take much effort to reverse engineer the activities and theory and apply it in a different context. The assumption made is that the readers are early-stage auto-didactic creative writers suffering from writer's block, and that these exercises, plus the scientific and philosophical rationale behind them, will break the block. It is further assumed that writer's block is caused by an inability to step outside the writer's own conception of their writer identity, a contentious assumption that a further study could explore. However, given the nature of L2 identity as outlined by Dörnyei (2005) and subsequent work in that field, perhaps for the purposes of an L2 creative writing classroom, overcoming a "block" can be usefully taken (with many caveats) is being analogous to overcoming the assumption of "correct" writing forms that certainly those of us who teach in a Japanese context have encountered. In both instances the student is being encouraged to explore new voices without fear of failure.

The book can be roughly divided into two parts. Chapters 1 to 4 provide context, justification and methodology, while chapters 5 to 9 each focus on a separate writing exercise. These exercises are freewriting, writing about an object, "Instructions from the Other" which means following a list of writing tasks such as giving voice to an object or writing a sentence with words beginning with the same letter, writing in the voice of someone "opposite" to yourself and describing what you see in a mirror.

The exercises themselves are well-known to creative writing teachers and are frequently used exactly as Charalambous intends: to short-circuit the “what should I write about?” fear of the blank page. As a result, there is little new here to aid the instructor, though the literature review in chapter 2 offers interesting avenues of further reading for those interested in creative writing pedagogy. These are the same activities available on many “how to” creative writing websites and blogs.

What is of use for the instructor using creative writing as a tool to language acquisition is the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Charalambous couches her arguments in the language of Lacan. The “fantasy” of the title is not genre, rather the Lacanian concept of identity formation—in short, an individual’s personal narrative. By applying this concept to writing and combining it with exercises aimed at promoting ambiguity and otherness, the writer will move beyond a priori assumptions about voice and identity and produce new work in new voices.

How students write to the exercises reveals their writer identity and fantasy, and their continued writing to these exercises may produce a sudden momentary shift in how they write... causing them to discover a writing pathway that they had not “allowed” themselves before” (p. 71).

One of the most promising areas for L2 creative writing research going forwards is the connection between creative writing, authorial voice and L2 identity formation. Lacanian fantasy shares many points of contact with Dörnyei-led motivational theory—not least that identity formation, whether in L1 or L2, is an imaginative act, something that lends itself well to creative writing—and any contribution to strengthening the bedrock of theory of L2 creative writing is to be welcomed. Furthermore, the Lacanian approach offers something of a new avenue since the literature in this field tends to focus on identity expression rather than identity formation. Charalambous’s focus on “fantasy” and otherness happily puts this work firmly in the latter camp.

Unfortunately, the author’s desire that this book be both a rigorous academic study, a tool for creative writing instructors and a self-help guide for blocked authors, rather than producing something greater than the sum of its parts, ends up falling short of its targets. While the theoretical frame work is of academic interest, the activities themselves are nothing new, frequently mentioned on writing blogs and other “how to write” books, and there is little of practical value for the

classroom which, at the end of the day, is what all the theory is supposed to lead to. In addition, the text swings wildly through colloquial, mystical and academic registers, dislocating the reader with each new turn and producing a work of uneven quality.

Author Biography

Iain Maloney is a lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He is the author of five books including the critically acclaimed memoir *The Only Gaijin in the Village* (Birlinn, 2020) <maloney@nufs.ac.jp>

References

- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Iida, A. (2010). Developing voice by composing haiku: A social-expressivist framework for teaching haiku in EFL contexts. *English Teaching Forum*, 48(1), 28-34.
- Maloney, I. (2019). The place of creative writing in an EFL university curriculum. *Bulletin of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies*, 4, 229-251.
- Schrader, R. (2000). Creative Writing With Young Immigrants. In G. Bräuer (Ed.), *Writing Across Languages* (pp. 25-40). Ablex.
- Smith, C. (2013). Creative writing as an important tool in second language acquisition and practice. *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, 2(1), 12-18.
- Sullivan, S. L. (2015). Student autonomy through creativity. *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching* 4(1), 35-53.