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Interview

An interview with Darryl Whetter, LiLT SIG's featured speaker at JALT 2022, on creative nonfiction and creative writing for language learning

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At JALT 2022 in Fukuoka, LiLT SIG forum chair Andy Decker took the opportunity to sit down with LiLT SIG's featured speaker Darryl Whetter between his workshops on teaching creative writing in Asia and hermit crab essays, and chat some more about his thoughts on creative nonfiction, the future of creative writing for language learning and his recent edited books, *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia* and *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*.

Andy Decker: Tell us a little about how you got into creative writing and language teaching?

Darryl Whetter: So, I went off to university and at first I thought I would major in philosophy because I went to university for big ideas. But then I realized that when I read a page of philosophy, it's like I turn the page and the letters crumbled and I didn't remember a thing, whereas when I read literature, that's what I remembered. So I studied literature with creative writing courses and then I did my master's degree, [which] was actually a hybrid degree in English and creative writing. I did some graduate level literature seminars and even published some of my papers there as articles of peer reviewed scholarly literary criticism.

[I] also was doing graduate creative writing workshops in poetry and fiction and writing a novel, a thesis novel...my PhD was actually in literature, but I just kept writing and writing and writing. My teaching career has spanned teaching literature classes, teaching creative classes, and then for several years I have actually taught at a tiny Francophone university, Université Sainte-Anne, in Nova Scotia Canada, where I teach in English. The students, the majority of the courses they are taking are taught in French, so that's where I am teaching bilingual students from the other side. I have colleagues who are teaching them how to speak English and write English, and I am teaching them how to

analyze English literature and how to write English literature. I also had a four-year sojourn in Singapore where I directed the first master's degree in creative writing there.

I've always been teaching literature, writing literature, and now I have experience with multi-language learners, someone, for example, whose English might be a second language. I've had that experience in both Canada and in Asia. That's been fantastic.

AD: I think that a lot of our members or people who come to these events might relate to that. So you started with creative writing, with literature and then came into language teaching later. These students sound like advanced students?

DW: Well, I mean, in Singapore I was teaching master's students and elsewhere in Canada I've taught master's students but in Canada where I'm currently teaching at Université Sainte-Anne I am teaching undergraduates and so, you know, it's the whole range. So [here is] something that I think is more true in the creative writing university course than, say, a university literature course. Whenever I teach a creative writing course, and this is true when I teach for non-credit courses for community learners as well, I ask the room how many people have gone to at least one yoga class. People have, then I say ok, what is the move you did in your first yoga class named after a dog, oh, downward-facing dog. And I say right, so, if you do yoga for four months or forty years you're going to do downward-facing dog every class and it's going to seem like it's the same move for a long time and then you'll have this epiphany of understanding, and it suddenly becomes a kind of new move. It's a staircase of knowledge. Creative writing is like that. I know this seems naive, but it is a practice and so the fundamentals you learn in your first class, you can revisit those fundamentals twenty years later.

AD: That's a really practical way to look at creative writing, right? Would you say there was an adjustment when you moved from the graduate level to the undergraduate level?

DW: Yes, undeniably. Although, [in] my Rutledge book, *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, one thing that a lot of us talked about in there is when I was teaching master's students I wasn't teaching generally people who had a BA where they did a lot of creative writing and now they were doing a master's degree. Generally, I was teaching people in their thirties who, when I would do their intake interviews so many students told me, "I was a good Asian child, I got a degree that would get me a job, that would get me a decent income, I've done all that, I'm bored out of my mind, now I want to do something creative." And so, I was generally teaching people at the master's level who might not have the same technical skills writing fiction at the beginning of their degrees as a master's student in North America would. You know, if you're doing a master's in creative writing in North America you out-competed other skilled applicants who are skilled at writing fiction to get in. Of course, we had limited enrollment, I did turn people away, but I was generally taking people who knew what they wanted to say, and I just brought their abilities to say it up to speed.

AD: I think that makes sense. You've written a lot; the things that you've published, do you use those in your classes? What's your philosophy about that?

DW: Yeah, well, I do generally think that's just an irresistible resource because well, actually I'll show students both published and unpublished work, right? Because on the one hand with the published work, you do want to show them that, the ideal of you know, look, I changed this so many times and worked on this for so long and I cut 10, I cut 20,000 words from my last novel between contract and publication. That's the novel *Our Sands* from Penguin in 2020, so you know, on the one hand you do want to show them the clichéd well-wrought urn, the polished finished thing, and then you can talk a lot about how you got there, plot lines that you collapsed, things that you augmented, etcetera, and I do think that's wonderful. But on the other hand, particularly when I teach creative nonfiction, I do also sometimes show them drafts or even, and I still do a lot of teaching on Zoom, I will Zoom them into my folder for one essay. Now I guess one distinction is I'm writing a memoir, which is of course a book of nonfiction, but

I'm also writing a series of stand-alone, creative nonfiction essays and while I do still occasionally write and publish short stories, like I had a short story in *Best Asian Short Stories 2020* and now I'm the editor for *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*, so I still occasionally publish short stories, but when I write fiction, I tend to be writing novels. Whereas when I write nonfiction, I'm writing both the stand-alone essay and the memoir.

This is a long-winded way to get back to your question so I find that the unpublished essays are great to show because I can show students like, look, let's go inside the folder I have for a single essay: A, it's not a file it's a folder...like I'm working on an essay right now the working title is called "Mr Freeze". Here you see a file called "Mr Freeze ideas", here's "Mr Freeze cutting room", because sometimes I cut something and I put it in a separate file, like I might use it again, but I never, never, ever, ever use it again. But then I'll show them like zero draft, first draft, second draft, and then I get up to, like, the seventh draft or I have a draft to print and read aloud, I show them all that. And then, also I never as a creative nonfiction prof, I never require people to write personally, but so many of us do, and so also I do think there's an important reciprocity of trust and confidence when they're telling me about heartbreak and family illness, I do feel it's kind of fair that I show them some of my own experiences. Or also just practically, like you know, and invariably with creative nonfiction, one practical issue that comes up is like, ok, right, what do I do about the fact that this is nonfiction and I'm really talking about my friend Rebecca, what do I do about that, and I say well, yeah, let's take a look at an example of mine, and you see right here in the essay, I don't have a footnote, right in the essay I say "a friend I'll call Jeremy," and that's the flag Jeremy is not his real name. You don't need a disclaimer. So, little examples like that or as I say, to show them you know, personal issues.

So, I do show students published and unpublished writing just because I think that's a great behind the scenes opportunity. They are paying tuition; what can you learn from me that you can't learn from a YouTube video, that you can't learn from a textbook, actually seeing how I've changed drafts is to me a really graphic lesson.

AD: I think that's something we could be doing more. The work that your students produce, what happens to that? Do you ever share that with other students? If they're writing personally, how does that work?

DW: Well, you've been through creative writing workshops yourself, and that's one of the ways in which the writing workshop is a revolutionary educational space in that with the literature classroom, the essay, the student writes the essay, the prof marks the essay, [and] hands it back to the student, it's this vertical silo. Whereas the workshop, of course, we're often seeing the writing, so by nature we're sharing, students are sharing each others' work. Anne Pratchett has a beautiful essay called "The Getaway Car" and she talks about how that's what you learn in workshop: not just having your story critiqued, it's watching how people critique your story, it's critiquing other people's stories. And so yes, we share writing, I organize the sharing of peer writing among students.

Although actually one thing I do with non-credit courses is I do encourage students to use a pseudonym if they want, right? And particularly if we're using something like Google Classroom. I keep a little Rosetta Stone file, so I know the person with the username strawberry bean is actually Sushmita, but to the peers I just refer to strawberry bean, strawberry bean, strawberry bean, and that's great again if someone is very shy about personal work.

But then also I do think it's important to share exemplary peer work because it's one thing to show them work by Ian McEwan and Zadie Smith right, top of the game, but to know that someone else in this classroom took the same instruction and delivered this is fantastic. And then, in a more practical sense of course, ideally, you do want to ultimately try to usher your students towards publication.

AD: This is interesting, the advantages of being anonymous but the advantages of seeing progress, right? Oh, it's strawberry bean, it's classic strawberry bean. Thinking of workshoping, you know, feedback, revision, assessment, stuff that we get questions about a lot, what's important?

DW: To me, the short story involves the magic question, who wants what. And we ask who wants what of any narrative, whether it's a short story, a novel, a stage play, a graphic novel, a movie, who wants what and then what's the trouble getting that desire. In nonfiction, I love nonfiction because it can be a narrative medium that tells a story, a who-wants-what story, or it can be like poetry, more meditative and contemplative, or it can be both.

With creative nonfiction, we have to have voice. We have to know on each page, we have to feel like we're with someone on each page. So voice is crucial to creative nonfiction. I do, if you are going to tell a story, I do want a who-wants-what but I, I think creative nonfiction in the English language is more amenable to place with form. So actually, my workshop tomorrow here at the JALT 2022 conference is on playing with form in creative nonfiction, which, when you do it with fiction you're taking a risk, oh, ok, you're going in the "don't publish" pile, whereas it's much more acceptable in creative nonfiction.

And just as a practical tip, and this one would be for language learners as well, I always advise students to read their work aloud. And to sound like a dinosaur, I say from a paper draft, and some of my students are like what is this paper nonsense you're talking about. But you know we've been staring at a screen and so a) you need to look at something different and b) you need to hear your work and that's where you hear repetition, that's where you hear we've repeated words, ideas, you hear what phrases don't work, that's where you spot all the typos, if you can't get through a sentence without taking a breath it's too long, that's where you realize that your dialogue sounds like, sounds really clunky.

AD: I can't wait any longer. Let's talk about creative nonfiction.

DW: Yes, gladly.

AD: How would you define creative nonfiction?

DW: In effect I can't not use the forward definition of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, "True stories, well told." It's like, grand slam definition. "True stories, well told." Although crucially, we do need to distinguish that creative nonfiction, the bulk of it that I see as a prof and I think the bulk that we read, is personal creative nonfiction written in the first person, here is my story. But that's never to discount the value of third-person creative nonfiction.

AD: You've described creative nonfiction as "the most accessible creative writing genre for new writers" and "the genre most easily absorbed into the language learning classroom." Pulling this back to language learning, why does it work well for language learning?

DW: Right well, well, a couple reasons. One it's we're not just talking about language learning, but we are

talking about language learning in Asia. Now generalizing about any continent is ridiculously naïve, and generalizing about the largest continent is *ridiculously* naïve, but, you know, in in the Routledge book, *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, so many different profs, whether they're talking about teaching in Taiwan or in China or in Singapore [say] the same thing that in so much of education, like the point Carl Jung makes about India, so much of education in Asia involves memorizing facts. Right? So for students who get, Asian students who get a chance to try creative writing, in part, there's this great joy like oh, ok, it's not about memorizing facts but where do you start? It tends to be, some people find it easier to tell a story from their past than to invent a story about imaginary characters. So actually, in that great compliment that is envy, the one thing that I wish I'd done myself that is in *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, is Dr. Barrie Sherwood, who teaches writing at Nanyang Technological University, talking about sharing your students' writing, he contrasts opening lines from student fiction and opening lines from student nonfiction and the nonfiction just explodes.

But then, interestingly, this is also not just the language learner, but the language learner in Asia, and the 21st century language learner, so social media is a kind of grandparent in the room when you're talking about creative writing, right? So, students are narrating their lives, they are trying to turn their lives into a kind of art, you know, that quest for likes, the fact that getting shared is the compliment for how you might have phrased something...you know they're already doing creative writing and so now we need to move it from the short, short, short text to the longer, more polished text. But narrating your life is happening, you know, visually and verbally, and so now we just need to introduce, oh well, don't worry, people have been doing it forever and here's this wonderful thing called creative nonfiction.

Right now, so often, you know I don't like to generalize, but you'll get student fiction that is eighty-two percent devoted to describing some world and, you know, eighteen percent some story. Right? And so, whereas with nonfiction maybe it's easier for people to concentrate on what was dramatic, you know, if they knew when their heart was racing maybe they can render that to the reader.

AD: I'm sure you've tried lots of things with your students, right, some hits, some misses. Tell me about something that didn't work, that you wouldn't do again.

Something you asked them to write? Something you asked them to read?

DW: Ok, so actually the assignment I'm going to do a workshop on here, the genre, the sub-genre of creative nonfiction [is] known as a hermit crab essay, where someone needs to transpose an essay, whether it's third person or worldly creative nonfiction or first-person personal nonfiction, they need to put it into some other textual form. So, the student Anisha Ralhan, who is in *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*, her knockout version of that assignment was to write, and if you're a creative nonfiction prof, the writing you see the most is my mental illness, you're, you're just seeing that around the world, well, so the great creative writing challenge of "make it new," how do you write about your mental illness in a novel way, Anisha took the hermit crab assignment and wrote about her anxiety in the form of a resumé. It's literally, you know, like with an email address, it's skills, it's experiences, it's goals, and that was such a novel way of describing it: very powerful personal issues which of course requires bravery and yet she put it into that novel form and that was great. So, hermit crab essays: when I teach people in a first creative nonfiction class, that's the assignment that people either love or hate. And, hate or just don't get.

AD: When you look at who comes to these events, people that come to these hermit crabs and dancing skeletons because they look interesting, like, I'm interested in creative writing, I don't teach creative writing. How do we keep them? How do we not scare them away? For, like, teaching contexts that are outside of creative writing.

DW: Yeah, well, you do hope, you know, again you do hope, so I'm not a chef and I've never been to cooking school, right? But, you know, the idea is like there are these sort of stations of the cross at cooking school you know, so what does pastry have to do with BBQ, grilling meat? In ways those are very far apart, but you're always in this kind of bilingual dialogue between like, ok, I'm literally working on pastry but I'm going to transpose this idea about like, for example, having the butter at the right temperature before I begin, I am going to use that same principle when it gets to BBQ sauce. Or, for the language learner, also again you know when you know you need to emphasize the context and ethos in which you're speaking, right? So when does one need to be very formal, as in a job application, and when is that formality

a hindrance? You know if you're sitting across the table from someone and you need to try to get them to open up emotionally, you don't want to sound like a job interview or a job application letter. So you know, some of those constant communication principles hopefully will get, in a more exaggerated form, in a workshop on say, the hermit crab essay.

AD: Finally, for those of us who are researching this stuff—creative writing, literature and language teaching, your book—*Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, it's got some good news for us.

DW: Well, one of the big points I make is that a) I think creative educations in Asia are on the rise, and b) creative writing is a popular and accessible way for creative educations to be delivered in Asia, and then c) literally the chapter that can be written in Asia about creative writing pedagogy that the big Anglo-American establishment can learn from, this is the laboratory where we talk about the English-second-language learner writing creative writing because, so with some of the post-colonial examples, India has a 200-year history of creative writing in English, which is literally back then the language of the conqueror, right, so what's it like when someone either self translates, they are a creative writer in their mother tongue, and they perfect their English and creative writing as a part of their perfection of their language, and they start writing in English, or, as I think is going to be the case, someone who has not perhaps been a creative writer in their mother tongue in Asia is going to be, is, creative writing. So there is going to be an interesting sort of parenting or marriage where English is their language of creative writing, you know? I think again, when we have so many Asian education systems that are about memorization, I think there is a kind of breaking loose that is available in English or, just as we all know, you know, languages do hardwire certain thoughts and emotions so... you are mostly the same person in your other language but you get to be a little different, right?

Crucially, Asian creative writing is in the vanguard, because it will be someone for whom English is a second or third language and they want to do creative writing in English and, again, then “boom”, they can lock in. There are enormous courses, national organizations, conferences, so a lot of our students would go to the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and that's to Australia's credit, when they were founding their “ok, there are a lot of us let's do our version of America's

AWP,” they called themselves the Australasian Association of Writers and Writing Programs and that's when there weren't many creative writing programs in the rest of Asia. So yeah, that's the big open, and actually Australia is starting to have satellite campuses in Asia. The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology has one in Vietnam, so, yeah, the fact that someone is going to start writing, start doing creative writing, as part of perfecting their English as a second language education, that's a really exciting intersection.

Author Biography

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