

Creative Writing

BY MARGARET RONAN

‘PERHAPS the most dramatic of all the revolutions in English teaching’, the Plowden Committee remarks, ‘is in the amount and quality of children’s writing. In a growing number of junior schools there is free, fluent and copious writing on a great variety of subject matter. Sometimes it is called ‘creative writing’. Its essence is that much of it is personal and that the writers are communicating something that has really engaged their minds and their imaginations. To this kind of writing we give an unqualified welcome.’

But how do we begin to teach it—if we can teach it at all? In the days when poets and story-tellers were trained in their art the teaching was done by practising experts. Must we wait for creative writers to teach the children now or can we do something about it ourselves?

One thing we must do is to attempt creative writing ourselves; describing an incident, a place or an emotion not in the half-true words that laziness would prefer but as vividly and accurately as we are able. A genuine attempt at this will rid us forever of the idea that creative writing must be a soft option because children enjoy doing it. It is a source of intense pleasure and satisfaction but, at the same time, it is difficult and can be exhausting. We will not reach the ‘height of feeling intellect’ Wordsworth wrote of in a few easy stages.

That it is worth reaching is becoming more and more obvious. Children who are closer than we are to ‘the freshness deep down things’ should be encouraged in every way to use that insight and keep the sense of wonder. ‘The crime against life, the worst of all crimes’, says the American poet Archibald MacLeish, ‘is *not* to feel. And there was never, perhaps, a civilisation in which that crime, the crime of torpor, of lethargy, of apathy, the snake-like sin of coldness-at-the-heart, was commoner than in our technological civilisation in which the emotionless emotions of adolescent boys are mass produced on television screens to do our feeling for us, and a woman’s longing for her life is twisted, by singing commercials, into a longing for a new detergent, family size, which will keep her hands as innocent as though she had never lived. It is the modern painless death, this commercialised atrophy of the heart. None of us is safe from it.’

Easy access to the printed book has helped to form our way of life but it has helped to deform it too. It has made it all too easy to do our living at second hand. Other times produced the poet, the philosopher and the craftsman; our own age has produced ‘the intellectual’ commonly known as ‘the egg-head’ and dismissed by Einstein as one who ‘has no direct contact with life in the raw but encounters it in its easiest synthetic form—the printed page’.

Sense experiences, as many and as varied as possible, must precede any growth of the power of imagination. A child needs contact at first hand with the sharp smell and stick touch of resin in a snapped-off pine branch; the feel of dry sand trickling through the fingers and the firmness of wet sand under bare feet; running against the wind or in

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the rain; the rush of a cycle going fast downhill. There must be the chance to experience awe and wonder; light split by a prism into its rainbow colours; a city at night; jets coming in and taking off; a view from a height or through a good telescope or binoculars; contact with animals.

The list is endless. Some environments are far richer than others but none are so barren

that we cannot reach to reality through them. Good pictures or photographs can be used to enrich experience. Music, story, films and poetry can all play a part in building up imaginative power. It is not that the printed page is to be despised; nobody but a fool would think that Einstein despised it when he made his scathing judgment on the so-called intellectual. It has a very great place in training the imagination and intellect but not the first place of all.

One thing to be wary of is attempting to force a response from a child. It is not only in our fingerprints that we are all different. What seems to an adult a trivial experience may be of fundamental importance to a child who lets other, apparently more significant, sensations slip away unheeded. We tend to forget that we very rarely know the origin of those images that have most influence on our own imaginative life. They may have been produced by something that would have seemed slight at the time to any onlooker.

‘Close your eyes and remember—or imagine’ can be a useful method of concentrating after the stimulus has been provided and enjoyed. Fears, fantasies and longings may be mixed up with the sense experiences; all these can be talked about but not for too long or there will be no drive towards written expression; it will have spent itself in talk.

Once writing has begun it can go on as long as it is absorbing. This will usually mean about fifteen minutes for a young child but it can last for much longer and if so should be allowed to do so. Older children need time before they begin to write in order to think and to relate things up to one another. They should not be rushed into writing and when they do begin they will want to go on much longer than a younger child.

A loose-leaf book is better than an exercise book for this sort of work. Something the child considers less than satisfactory can be easily taken out without injury to the rest. A fair copy can be made and inserted of some piece that is specially liked. Pictures can be included and the cover painted or decorated if the child wants to do this. Creative expression creates its own order—though this is not always apparent especially in the early stages—because if it matters to the one who is making it it has to be as good as it possibly can be.

Pencil is preferable even for an older child unless there is no difficulty in writing quickly with a pen. Usually a pen cannot keep pace with the flow of ideas and causes frustration. A good ball-point would not be out of place here; it is one of the places where it really justifies its existence.

Correcting should be done as far as possible by the young writer. If adult criticism is asked for and given it must never be negative. An adult writer would give short shrift to anybody offering such criticism; a child does not yet know how to do this and is more inclined to give up or to close in on himself. If a piece of writing is unusually clumsy its author may be trying out something new and adventurous which negative criticism could destroy.

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Practical help can be given by explaining about proof reading and advising when work is being re-read. A piece of writing should be put away for a while before this is done. It is then re-read with an eye to spelling and punctuation, the child asking advice when in doubt and using dictionary and rubber to produce a more accurate and finished product.

There are books on the market that give ideas on teaching creative writing but they really say no more than is summed up in the remark of Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher, who said as long ago as 1894: ‘Teach them to think and read and talk with self-expression and they will write because they cannot help it.’

And if we succeed in training children to find expression in writing what have we achieved? They will have learned the importance of trying for sincerity and accuracy and boredom will be something they hardly understood. Boredom is the result of that lack of feeling castigated by MacLeish and is always dangerous. The bored child pulling the wings off a fly and the bored adult indulging in casual violence because he is 'looking for kicks' are destructive because of their own inner emptiness. 'All our wonderful education', D. H. Lawrence said bitterly, 'is producing a grand sum-total of boredom. Modern people are inwardly thoroughly bored. They are bored because they experience nothing, and they experience nothing because the wonder has gone out of them. And when the wonder has gone out of a man he is dead.'

Children have a great capacity for wonder. To leave them in peace and not try to darken that vision is at least something. To respect and encourage it is better still. We may even begin to learn sincerity ourselves.

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