on a regular basis, and that will inspire hallway conversations, conference presentations, seeds of new research, and that may indeed cultivate a new generation of writing center directors to further the intellectual discovery, growth, and diversity we value: past, present, and future.

Atlanta, Georgia


Reviewed by Heather Russel, Georgia State University

In *Can It Really Be Taught: Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice collect an important series of essays and dialogues that address challenges faced by creative writing professors who seek effective teaching methodology. The book’s subtitle refers to the editors’ hope to debunk dangerous assumptions held by many professors of literary studies, rhetoric and composition, and even creative writing itself, which collectively establish a lore that writers are born, not taught, and thus an exploration of effective practices will benefit only a few, at best. In the book’s opening essay, “Figuring the Future: Lore and/in Creative Writing,” Tim Mayers explains that the discipline of rhetoric and composition, often considered one of two camps within the English department, roots itself in a tradition of collegial discussion about pedagogy; and literary studies, the other camp, has widened its scope to emphasize effective teaching as well. But a disturbingly pervasive lore among English departments dismisses creative writers as charismatic stars hired more for their power to attract students than for their concern about good teaching. Among other pleas, Mayers asks members of English departments to strive for less fragmented versions of English studies (11), and the essays and conversations that accompany “Figuring the Future” support Mayers’s cause both in content and style.

The essays delight with narratives spun by their authors, creative writers grappling with the implications of pedagogy for their work. For example, in “Against Reading,” Katharine Haake cites Patrick Bizzaro’s concern that MFA classrooms can produce a “workshop-writing phenomenon [that] no doubt works vertically, where sameness is passed from teacher to student who, in turn, becomes a teacher who passes certain literary biases to yet another generation of students” (21). As Haake argues for a liberation from the literary canon in the creative writing classroom, she infuses her comments with poignant anecdotes about her own discoveries as a graduate student and
later, after graduation, engaging in “totally random reading practice” (19),
taking up whatever interesting books she discovered at the library. These
experiences often had more profound effects on her development as a writer
than did the anthologies she would later select for her own teaching purposes.
In a powerful extended metaphor, Haake ends her essay by recounting a
walk along a beach during an artist’s retreat when a pleasing sentence came
to her. Finding herself alone and without a pen, she was forced to accept
that this particular sentence, and the story that would develop around it,
would arrive through some other manner than the scribbled phrases she was
accustomed to collecting. And her argument, that creative writing teachers
must seek new ways of inspiring their students to read broadly, sparkles
with the details of Haake’s own personal experience.

In “Charming Tyrants and Faceless Facilitators: The Lore of Teaching
Identities in Creative Writing,” Mary Ann Cain rivets her readers with an essay
that is part memoir and part academic discussion, a mingling which reminds
us that effective teaching is rooted in personal discovery about why people
love writing, and what draws them to their mentors. We find ourselves caught
up in this narrator’s quest to work as a student under the tutelage of her
east-coast idol, Famous Author, and genuinely concerned when her journey
to this end conflicts literally (in terms of class schedule) and philosophically
with her developing passion for Composition Theory. Late in the essay, Cain
wins our sympathy while confessing that as a new professor, she failed to
excite her students. This masterful section reminds us that good storytell-
ing is rhetorically powerful. Cain relates how she strove in the classroom to
sacrifice her public “face” and become a “worker bee” so that students would
exercise critical questioning rather than submitting to a Charming Tyrant,
one whose electric and enigmatic influence might overwhelm them. But as a
“worker bee,” Cain bored her students rather than compelling them to learn,
while Famous Author, the Charming Tyrant, had actually inspired Cain’s raw
emotion: “I remember . . . watching my blue ink blur into grey pools as tears
splashed onto the notes I was writing. I remember the pain of hearing how
Famous Author had so thoroughly entered my story, telling of its possibilities,
possibilities which also spoke of its current failures. I remember thinking, I love
this story she is imagining with me, but I don’t have the guts to write it” (35).
Even as she admits to boring her students, Cain’s prose moves her readers.
These contemplations of a writer who longs to teach well, and who frankly
questions herself and others to that end, is characteristic of the engaging
and enlightening work compiled in Can It Really Be Taught.

Complementing the narrative voices of essays like Haake’s and Cain’s,
dialogues about MFA programs appear in the collection. In these transcripts
of formal professional conversations, teachers and students address the chal-
 lenges they have met and benefits they have enjoyed in writing workshops.
In “A Better Time Teaching’: A Dialogue About Pedagogy and the Antioch-LA
MFA,” David Starkey and Eloise Klein Healy discuss exciting ways to foster writing in low-residency MFA programs. Starkey and Klein Healy also consider the frustration that can result when writers have unrealistic expectations about their roles in the world (39). In “Putting Wings on the Invisible: Voice, Authorship, and the Authentic Self,” Patrick Bizzaro responds with careful detail to questions posed by his student, Michael McClanahan, about the ways that creative writing in the academy can benefit a developing writer. Bizzaro, whose important work on creative writing pedagogy is cited frequently throughout Can It Really Be Taught, infuses his own section of dialogue with passion about Wendy Bishop’s notion of writers-who-teach as priests. Bizzaro urges, “I want you to be willing to teach when you become a zillionaire. Otherwise, you’re teaching what you no longer believe in yourself. What kind of priest is that?” (79).

Much more than a debate about the role of the writing teacher, Can It Really Be Taught also includes invaluable commentary about practical aspects of teaching. Priscila Uppal’s “Both Sides of the Desk: Experiencing Creative Writing Lore as a Student and as a Professor” and Anna Leahy’s “Creativity, Caring, and The Easy ‘A’: Rethinking the Role of Self-Esteem in Creative Writing Pedagogy” feature recounted teaching experiences that suggest ways in which constructive grading can shape a writer’s development. And refreshingly late in the collection, after much wrestling with the question of whether writing can be taught, Michelle Cross’s “Writing In Public: Popular Pedagogies of Creative Writing” describes literary pedagogy, commercial pedagogy, holistic pedagogy, and iconic pedagogy as they likely appear, “whether or not as types per se” (68), in the classroom.

The final essay, “Box Office Poison: The Influence of Writers in Films on Writers (in Graduate Programs),” is written by Stephen Armstrong in conjunction with the late Wendy Bishop, whose insights pervade Can It Really Be Taught, and to whom the collection is dedicated. In a poignant twist, after a series of essays by professional teachers of creative writing who grapple to define their roles, we are left with Bishop and Armstrong’s depiction of movies’ distorted images of writers, fueled by film’s imperative to throw its writer-heroes into action rather than leaving them at their desks to craft delightful verse or prose (94). The late placement of this essay in the collection helps underscore an urgent call for the very definition of writer to be revised in contemporary culture, in order for aspiring writers to focus on their work and thrive. Indeed, a closer reading of the title Can It Really Be Taught might suggest a struggle particular to writing teachers in the real world, where audiences’ unreasonable expectations of their writers and writing teachers should be challenged.

Peter Vandenberg’s closing remarks in the “After Words” section of Can It Really Be Taught include the concession that the collection will join “the small handful of books and articles its contributors reference” (106). Even
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as texts about creative writing pedagogy are relatively few, the collective power of the essays in *Can It Really Be Taught* does much to further discussion on the subject as it invites readers to consider the future of creative writing in the academy.

*Atlanta, Georgia*


*Reviewed by Renee Love, Lander University*

Everyone likes a good story, that rare narrative that is smart as well as memorable, scholarly as well as inspiring, particularly when the story involves a compelling hero. Katherine Sohn’s *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia* promises just such a read, an incredibly thorough, articulate, and well-researched study destined to find a permanent place in studies of Composition and Rhetoric.

When I initially set out to read *Whistlin’ and Crowin’*, I wondered if the book’s focus would be too specialized and only relevant for those teaching in the Appalachian region, somewhere between Kentucky and West Virginia. I could not have been more mistaken. On the contrary, Sohn’s work, a combination of data-driven research and thoughtful narrative, represents not only the women of Appalachia but women and other marginalized groups “across the nation who are isolated economically, societally, geographically, and culturally yet who manage to surmount obstacles to become self-fulfilled” (7). Sohn suggests that like stereotypes of gender, class, culture, and race, stereotypes about dialect also exist, a form of discrimination that, as Peter Elbow believes, may be even more insidious than other forms of discrimination.

Notably, the book begins with an auspicious Foreword by Sohn’s former teacher Victor Villanueva who writes that Sohn’s work “breaks stereotypes, managing sympathy and the rigors of ethnographic distance simultaneously, and we learn about literacy acquisition despite ideology, bigotry, and economy” (xv). Not only because of his own work in cultural studies and literacy, Villanueva’s reflections support Sohn’s study because his wife Carol has roots in the Appalachian region, a position that gives Villanueva a unique perspective of Sohn’s analysis. Garnering additional laurels as part of the series Studies in Writing and Rhetoric, Sohn’s book