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# Becoming the falconer: productive feedback for the redrafting of creative writing

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## ABSTRACT

Within a wider neoliberal education system, time and space for redrafting creative writing are marginalised, with focus on the written product rather than the writing process. This precludes the development of young writers. As academics and creative writers working in university Schools of Education, we use inductive autoethnography to explore our memories of feedback on creative writing throughout our writing lives. The affective dimension of feedback, with readers having power over their writers, is emphasised. We identify how feedback can be unproductive and unempathetic, harming the writer. We also identify how feedback can be productive, nurturing the writer through the process towards an internal dialogue with their inner ideal reader – their ‘superaddressee.’ It is the internal dialogue with the superaddressee, who perfectly understands what the writer is communicating, that develops the writer over time, giving them control over the writing process and facilitating redrafting. We recommend the professional development of teachers to become self-reflexive readers, who plan focused writing assessments, and provide productive feedback as well as mentorship programmes in publishing to develop new writers. Future research should explore the psychoanalytic nature of the writer–reader relationship and what the facilitation of redrafting looks like in educational settings.

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## Introduction

We believe that all writers who continue to write and who develop as writers throughout their lives will engage with significant redrafting of their creative texts. Redrafting is a necessary creative process, facilitated by past and present readers, and obfuscated by the myth of genius, where ‘great’ authors are seen to be able to write a creative work of high quality first time around (Weisberg 1999). One glance at the *Acknowledgements* page of most published creative works demonstrates that this is not the case, with authors often citing a multitude of readers who have helped them redraft. In reality,

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therefore, redrafting is something that all successful creative writers engage with, altering structure, replotting, switching point of view, developing character, rethinking the overall concept of their work, starting again ...

In schools in England, the potential for redrafting is limited. For 5- to 11-year-old writers, government policy in the form of a highly prescriptive national curriculum values the technical aspects of writing over ideas, craft, and content (DfE 2014). Accordingly, redrafting tends to take place in response to teacher feedback concerned with spelling, punctuation, and grammar, meaning young writers become 'alienated' from the writing process (Lambirth 2016). For 11- to 16-year olds, the picture becomes bleaker, with fewer young writers given the opportunity to redraft at all. This is due to exam board syllabuses that not only marginalise creative writing, but also see it as a one-draft-only activity, with young writers producing a creative piece under exam conditions. As with 5- to 11-year-old writers, the assessment criteria (e.g. AQA 2023) focus on the technical aspects of writing, a checklist that directs teachers and young writers to concentrate on the end product of writing rather than the writing process itself.

For 16- to 19-year olds, the axing of the Creative Writing A-level in 2015 means that creative writing is marginalised within the English language.

In Western Australia, the situation for young writers is similar. Here, however, the focus on the technical aspects of writing is more aligned with genre theory and learning to write for different audiences (Price 2020). This means that the craft of writing, the techniques used by young writers, is predetermined by audience and genre and that, as in England, these young writers are equally alienated from the writing process. For Price, this results in the assessment of creative writing crucially ignoring 'the performative aspects that are involved in writing, the act of making thinking comprehensible' (2020, 464). Price also notes a similar approach to assessment in universities and argues for a realignment of assessment in all educational settings so that writing is acknowledged as a 'cognitive process', with feedback focusing on 'how we write rather than what we write' (2020, 465).

One look at the poet William Blake's notebook (Blake, Erdman, and Moore 1973) indicates that his poetry emerged from an intense process of redrafting. Sometimes authors like T.S. Eliot and Raymond Carver have used editors to change their work significantly. For example, Eliot's 'The Wasteland' would not be recognisable without Ezra Pound's multiple interventions (Eliot, Pound, and Eliot 1971). However, teachers of writing have often not understood these processes because they are not writers themselves (Cremin and Oliver 2017; Smith and Wrigley 2016). As Patrick Bizzaro (1993, 15) points out, teachers need to become committed writers themselves and redraft their own work to teach redrafting in a sensitive, productive fashion:

Certainly, teachers of poetry writing classes who do not write should; there is no substitute for experience. For teachers who do not write, no one's advice about how to teach poetry writing to students will do much good. But teachers should take the risk of writing a poem keeping in mind that the point is not necessarily to produce an excellent poem, which is a difficult task under any circumstances. Rather, their aim should be to experience firsthand what their students will experience in the belief that the best teachers of writing are most often writers themselves.

However, as Bizzaro (1993) also adds, the best writers are not necessarily the best teachers of writing, rather it is the combination of lived experiences of being a teacher and a writer which leads to the instituting of meaningful assessment and evaluation feedback loops. When teachers of writing become aware of how they write, they understand when are the most opportune moments to assess and provide feedback. Peter Elbow (1986, 61), an American teacher and writing theorist who strongly advocates free writing, claims:

If we hold off criticism or revising for a while, we can build a safe place for generative thinking or writing. Similarly, if we devote certain times to wholehearted critical thinking or revising, we can be more acute and powerful in our critical assessment.

The teacher and writer Wendy Bishop (1990) builds upon many of Elbow's ideas in her work in this area, reflecting upon her own composition classes where she tries to avoid inflicting the terror of the reader upon her students. Bishop (1990, 132) writes of her classes, 'Students self-evaluate and revise when they analyse their own growth in journals and draft folders, participate in large- and small-group critique sessions, participate in student-teacher conferences, complete written self-evaluations, and compile writing portfolios.'

The approach here is all about students generating their own internalised readers and editors, feeling empowered to make their own choices, to take ownership of their own evaluation and assessment. Smith and Wrigley (2016) have developed many of Bishop, Bizzaro, and Elbow's tenets in their pedagogy, illustrating how workshop leaders need to allow space for writers to share only when they are ready, to read their work aloud, to listen attentively, and respond in a descriptive, emotional way rather than judgementally. These pedagogies are fundamentally democratic and emancipatory, and are contrary to many of the teaching approaches currently dominating many schools and universities.

Indeed, in many formal educational settings, conceptualisations of creative writing are currently skewed towards creative writing as a product as a result of the wider neoliberal context. Here education becomes auditable through 'accountability systems' (Theriault 2021, 13), with children's writing outcomes part of the auditing process. In schools, what is measurable in writing, for example the technical aspects, is given salience over content and process, meaning that time and space for writing development in the form of feedback and redrafting are further marginalised. In universities, neoliberalism means that creative writing courses are aligned with the publishing industry, where writer development and exploration are often synonymous with marketability of outcomes (Mort and Green 2020).

In light of this context, we start by asking two questions. Firstly, what can be done to promote redrafting with young writers in educational institutions and beyond? And secondly, how can feedback be framed to facilitate this?

Obviously, there are many dimensions to a writer learning how to redraft their work: teachers engaging with and modelling redrafting; young writers reading and reflecting upon other creative works; leaving a creative piece for a period of time and then returning to it; young writers learning to read themselves (Lodge 2003). For us it is this cognitive process of the writer reading themselves that is arguably the most important skill to be developed for redrafting. If a writer is to read themselves, they must engage in an internal critical dialogue about their creative piece to become metacognitive (Howe and Wig

2017). But for this internal dialogue to even begin to take hold, it is necessary for writers to receive productive feedback from the readers of their creative texts. For it is this – the reception of external feedback from a reader – that becomes internalised in the psyche of the writer who reads themselves.

As creative writers in Higher Education Schools of Education, we have considerable personal experience of receiving and responding to feedback, which has both facilitated and hindered our cognitive processes needed for redrafting and our development as writers at different moments in our writing lives. To delve more deeply into the ways in which feedback can be supportive of these cognitive processes or otherwise, we felt that a good starting point for unpacking the role of feedback in redrafting would be to build on earlier research (Bishop 1990; Bizzaro 1993; Cremin and Oliver 2017; Elbow 1998; Smith and Wrigley 2016) by undertaking an autoethnographic study of our different lived experiences.

Receiving feedback on creative writing for redrafting, we instinctively know, includes a highly affective dimension. With the notable exception of T.S. Eliot (1997), writers agree that the act of writing creatively is different from writing non-fiction because aspects of the writer's self are embedded and transformed through the creative writing process. Writing is personal. According to Zadie Smith, 'A writer's way of being is (their) manner of being in the world: (their) writing style in the unavoidable trace of that manner' (2017, 358). And because creative writing is personal, feedback upon creative writing, as opposed to non-creative writing, is personal too. Whether the reader realises or wants this, the personal nature of feedback gives the reader power over the writer. We believe that readers have real power to affect the writers' cognitive processes, their ability to redraft, their emotions, and even sometimes their well-being. Rather than elide this affective dimension and power dynamic between the writer and their reader, we look to bring it to the surface – to think about the feedback that has motivated and helped us to redraft; and to think about the feedback that was the harbinger of failure, 'causing harm and trauma on the minds and bodies' of our writer selves (Suphap 2023, 2).

In doing so, in this article we deliberately use and develop a new conceptualisation of our readers – Powerful Readers. We explore how our Powerful Readers' feedback has been both productive and unproductive feedback in relation to our subsequent redrafting of our creative writing as well as our development as writers over time. We start with our memories of feedback from Powerful Readers in educational institutions, where policy agendas and embedded teacher practices shape this process; we move on to memories of feedback relating to the publishing industry, where issues of marketability dominate.

This insight, we feel, will be of benefit to Writers, helping them develop a greater consciousness of the nature of the feedback they are receiving and the different impacts it may have, including what it means for redrafting. This might see Writers engaging in similar creative autoethnographic tasks, as we do in this article, in order to understand their relationships with Powerful Readers. And, we also feel, it will be of benefit to Powerful Readers, especially those who take on teaching roles in educational institutions and gatekeeper roles in the publishing industry, as they might come to see their roles differently when they reflect upon how they give feedback and the impact it may have.

## Theorising feedback and response as dialogism

As Bishop (1990), Bizzaro (1993), and Elbow have all noted, it is incumbent upon successful writers to internalise their own literary critics, and this is not achieved when they feel this voice is coming from outside themselves.

Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' (1981) underpins our understanding of the potential relationship between a Powerful Reader's feedback and a Writer's subsequent internal cognitive processes in the redrafting of a creative text. This external dialogue between the Powerful Reader, who gives feedback on the creative text, and the Writer, who responds to this feedback in redrafting, also involves both prior and subsequent internal dialogues in the minds of both the Writer and the Powerful Reader.

To start with the Writer's internal dialogue, we draw upon Bakhtin's concept of the Superaddressee (1986). This idea is that the act of writing is always already predicated upon the Writer having in mind an ideal reader – a Superaddressee – who perfectly understands their creative text. Whilst reader response theory posits that the material existence of a Superaddressee is impossible, when the Superaddressee is viewed as a mental concept for the Writer, it becomes a useful heuristic device to think about the role of the internal dialogic relationship between a Writer's Superaddressee and the feedback of a Powerful Reader in the redrafting of creative texts.

When an external dialogue between a Powerful Reader and Writer is productive and the Writer begins to consider changes to their creative text, the ensuing internal dialogue between the Writer and their altering Superaddressee may result in the redrafting of the creative text. This is because the Superaddressee themselves is changing in their understanding of the potential meaning of the Writer's creative text as a direct result of the external dialogue between the Writer and Powerful Reader.

And so, the Superaddressee is reborn – a second coming.

Which is not to say that the rebirth of the Writer's Superaddressee is inevitable or straightforward. Instead, the process can be slow, the Superaddressee stubborn and unwilling to concede ground, a territory of uncertainty emerging. Creative text and meaning are defended, then conceded, defended, conceded again, as a new creative text with a new Superaddressee sometimes eventually emerges.

And once this second draft is delivered, negotiation can start over again. The Writer may solicit the feedback of the same Powerful Reader, who returns, albeit altered by the initial reading and external dialogue with the Writer.

For we should not forget that the act of reading and rereading for the Powerful Reader is in itself dialogic. This is due to the nature of creative texts which, according to Bakhtin (1981), are differentiated from non-creative texts by the ways in which discourse, or 'heteroglossia', is dialogised through the act of reading. In line with reader response theory, the dialogising of heteroglossia through reading means that no two Powerful Readers will respond to the creative text in the same way.

So, the Writer must hope to find Powerful Readers whom they can trust to provide the potential for their Superaddressee to be reborn.

Of course, in many institutional and professional contexts, the Writer has no choice as to who their Powerful Reader might be. And in these instances, the potential for the Powerful Reader not to appreciate the Writer's Superaddressee, or, worse, to destroy the Writer's Superaddressee, is immanent. Even more so, as we have already discussed,

in an educational landscape that marginalises redrafting and values writing as a product rather than a cognitive process (Price 2020).

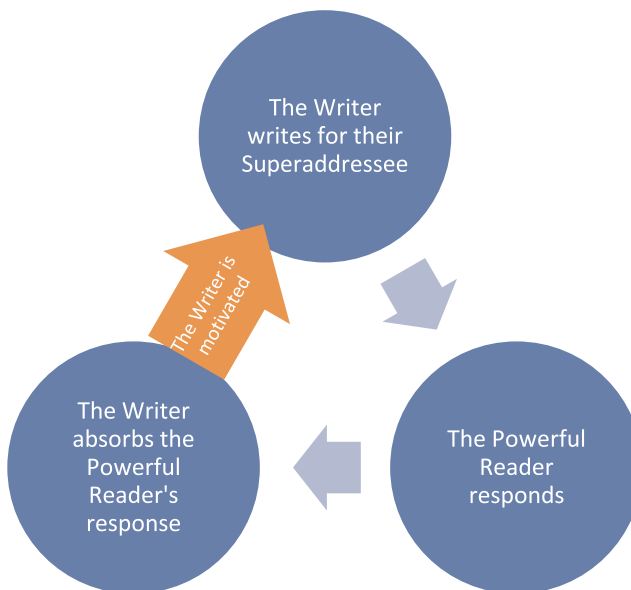
But let us return to the Writer whose Superaddressee is reborn and who then asks the same Powerful Reader to engage in another internal dialogue with the creative text. This second internal dialogue is more complex than the first, shadowed by a memory of the original reading, a memory of the external dialogue with the Writer, an expectation of what the new creative text might mean. Here, of course, depending on the nature of the redraft, the Writer's Superaddressee and the Powerful Reader may become more aligned. Redrafting may become far less radical for the next draft. The Superaddressee may shift, but this shift will not necessitate another rebirth.

And so, when writers develop and improve, this wheel of internal and external dialogues – between the Writer and their Superaddressee, the Powerful Reader and the text, the Powerful Reader and the Writer, the Writer and their Superaddressee – keeps turning in a cycle that can support writing progress (see Figure 1).

When the Writer is motivated by the Powerful Reader's response, the internal dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee accelerates and the Superaddressee has the potential to be reborn. However, the rebirth of the Superaddressee often never occurs due to the harmful nature of the external dialogue between the Powerful Reader and the Writer.

### Our approach to autoethnography

Within creative writing research, autoethnography is a way of exploring and analysing the individual's experiences in order to illuminate the social structures in which social actors operate (Gilbert and Macleroy 2021, 260). By focussing on our own experiences of



**Figure 1.** The cycle of productive feedback for redrafting.



feedback on creative writing in educational and publishing contexts, our aim is to illuminate the ways in which Powerful Readers as social actors have impacted upon our potential to redraft our creative writing and our wider development as Writers. This, in turn, will enable us to identify how: Writers can develop a consciousness of these processes; Powerful Readers as social actors in education and publishing can reflect upon and improve their practices; and policy technologies and institutional practices could be reformed to facilitate this.

We engaged in free writing in order to access our long-, medium-, and short-term memories of writing and feedback. This is an inductive approach to generating data for autoethnographic research and these first drafts of memories tended to be descriptive of the creative writing piece, the setting, the reader who gave the feedback, the feedback given, and the way this made us feel.

We met to share these first drafts, which numbered about 20, and undertook an initial analysis to develop a theoretical frame for analysis. This discussion included an acknowledgement of the affective dimension to feedback, the nature of creative writing as personal, and the power our readers held over us. We talked about feedback as dialogue, the work of Bakhtin, his theory of dialogism, the nature of time and memory, the felt internal dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee, and the experienced external dialogue between the Writer and what we were by then calling the Powerful Reader. We worked up our theoretical model (Figure 1) and we identified how, in line with autoethnography's tendency to portray internal dialogues (Adams and Jones 2018, 150), our autoethnographic memories were dramatisations of the internal dialogue between the Superaddressee and the Powerful Reader after the external dialogue between the Writer and the Powerful Reader had taken place. In this sense, the internal dialogue cannot attempt to represent an objective retelling of the external dialogue. Instead, it is a resonance of the way in which the external dialogue was experienced and is now remembered by the Writers at the point of authoring this paper – a resonance, moreover, which, like a palimpsest, has overwritten the original external dialogue in the minds of the Writers, rendering replication of the exact original external dialogue irretrievable.

We felt that this internal dialogue was central to what we were exploring – the existence of these memories proof not only that these internal dialogues had been born from experienced external dialogues but that they had been impactful, both positively and negatively, on our cognitive processes and our respective development as Writers. (Had they not been, we would not have remembered them through free writing in the first place.) These internal dialogues, between the Superaddressee and the Powerful Reader, we hypothesised, have stayed with us, have never stopped going round. The unproductive feedback from Powerful Readers echoing in our minds, bringing about uncertainty and self-doubt. The productive feedback from Powerful Readers nourishing our Superaddressees.

We spoke of how this internal dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee kept going. How the temporal dimension to our development as writers gave the internal dialogue its potential, its ability to nourish our redrafting and writing development over time. The temporal dimension made us think of how the internal dialogue could be represented as three-dimensional. It made us think of Yeats' gyre.

Initially, the Powerful Reader is the falconer; the Writer and their Superaddressee the falcon, 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre'. When the Powerful Reader gives

productive feedback, it is transferred to the Writer, internalised by the Writer, in the form of a dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee. And so the Writer becomes the falconer who is in control of the gyre. But when the Powerful Reader gives unproductive feedback, transference from the Powerful Reader to the Writer is problematised. The Writer becomes the falconer at 'the centre' that 'cannot hold'; the Writer and their Superaddressee experiencing what it is like when 'things fall apart' (Yeats 1992, 76).

Inspired by the mouth in Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (2006), we agreed to rewrite each memory of these internal dialogues, these controlled and widening gyres, as disembodied mouths – the Superaddressee and the Powerful Reader – spotlighted against the backdrop of the settings described through stage directions. A disembodied approach, we felt, would serve not only to indicate the internalised nature of the dialogues, but also to protect the anonymity of our Powerful Readers.

At our next meeting, we reviewed the writing of our memories as disembodied internal dialogues and felt that they were too abstract. Our memories were in danger of not letting us undertake a meaningful autoethnographic study where we could remember and explore the contexts in which we as social actors – Writers and Powerful Readers – were situated. They also made abstract the affective dimension of our memories (Muncey 2005) and how we as Writers experienced embodied response to feedback. We decided to keep the internal dialogues but to preface them with short ethnographic sketches, which would provide more information about the setting as well as something of the backstories of us as Writers and of our Powerful Readers. The combination of the dramatisation of internal dialogues alongside autoethnographic sketches, we feel, enables us to use autoethnography to illuminate both the nature of productive and unproductive feedback on us as Writers and the wider social structures of education and publishing in which this feedback was bound. We anonymised our Powerful Readers, with the exception of where they are deceased.

Having rewritten our memories in this way, we then began a final process of analysis. We considered a chronological ordering of our memories but rejected this in favour of a thematic analysis which would enable us to group our memories into the broad themes of productive and unproductive feedback. Within these broad themes, subthemes emerged. For example, it was clear that productivity of feedback was not predicated upon whether or not feedback was positive or negative but more upon whether the feedback was empathetic towards the Writer's Superaddressee. Having grouped our memories as examples of productive and unproductive feedback, and having identified subthemes within these two groups, for this article we then selected memories which we felt were most illustrative of the full range of subthemes, the nuances of which are then analysed and discussed in synthesis with our theoretical underpinnings.

## Unproductive feedback

### *Primary school*

*1975. Cambridge. Author 2 is showing his mother an origami word game he has co-created with other children in the playground. There has been much merriment about making this origami game.*

- Superaddressee: Mummy, I learnt how to put together this paper thing today. Look I'll show you. Pick a number.
- Powerful Reader: 4.
- Superaddressee: Ip-a-dip-a-dation the train stops at the station, you've got 4, and it says ... let me take back the flap ... fuck off! (*laughs not knowing what the phrase means*)
- Powerful Reader: (*hits Little Author 2 on the back of the head*) How dare you! How dare you speak like that to me.
- Superaddressee: Oh no, this language game has spelt disaster for me. If I say certain words, play certain games, then I might actually lose my Mummy altogether, she might leave me. Sometimes she says she wishes she could ...

*1977. A primary school in London. Mr Ballinger, an angry, resentful teacher, has a long queue at his desk, with children waiting fearfully for him to mark their stories. Author 2 hovers at the back of the queue.*

- Powerful Reader: So remember I want to see that your grammar is perfect in these stories: the spelling, the punctuation, the full stops, the full stops, you know there's nothing that makes me more mad than seeing no full stops, or too many full stops. And no capital letters, and too many commas, if you're unsure about the commas, just leave them out, there's nothing that makes me more furious than seeing a piece of work littered with totally irrelevant commas ... You boy, come here, stop skulking, I can't stand it when children skulk! Stand up straight for goodness' sake! Oh don't blubber! I'm just marking books, it's nothing to get upset about! Oh for heaven's sake, go and sit down.
- Superaddressee: That was a terrible experience, Mr Ballinger just shouting at me for putting full stops and commas in the wrong place, his red pen covering my story. Mrs Gorman never did that. I felt free to write what I wanted with her. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Pages of stuff, and she only ever gently made some suggestions, but Mr Ballinger, he's putting me off story writing entirely.

## Secondary school

*1989. Author 1 is 15 years old, sat at a table of six, in a north London secondary school. The teacher, Ms P, is passionate about literature, especially poetry. Especially Dylan Thomas. There is something melancholy about Ms P. Poetry is her solace? Ms P hands out some photocopies of different poems to each table. She asks the class to read the poems and then write their own. One of the poems that Author 1 reads uses an extended metaphor and this immediately gives him an idea – swimming between islands is weekdays at school; the islands the weekend. Author 1 writes the poem in his English book and, nonplussed, hands in his book. When the teacher returns the book the following week, Author 1 is surprised by his grade.*

- Powerful Reader: You've all read some great poems. Now it's your turn. Write me your great poem.
- Superaddressee: I don't like being at school. I'll write about that. I'll use a metaphor like that poet did in this poem. The school week's the sea; the island the

- weekend that I'm swimming towards. The week has long stanzas; the weekend short. The week is full of struggle; the weekend relaxing.
- Powerful Reader: This is a great poem.
- Superaddressee: I thought the metaphor was too obvious. Extending it tedious.
- Powerful Reader: It's an 'A'.
- Superaddressee: But what makes it great? What makes it an 'A'?
- Powerful Reader: It's literary.
- Superaddressee: Is that because I didn't think too much? Is that because I had an idea and I just wrote it?
- Powerful Reader: *(silence)*
- Superaddressee: Or is it because I responded to a published poem? Is that how I should write creatively?

*1990. Author 1 is sat at a table of six, in a different classroom in the same north London secondary school. The teacher, Ms P, has finishing marking the coursework and is calling the students one-by-one to return their portfolios. Whilst the rest of the class waits, they are meant to be revising for their exams, but they are mainly chatting about their coursework grades. Ms P calls Author 1 to her desk and Author 1 sits down, taking hold of the blue folder that Ms P holds out to him. Author 1 can smell the cigarette that Ms P smoked at break-time. Ms P starts telling Author 1 what she thinks of his coursework.*

- Powerful Reader: Overall it's really good. Well done.
- Superaddressee: Thanks.
- Powerful Reader: *(flicking through the folder)* Overall it's an A.
- Superaddressee: I feel warm inside.
- Powerful Reader: *(pointing to the blue folder)* These pieces are the strongest.
- Superaddressee: What about my creative writing piece?
- Powerful Reader: The other pieces were stronger.
- Superaddressee: There's something wrong with my story.
- Powerful Reader: *(silent)*
- Superaddressee: I've been reading Mary Wesley. In her stories there are these coincidences which bring unlikely characters together. Characters who all have traumatic backstories that are somehow interlinked. Due to an unlikely chain of events, the characters slowly reveal themselves.
- Powerful Reader: *(silent)*
- Superaddressee: What's wrong with my story?

### **Beyond school**

*1990. Having completed a BA in English (1986–89) and then a PGCE in English (1989–90), Author 2 applies to do an MA in Creative Writing. Author 2 finds the workshop process with a famous, admired writer terrifying and dispiriting. This workshop is attended by ten other intense students, some of whom are published writers, and quite posh and rich as well.*

- Superaddressee: I have attended a scriptwriting workshop led by a screenwriter, and he's evangelised about getting plots right, structuring things correctly. I've sort of done that with this story about a granny who gives birth to the Devil in a remote Northumbrian village, leading to the Devil running amok amongst the villagers. It's influenced by American Werewolf and the Magus. I see it as a serious work which comments on the spiritual barrenness of mankind.

- Powerful Reader: Well having spent most of the time talking about a good short story, written by a New Yorker, definitely a piece that could be published in the New Yorker, we now move on to this rather poorly written horror story. A little distasteful if you don't mind me saying. Not sure much attention has been paid to the language, the description, the characters but there does appear to be a plot. It's not the sort of writing I like but you might want to consider writing teenage fiction.
- Superaddressee: Oh dear I am not writing the kind of literary short stories or fiction that is required by these sorts of courses. Oh my God, I think this means I am hopeless, lost! I hate my writing! I hate it! I will never write again. I don't have the ability to publish anything worth publishing. It's time to give up and sob.

*2004. Author 1 has studied a BA and then an MA in English Literature. During his studies, he started writing novels. A comic coming-of-age campus novel, a never-ending epistolary novel. He was not happy with either and did not try to publish them. He moved from London to Leeds and became a secondary school teacher. In his spare time, Author 1 now writes creatively, focusing on young adult fiction. He posts his first novel, a semi-autobiographical teenage angst story, Paper Chains, to every appropriate agent listed in the Writers' & Artists' Yearbook. One agent responds positively, soliciting the manuscript. It takes a while for the agent to read it. When she responds, Author 1 is sat in his new terraced house in Leeds reading the email.*

- Powerful Reader: Thank you for sending me the full manuscript of your YA novel, *Paper Chains*.
- Superaddressee: You did solicit it. You could see from the first three chapters that this novel had something important to say about being a teenager.
- Powerful Reader: It's well written but it lacks pace. There's a strange lack of plot compulsion.
- Superaddressee: I'm glad you spotted that. Completely deliberate.
- Powerful Reader: You might want to try other agents. These things are so subjective.
- Superaddressee: I'm going against the grain.
- Powerful Reader: Yours sincerely.
- Superaddressee: I hate formulaic plots. Page turners. This is something different.

*2005. Author 1 is in the Post Office, a stack of stuffed A4 brown envelopes in his hands. It's the first three chapters of his second young adult novel, The Long Road Home, which he's sending to all the agents in this year's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook. The agent names, Author 1 sees, are almost identical to the year before, but the novel is different. It's about teenage angst, of course it is, but it's also about gaming and it's about nuclear power and there's most definitely a plot. Author 1 returns home to his terraced house and waits for the agents' responses to come through his letter box.*

- Superaddressee: This one does teenage angst but also has strong plot compulsion.
- Powerful Readers: *(silence)*
- Superaddressee: There's a new nuclear power station down the road. It's a source of debate in the community.
- Powerful Readers: *(silence)*
- Superaddressee: Every character has a view about it. Some of the characters know people who work there.
- Powerful Readers: *(silence)*

- Superaddressee: And then something happens. There's a leak. One of the workers gets ill. The dad of the protagonist's friend. It's an inciting incident. It's a page turner.
- Powerful Readers: *(silence)*
- Superaddressee: And the protagonist is a gamer. And as he struggles to help his friend, he finds the gaming world becomes the real world ...
- Powerful Readers: We cannot see a market for your novel at this moment.

*2009. Author 1 has changed jobs and is now working in a School of Education at a university. He is doing a PhD, which explores the relationship between masculine identity and creative writing in a primary school in Bradford. As part of his PhD, Author 1 writes stories for the class. These stories challenge gender stereotypes and Author 1 is interested in the ways in which the class responds. The story Author 1 has written for them is about a teenage Secret Agent who is sent to Jamaica for his first mission. The Secret Agent gets homesick, prompting his mum to fly out to look after him and complete the mission.*

- Superaddressee: This will challenge your gender assumptions.
- Powerful Readers: Nah, we don't believe it.
- Superaddressee: His mum is based on the mum in Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber*.
- Powerful Readers: Why would a Secret Agent need to be saved by his mum?
- Superaddressee: He definitely would.
- Powerful Reader: It's rubbish.

## Productive feedback

### Primary school

*1975. Cambridge. The teacher, Mrs G, asks the class to write rhyming nonsense poems and decorate them with their own drawings.*

- Powerful Reader: So now children, I'd like you to write a poem which contains rhyme words, and one that is full of nonsense.
- Superaddressee: Oh this is fun, I like the idea of creating a Wing-Ding-Thing which is a creature which lives in the sea, and keeps changing shape. You never know what it looks like. And it makes everyone laugh because it is always saying rubbish, just Wing-Ding-Thing rubbish words. I think I will draw the sea to decorate my poem.
- Powerful Reader: Oh well done Author 2, you have written a lovely poem, it contains so many silly rhyming words!
- Superaddressee: This is great. I can just string words together and enjoy playing with them in any way I like. I have felt the playfulness of language, its inherent absurdity and joy.

*1985. Author 1 is 11 years old, sat at a table of six, in a north London primary school. The teacher is Mr Lynch. Despite teaching by worksheets and asking the class to copy text into their books, Author 1 likes Mr Lynch. He can be fun when he's not handing out worksheets. And he's caring. Today Mr Lynch is asking the class to write a story set in everyday life where something fantastical happens. Author 1 thinks about this and an advert for a breakfast cereal – Frosties – pops into his mind. He starts writing a story about a boy called Tom who is having breakfast. Author 1 is the only one in the house to witness the Smiling Bear on his cereal box come to life. Author 1 decides that the way to end his story is to have*

*Tom wake up and realise the Smiling Bear was just a dream. Mr Lynch seems to have pre-empted this ending. He tells the class that they are not allowed to end their stories with 'it was just a dream'. Author 1 thinks of a more open ending.*

- Powerful Reader: I want to read a story set in everyday life where something fantastical happens.
- Superaddressee: A boy having breakfast looks at this drawing of a Smiling Bear on the cereal box. The Smiling Bear comes to life and starts talking. Only the boy knows this and when he wakes up, he realises the Smiling Bear was a dream.
- Powerful Reader: It can't be a dream. That's the one rule. It's far too predictable! That ending will bore me.
- Superaddressee: The boy wakes up and thinks *it was just a dream*. The reader thinks this is going to be one of those *it was just a dream* endings. That's a deliberate trick because when the boy goes downstairs and picks up the cereal box, he realises the Smiling Bear has disappeared.
- Powerful Reader: That's better! I like being tricked. Other readers should hear your story.
- Superaddressee: There is a warm glow inside of me.

## Secondary school

*1981. A History lesson with an inspirational teacher.*

- Powerful Reader: I want you to really grasp the stories that led Stalin and Hitler and Roosevelt to power, I want you to tell the story to me and the class, write something which brings the facts together in an interesting way. Make it stylish. Grab us!
- Superaddressee: I like this History teacher better than my English teachers, he makes me think about my readership, makes me think about writing stuff which makes me leave writing tired facts behind, and write some stories, stories about the mediocre, penniless Bavarian soldier who was a joke character, never taken seriously until he came to power, the rough tough gangster who ascended to the heights of the Bolshevik Party, brutally killing and imprisoning his enemies, the disabled American aristocrat with his powerful wife who saw a way that might stop Americans feeling so fearful during the Great Depression. I like writing these kinds of stories because I can talk to my grandmother about them too.
- Powerful Reader: These stories are great, you are able to make dry facts feel interesting ... These are more than schoolboy essays, they have feeling, drive, energy, well done.

## Beyond school

*1998. Over the next ten years, Author 2 has sent his novels off to agents and publishers. He gets rejections – some nice, some very brief, some long and critical. He gives up teaching for a bit and does a Journalism course. In a Journalism class in Clerkenwell, a journalist is commenting on the articles he asked us to write about the local area. Author 2 writes what he thinks is a very clever, literary article.*

- Superaddressee: I have written a very literary article, full of metaphors and similes about the local area, the literary heroes that have populated Clerkenwell: Dickens, Fagin, Oliver Twist ...
- Powerful Reader: I find this piece overwritten, far too fancy for an article about the local area for a local magazine. Just tell us it straight. Keep it plain! We don't need all this highfalutin language.
- Superaddressee: This is helpful. I need to take more care to write plainly, clearly. Shouldn't worry about being literary anymore. I like this advice.

*2009. Author 2 embarks on a Creative Writing PhD with a well-known writer as his supervisor. He prints out and reads pieces of Author 2's work, and marks things in black pen. He does not demand huge rewrites and is generally very positive. Author 2 gains the PhD in 2015.*

- Superaddressee: I know I was intending to write something educational for this PhD, *I'm a Pupil Get Me Out of Here*, but actually I'd like to write an autobiographical piece of fiction about a girlfriend of mine who I just learnt has died.
- Powerful Reader: That wasn't the plan, but I'm curious to read more. Why don't you have a go?
- Superaddressee: I find that I am writing about my past as a student, my days with my girlfriend who is now dead, and I am finding that the past is coming alive as I write, I just let it flow. The tension of doing a hard teaching job, a PhD, bringing up a child, being married, being an adult, just melts away as I write ... I am enjoying what I am reading. It feels like you are writing for yourself here, but you are writing clearly here for yourself, wanting to communicate properly to yourself.
- Powerful Reader: This is good stuff, I only have some comments about your punctuation, some typos, and the occasional thing about your presentation of your characters.
- Superaddressee: This is working, I am getting the right mix of attention, criticism, and encouragement. I am being left alone to work through my creative process, but also have a deep sense that I am communicating to someone important.

*2022. Author 1 has taken a job at a different university in a School of Education. Outside of his job, he is writing creatively again. This time it's a middle-grade novel, The Poppy Project. The novel involves a time shift and tells the stories of two girls, Mary and Mia, during World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic. Before approaching agents, Author 1 pays an editor he has worked with before to read the novel. Author 1 is at work, about to give a lecture to students, when the editor's email flashes up on his phone. Author 1 opens the email and the attachment – a 16-page full manuscript review.*

- Powerful Reader: The aim of my feedback is to enable you to improve your work. This does not mean there is not merit in your writing. Instead, I am deliberately focusing my feedback on the areas you need to improve and the changes you might make to ensure this improvement.
- Superaddressee: The dark clouds are coming.
- Powerful Reader: You need an overarching plot driver for the pandemic story. As it stands, there are subplots but there needs to be a main plot linked to the main character. Something the main character wants to achieve. Otherwise, your reader will not be interested. This is especially important with children's books.
- Superaddressee: I once got feedback from an agent. She said my YA novel lacked pace.



- Powerful Reader: Yes, that's what people say when they sense something's wrong but can't tell you what.
- Superaddressee: The main plot could be about Mia trying to keep her parents together?
- Powerful Reader: Link this to your overall concept. I understood the dual narrative but I didn't really know what the whole thing was about.
- Superaddressee: Mary is an evacuee. Like Mia, she would want to keep her family together but is powerless in the face of the war. She could, however, be superstitious ... And she could see her superstition as a way of keeping her family together ... The book is about two characters in difficult times trying to keep their families together.
- Powerful Reader: There's a problem with Mary's age. She's six at the start and this is too young for a middle-grade audience.
- Superaddressee: I'll make her ten. Tell me more.
- Powerful Reader: Here's 16 pages of more!

## Analysis and discussion

Fundamentally, our memories emphasise the affective dimension that underpins all feedback from Powerful Readers on Writers' creative writing. Positive feedback, like that received by Author 2 in his earliest memory of a primary school teacher and his most recent memory from his PhD, valorises the Superaddressee and motivates the Writer to think of themselves as a Writer; negative feedback, on the other hand, damages the Superaddressee and makes the Writer question themselves and their endeavours. Positive feedback from the Powerful Reader, therefore, is a motivating force that can set the gyre of internal dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee in motion.

Positivity, however, is not enough to ensure the internal dialogue between the Writer and their Superaddressee takes hold. One reason for it not taking hold is the Writer being resistant to criticism and change. This is exemplified by Author 1 when the agent says his YA novel lacks pace. Unlike Author 2 when faced with criticism from the Powerful Reader on his Journalism course, Author 1 is immediately defensive and sees the lack of pace in his novel as a positive. If Author 1's resistance to criticism were to endure, Author 1 as a Writer would become delusional, his Superaddressee ossified. This is not the case, however, the voice of the Powerful Reader staying with Author 1 when he writes his next novel. The issue, however, is that Author 1 does not know how to fix the problem of pace, the Powerful Reader not giving him enough time or feedback, leaving his Superaddressee with a limited understanding of plot, his new Powerful Readers silent.

Which brings us to the most significant reason why the internal dialogue between Writer and Superaddressee does not hold – the Powerful Reader's feedback does not contain evidence that they have closely read the text. Or rather, the Powerful Reader has not taken the time to seek to apprehend and appreciate the Writer's Superaddressee. It is this alignment, the skill of the Powerful Reader to empathise, to acknowledge and understand the Writer's Superaddressee through feedback, which draws the Writer in, enabling them to shed any residue of their defence. Positive feedback aside, it is the empathy of the Powerful Reader in apprehending the Writer's Superaddressee which is the real motivating force and which enables the transference of the gyre from the Powerful Reader to the Writer. It is the empathy of the Powerful Reader which enables the Writer

to become the falconer, to speak their own internal voice of self-criticism in dialogue with their Superaddressee.

Transference from the Powerful Reader to the Writer as a result of the Powerful Reader's empathy is evident in all our memories of productive feedback. For Author 2, this empathy is largely positive: Mrs G appreciating his Wing-Ding-Thing creature; his History teacher loving the way he brings dry facts to life; his PhD supervisor being open to a change in direction. For Author 1, this empathy is positive in his memory where, albeit fortuitously, Mr Lynch pre-empts the Superaddressee's ending, helping the Writer to think of other possibilities. In all these instances, the Superaddressees are apprehended by an empathetic Powerful Reader, meaning that the Writer is able to be creative, to take hold of the gyre, to continue in their internal dialogue with their Superaddressee.

At other times, the Powerful Reader is more critical of the Writer's Superaddressee: the journalist challenging Author 2's use of highfalutin language, which does not match the Superaddressee of a journalistic text; and the editor making Author 1 think more about his middle-grade readers. But because in all of these instances the Powerful Reader has carefully read the Writers' text, has identified problems, given reasons for these problems, and suggested changes which bring in other Superaddressees, the Powerful Reader is empathetic to the Writers' Superaddressees. It is an empathy that is demonstrated through an external dialogue where the Powerful Reader is shown to understand writing as a cognitive act, as a performance of that which is always in the making (Price 2020, 463). And because of this, a transference from an external dialogue to an internal dialogue can take place. The Writer reads their own text through the eyes of their Powerful Reader and in doing so brings forth the potential of a new Superaddressee. The Writer is able to internalise criticism, to take hold of the gyre, to enter into internal dialogue with their Superaddressee. The Writer is able to engage with redrafting, to deliver their new Superaddressee, the second coming.

But, as we have shown, so often in the institutions of education and publishing the Powerful Reader is either unaware of their power and the impact it can have on their Writers, or has other priorities that take up their time, or, on occasion, is conscious of deliberately abusing that power. In primary school, Author 2 experienced how feedback can be driven by agendas where the technical aspects of writing are forced onto the Writer by a Powerful Reader who is abusive and devoid of empathy, the Writer's Superaddressee never acknowledged. At university, Author 2 experienced what has recently been researched – how Powerful Readers in creative writing workshops can use 'their relative positionality' to 'silence the student-writer' (Suphap 2023), dismissing the Writer's Superaddressee altogether. In secondary schools, Author 1 has experienced how the Powerful Reader's feedback is often judgemental (both positive and negative) without being constructive. And in the publishing industry, Author 1 has experienced how the feedback of silence found in schools is all-pervasive, the Powerful Reader interested in feedback only where profit allows.

In all of these instances, we as Writers are in differing degrees damaged by our encounters with unempathetic Powerful Readers. We as Writers have been left to devise our own dialogues with our Superaddressees, trying to guess what might have made our writing good or bad, marketable or unmarketable. Or, perhaps more productively, trying to ignore the feedback of these Powerful Readers altogether. (Not that we were able to do this. We wouldn't have remembered if that were the case.)

In all of these instances, the Powerful Reader, wittingly or unwittingly, will not relinquish their role as falconer. Author 2's mother will physically censor him, exerting power to stay in control of the Writer's gyre. The Writer's gyre is not allowed to take hold. The Writer continues to write for the same Superaddressee. A Superaddressee who never progresses. Never enters into internal dialogue with the Writer. Never changes. So, writing becomes failure – a failure which is far from generative (Suphap 2023). The second ossification of the Superaddressee.

Or the Writer simply stops writing. The voice of self-criticism becomes the only voice that is heard (Neff and Vonk 2009). The Superaddressee is annihilated.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

(Yeats 1992, 76)

(Note, dear Powerful Readers, we are still writing.)

## Conclusion

So, in the end, much of it comes down to you. The Powerful Readers.

For Writers to progress, for Writers to engage in internal dialogues with their Superaddressees, for the gyre of writing development to be unleashed, you, the Powerful Readers, must play your part.

You do not always have to be positive, although a positive approach might help. Rather, you have to be empathetic and you have to be given time to be empathetic. To look beyond the written – to look beyond policy, company agendas – to understand the Writer's Superaddressee. For without this understanding, and without the evidence of this understanding in your externalised feedback, the Writer will not be able to engage in meaningful dialogue with you. The dialogue will not be transferred, will not be internalised. The Writer will not redraft their text. The Superaddressee will never be reborn. Entropy everywhere.

So, what are the implications of this conclusion?

Firstly, that Powerful Readers in educational institutions need professional development to give productive feedback on creative writing to promote redrafting. Professional development would involve Powerful Readers becoming self-reflexive, aware of their own positionality, their power, their identities, possibly their privileges, the policy structures which bind them, and how all of this can affect the developing Writers with whom they work. In line with research into teaching writing (Bishop 1990; Bizzaro 1993; Cremin and Oliver 2017; Elbow 1998; Smith and Wrigley 2016), to become self-reflexive, Powerful Readers should become Writers who can give feedback which is cognisant of writing as a cognitive process. Professional development would also involve Powerful Readers, who are now Writers, receiving feedback from other Powerful Readers in order to reflect upon both the affective dimension of creative writing and the nature of productive feedback. This professional development would also involve Powerful Readers,

who are now Writers, redrafting their creative texts and reflecting upon the changes to their Superaddressees. For Soyinka and Sweetman (2021), this Powerful Reader is the 'writer-facilitator' who continues with their own writing, who inspires and guides others, who facilitates writing and celebrates the relationships that are formed.

Linked to this, professional development for Powerful Readers would then involve crafting focused creative writing assignments. This would help Powerful Readers move beyond providing irrelevant feedback on the technical aspects of writing as experienced by Author 2. And it would help Powerful Readers pre-empt their Writers' Superaddressees, challenging them before the act of writing to avoid Author 1's ending, 'it was just a dream'. The Powerful Reader already being a writer-facilitator would give them the foundational experience to do this.

As for the Writers, they must also take responsibility and not just blame their Powerful Readers for their lack of writing development. In line with earlier research (Bishop 1990; Bizzaro 1993), Writers need to be resilient. Undertaking autoethnographic reflections into their own experiences of feedback and redrafting as we have done can help with this, enabling Writers to think about both the nature of the feedback they have been given as well as their response. This, in turn, could mitigate against the affective impact of unproductive feedback. Autoethnographic reflections could also help Writers empathise with their Powerful Readers, making them aware of the time pressures and policy contexts which make Powerful Readers respond as they sometimes do. The Writer's ability to contextualise feedback is another way of mitigating against the affective impact of unproductive feedback, enabling them to take it with a pinch of salt.

And for the publishing industry? It would be difficult to argue that literary agents should try to empathise with the thousands of Writers who send their manuscripts to the slush pile! But within the publishing industry, there could be more mentoring programmes for young writers which follow the principles of the writer-facilitator (Soyinka and Sweetman 2021). Programmes which could ignite the gyre of internal dialogue, shifting the Writer's Superaddressee so that, should they wish to, Writers could write something that the publishing industry considers marketable. Or, better, change what the publishing industry considers marketable. And the publishing industry should target young Writers with less privilege, with less access to Powerful Readers who provide productive feedback. Only then can the hegemony of creativity as genius be disrupted (Weisberg 1999).

Finally, for research. Our next steps are twofold. Firstly, we are interested in developing our understanding of the psychoanalytical underpinnings of the transference between the Powerful Reader and the Writer. The nature of this transference, we feel, has parallels with the transference that occurs between a client and their therapist, just as the process of redrafting has parallels with the psychoanalytic process of reframing. Secondly, we are interested in working with Writers and Powerful Readers in the full range of educational institutions in order to develop our knowledge of how this theoretical framework can translate into practice. Only then will we be able to understand how we can facilitate young Writers to become falconers in control of their own gyres.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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