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Journal der Schreibberatung

Im Schreibgespräch mit Aritha van Herk

Ende April hielt sich Aritha van Herk aus Anlass einer internationalen Konferenz für eine Woche in Jena auf. Sie ist einerseits eine international wahrgenommene Autorin und sie unterrichtet kanadische Literatur und *Creative Writing* an der University of Calgary. Auf Initiative des Schreibzentrums der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität gab sie in dieser Zeit auch einen Workshop mit dem Titel: *Pen to Paper. Perspectives of Creative Writing at the University*. Dazu befragte sie Peter Braun (PB), der Leiter des dortigen Schreibzentrums.



Aritha van Herk © Foto: Peter Braun

PB: Aritha, what is *Creative Writing*?

It is a wonderful zone of writing where you do not have to answer a question – you can ask a question. You can explore an intellectual idea that is somewhere outside of your coursework and that may take you to places that are completely unexpected. Creative Writing is almost impossible to define and yet is inevitably so much a part of our desire for self expression that it can become a companion to all of our intellectual, emotional and personal pursuits.

PB: What kind of students participates in *Creative Writing* classes at your university?

At my university we teach Creative Writing as part of the English Department, but there are not only students of English. There are also students who come from other disciplines – so I will have philosophy students, I will have biology students, sociolo-

gy students, business admin students. They would like to write, even though they may be exploring a degree and a career in other fields. We also teach our classes in the evenings so that people who have finished their degrees and are adults can come back and take their proper university. So Creative Writing is considered a world that is open to many different kinds of students. And as long as they get into the class, we do not ask questions about their background.

Nevertheless our students can get an English degree with a specialisation in Creative Writing, which means they will have taken three full-year English Creative Writing courses, and it can be in poetry, in fiction, in drama writing. We are starting to do classes that are 8 months, so they run from September to April because we find a half year, September to December, is too short to get much done. We usually give six classes a year because there are six of us teaching Creative Writing at the English Department. We teach an Introductory Course for first-year students, then students submit portfolios, if they want to get into Fiction 1 or Poetry 1 and then Fiction 2 or Poetry 2 and Drama 1 and Dra-

ma 2 which is part of the drama department, and then we have a senior course which is called The Book Manuscript Course. We teach one graduate course in Creative Writing, every other year fiction and poetry. Next year I teach it and it is fiction, prose, actually, I do both, fiction and non-fiction, and then the master students can do a thesis that is creative. And then students can do a PH.D. with a Creative Writing thesis but only a few students, we only let in three this year.

PB: In Germany we do not really have Creative Writing classes. So what do you do in a Creative Writing class?

Well, at the beginning of our classes, we do give students exercises. Then we move on and we just write. The students – we traditionally have about 20 people in the classes – distribute the story to their classmates and everyone reads the work, comes to the class, ready to critique it. Then the student who wrote the story sits in the corner and takes notes, does not speak, and the whole class talks about the story as if it were a piece they had just read in a magazine. And they critique what works about the piece, what does not work and what would make

the piece better. So we talk about the effectiveness of the writing in terms of what it achieves. At the end of the discussion the writer has an opportunity to ask questions. And I also write a detailed critique that is in writing, and the students will also write a paragraph talking about what works in the story and what does not work. So they go away from the class with the oral discussion, 20 different written critiques and a story that they can then improve or work on. And mostly they do. And then often they will send it out for publication. So the class is a workshop on the whole.

By the way – sorry I am used to teach by digression: About ten years ago I was in Berlin, giving a talk at a conference, and then got into a fight with a professor because he said: „You can not teach Creative Writing.“ And his wife was one of the most famous dancing teachers in Germany. And I said: „Well, can your wife teach dance?“ And he said: „Yes, but that is different.“ And I said: „How is it different? A dancer may or may not naturally be a good dancer. But you do not become a good ballet dancer by sitting alone in a room dancing with nobody critiquing your technique or watching what you

do or suggesting that you need to do these exercises or helping you to develop your muscles.“ In fact, Creative Writing is a kind of muscular art, where you need to develop your muscles in order to develop your art as quickly and as efficiently as possible. You can become a writer without ever taking a Creative Writing-course, but what we teach in our classes is the muscular train necessary to exercise your craft more quickly.

PB: Can you give me some examples of the way you are teaching Creative Writing?

When you begin to write as a creative act, the first element for you to think about is language. Language is your paint brush, your carving tool, your lasso, your hammer, your scalpel. It is your tool. And you have to realise that it can be a caress or it can be a punch. The first notion of using it well is paying attention. And not just paying attention to the language itself but to the world around you.

You must listen to everything that is going on around you and you must begin by writing down what you hear people say. Because that is where you get an ear for dialogue, where you get ideas for stories and where you also cap-

ture the essence of your particular world. And your particular world is the source of your material – always.

In the same way you have to be aware of small dramatic moments which I call *tableaux*. Let me give you an example: I was once riding a train, sitting quietly next to a window. Suddenly a man and a woman get on, they sit in the handicapped seats although they do not look handicapped. The man is quite grey and pale as a sheet – he seems ill and the girl with him: is she his nurse, is she his caregiver, is she his daughter? He coughs and coughs and leans over and she reaches out to touch his face which are gestures of concern that are clearly more than those of a nurse or a caregiver. So he slumps into an uneasy sleep, and she pulls out a book and begins to draw him. Quickly shading in his face with a skill that is far beyond amateur. She in fact manages to draw him very well. In about ten minutes, he wakes up and she bends forward, attentive again.

What a wonderful opportunity to invent a story. The door opens a crack, and you peer in and you can see a slice of a story or a poem, but you do not see the whole at all – ever. What you

see is only a little bit, so your imagination then can begin to work. Let me emphasize one more point. For me it is one of the primary aspects of writing: Your writing will be better, if you do not decide in advance what will happen. The best writing is the writing that meanders and reveals its own discoveries. So that you discover as you proceed with the writing. Then you begin to see that what we are looking for as writers in our writings is to shed light on some aspect of life that is inexplicable, unusual, a departure from the normal.

PB: Do you think there is an impact of *Creative Writing* on academic writing as well?

I am actually hard-evidenced of that. Remember when I said, we would each read a story and then we will have a class discussion where we look at the story. So they begin to see the patterns of bad writing, which are obvious, and what makes good writing and what makes writing really good, and they take this back to their papers. Every one of my students told me that their grades go up in their essays. It is not a surprise because it is the first time that they have looked carefully at what

they write. One of the fascinating parts of writing is that once you stop thinking about the essays as being a job, once you begin to think about this as: „This is a game I play with words“, even the academic essays become so much fun. Because you realise that language is your tool box and once you develop that it does not matter what kind of writing you are doing. That is one reason to have a Creative Writing discipline.

PB: Do you think that this is an idea, that is changing in Europe? Especially now, since more and more universities establish something like a writing centre?

It is a very North American phenomenon that writing is a field of study. We have a long tradition of that. And in the present it develops enormously. Ten years ago, there were in the United States about 20 Master of Fine Arts-programmes in Creative Writing, and now there are 200. They have

varying quality. I expect that Germany, being a smart place, will recognise that writing is an opportunity for a field of study that can be expanded. But all efforts will only be successful if your students will be successful.

Angaben zur Person: Aritha van Herk, 1954 in Kanada als Kind niederländischer Emigranten geboren, veröffentlichte ihren ersten Roman *Judith* (dt. Alle meine Schweine) im Jahr 1978; dafür erhielt sie den Preis für den besten kanadischen Erstlingsroman. Weitere Romane folgten: *The Tent Peg* (dt. Unter Männern), 1981, *No fixed Address* (dt. Adresse unbekannt), 1987 und *Restlessness* (1998). Darüber hinaus ist sie bekannt für ihre Experimente in *Creative Non-Fiction*, die u.a. in den Bänden *In Visible Ink* (1991) und *A Frozen Tongue* (1992) versammelt sind. Seit 1982 ist sie Professorin für *Creative Writing* an der Universität in Calgary/Alberta. Weitere Informationen: Homepage der Creative Writing Faculty der University of Calgary: <http://english.ucalgary.ca/content/creative-writing>