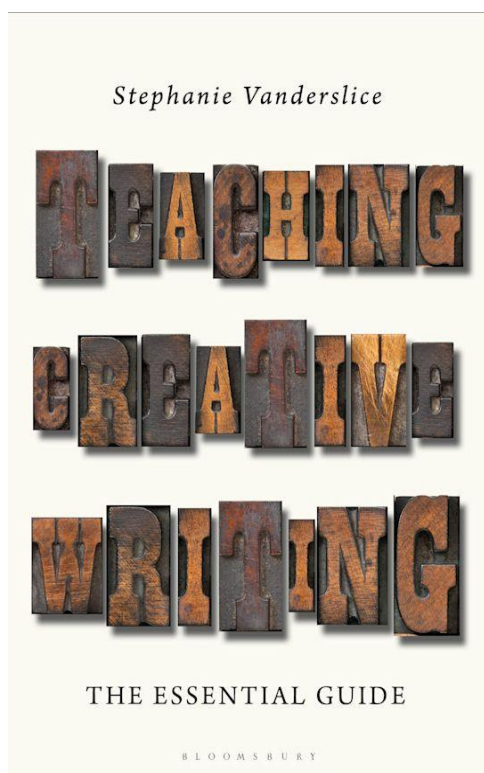


BOOKS

**Stephanie Vanderslice, *Teaching Creative Writing: The Essential Guide*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024
(paperback edition), 175 p.**



Since its inception in the early 20th century and until the 1990s Creative Writing was taught largely without much evidence of pedagogic investigation. This has changed in recent years, with the emergence of Creative Writing Studies, which seeks to scrutinize the practices passed down through what Kelly Ritter called the lore of Creative Writing. In her short book *Teaching Creative Writing: The Essential Guide*, Stephanie Vanderslice seeks to add to this emerging body of research by providing especially beginner teachers with a quick list of tips for thinking of how to approach the subject. The book is divided into thirteen short chapters that touch upon a wide array of topics relating to the field, as well as three appendixes and adopts a very relaxed tone, with the narrative voice often addressing the reader directly, as if a conversation were taking place. With respect to the target reader themselves, not only is the text very much aimed at young individuals who practice within the US education system,

but Vanderslice clearly assumes that they are also writers first and teachers second. The advice provided also leans heavily on the author's personal experience in the classroom rather than on research data (though this does exist in the text). Nevertheless,



such data is scarce in the field as it is, and this book does contain a lot of interesting details and perspectives that would be very useful for anyone just starting out, even (or especially) in an educational system like the Romanian one, where there is no tradition of teaching creative writing and, therefore, no local lore to rely on.

In a mere 175 pages of text, Vanderslice dives into a plethora of diachronic and synchronic issues pertaining to the field of Creative Writing, beginning with a quick history of the field. Dedicating just nine pages to this complex journey, the chapter lacks many of the details that can be found in other works, such as *The Elephants Teach* by D.G. Myers (1996), however, this makes sense, as this book is an essential guide, and is therefore not aimed at providing any in-depth analysis. From here, the author jumps directly into current issues, focusing first on one of the main obstacles that have stood in the way of creative writing studies, namely the myth that one is either born to be a writer or they are not, which subsequently has led to the other belief that writing cannot be taught, but only nurtured. To counter such untested beliefs, Vanderslice draws upon research done by scholars such as Vickie Spandel and Joshua Shenk to demonstrate that this notion of the natural writer was born out of the Romantic era and lacks any verifiable evidence to sustain it. With this nagging issue resolved, the author moves on to more specific issues relating to the pedagogy of Creative Writing, with the third chapter discussing the importance of reading when learning to write, while chapter four deals with the utility of providing in-class writing assignments.

A characteristic of this book is that it jumps from one thing to another, looking to capture as many aspects of teaching creative writing in as little space as possible. Chapter five thus shifts briefly from practical issues to discuss the importance of setting up an in-class environment that is based on diversity and inclusion. Chapter six then focuses on something that brushes shoulders with the field of literary studies, namely “literary” and “genre” writing. Here Vanderslice argues that the divide that exists between the two has always been an artificial construct, stating that “our culture loves to gatekeep, especially in the arts” (57) and that students should be encouraged simply to read broadly so as to draw inspiration from various sources. In chapter seven the author moves the discussion back to pedagogy and examines the efficacy of the standard workshop model, an issue that is certainly important to an American reader, as this is their standard organizational system, but perhaps less so to a European one, since here other models have emerged. Chapter eight then deals with how student work should be evaluated, pointing out that, in her experience, “it’s much more important to respond to student work at the beginning and the middle of the process than at the end” (74), thus emphasizing the fact that, in this field, the act of writing is more important than the resulting product. As stated above, Vanderslice’s book tends to jump from one aspect to another, and so chapter nine shifts gears again to provide useful tips on how a digital non-native like herself and the presumed reader can approach the process of integrating digital technology into their classroom. Chapter ten then discusses the problem of mental health in the classroom, arguing it is important that we consider “the teacher’s role in creating a psychologically safer classroom space” (93), although she admits that the possibility of establishing such a space relies heavily on the reader’s university having a clear set of mental health policies. The last three chapters of the book

are perhaps the most US-oriented ones, with chapter eleven discussing how creative writing classes might be integrated into non-philological specializations, chapter twelve touching upon how students can be helped to become career writers and finally chapter thirteen dealing with how those working within the US educational system might manage to balance their careers as both teachers and writers. This is, arguably, the least relevant segment of the text if you are a Creative Writing teacher in Romania.

However, this is not where the book ends, and what follows the thirteen chapters is perhaps one of its most valuable components, namely a three-part appendix section. It includes first a list of organizations, journals and textbooks that are particularly valuable to someone who has taken upon themselves to learn the practice of teaching Creative Writing but must rely mainly on text resources. The second part of the appendix provides a detailed presentation on how to write a teaching statement, which is great for anyone who wants to make sure that they have a clear perspective on what they seek to accomplish in their teaching. Finally, the book closes with information on how to create a course syllabus, including a specific example, and the utility of this is obvious for a beginning teacher who has yet to establish the structure of their class.

All in all, for anyone just starting out on their journey into the teaching of creative writing this book really is an essential guide. Vanderslice does a fantastic job of capturing the multitude of aspects, be them practical, theoretical or administrative, pertaining to the pedagogy of creative writing. She then presents them in a way that any reader can understand, even if they have not delved deep (or at all) into the literature of Creative Writing Studies. Despite the intended reader clearly being American, the utility of this book is arguably just as – or even more – important to someone from a country such as Romania, where no tradition in the field exists, meaning that a teacher cannot rely on past practices, but must instead look to the experiences of and texts written by others.

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