'What We Are Missing': An Interview With Andrew Cowan

Q: *Let's start with a simple question. What exactly is ?creative writing'?*

AC: I draw a distinction between Creative Writing and writing. Creative Writing (capital C, capital W) is a category of activity that happens in educational institutions, a subject of study for which awards are given, and course approval is required. It has all the apparatus of any other course of academic study. It has a programme specification, a curriculum, marking criteria; it has to have expected outcomes, and well-defined inputs. It's an institutional activity, whereas writing is what writers do, and it's not a regulated activity. Writing is more exploratory, contingent, unpredictable. But sometimes, at MA level, on a group programme like ours, Creative Writing can become more like writing ? that's the reward of teaching on such a good programme, because you're in a conversation with your fellow writers, you're engaging with their writing, responding to it as another writer, and it begins *not* to feel like a course of study?it starts to feel more like a conversation between people who are engaged in the same activity and taking it seriously.

Q: *A book is a conversation; the MA is one too, requiring the right participants, the right interlocutors. What degree of social engineering is needed to put together the perfect group of MA students?*

AC: We're actually in a very privileged position because we have this reputation, which is now international, and so we're able to attract high calibre applicants from all over the UK, increasingly throughout Europe, and from Canada, America, Australia, India. We get about three hundred applications a year for twenty-four places on the Prose MA, and we tend to select about sixty of those for interview, and we're often fairly convinced when we invite them that they have the potential eventually to become published writers. But what we're looking for in the interview is evidence that they'd be responsive to the input of others, and also that they'd be part of the teaching process, that they'd contribute to the conversation in a constructive way that would enable their peers, their fellow students, to develop more rapidly.

Malcolm Bradbury, who founded our programme forty years ago, confessed after twenty-five years of teaching Creative Writing that he still didn't know whether writing could be taught. But what he did know was that you could hasten the

development of a promising young writer through the process of workshopping, by introducing young writers to other young writers and allowing them to converse with each other under the aegis of a programme that employed successfully published writers who could offer the benefit of their own experience. And I think I agree. What a really good course can do is accelerate the development of someone who's already a promising writer. So we're looking to select two groups of twelve people who are going to be responsive to criticism and able to give constructive criticism to others, who are robust enough not to cave in if the feedback they get is negative, who are able to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful criticism, who are able to be honest with each other; we're looking for individuals who'll be able to speak truthfully about other students' work, but in a way that wouldn't be unkind, hurtful or likely to be misconstrued as being personally hostile.

I know that, in the past, UEA's MA did begin to get a reputation as a bit of a bear pit where you had to be really strong-willed, strong-minded and speak strongly, and there was a kind of masculinist ?survival of the fittest' scenario. But when I arrived in 2004 the ethos had completely changed, largely because of Michèle Roberts and Patricia Duncker who insisted a much more collaborative, conversational approach.

Q: *What are the skill sets of a good teacher of Creative Writing?*

AC: Someone who is not too dogmatic, or programmatic. Someone who is successful at writing.... Actually, in the field of Creative Writing with a capital C, capital W, it's quite a controversial thing, still, to insist that a teacher of Creative Writing should be a successful writer, and by ?successful' I mean not just that they've written things to completion but that they've published them, that their work has circulated in the wider world beyond the academy, and has preferably been reviewed in major newspapers, preferably won awards, preferably been translated overseas. There are all these conventional markers of literary success, but within the field of Creative Writing they're sometimes disparaged as being in some way tainted by commercial considerations.

Actually it's important to be a failure as well as a success. I think that someone who is familiar with failure but has found solutions to previous failed attempts, someone who has struggled with the language and the form and ultimately succeeded, who has managed to do something effective in the language ? that person has been on a journey that equips them better to be a teacher of writing. So that's important?you

need to be published, but you need to be familiar with failure. Because you're going to have to be sensitive to your students and to what one of my colleagues, Amit Chaudhuri, has called ?that paradoxical and sly addiction', failure. I understand this from my own self-sabotaging impulses, and I think you'll find it in a lot of creative people. Sometimes it can feel easier to fail than to keep at it and succeed, and you have to be very sensitive to that temptation to fail in your students, and know ways of encouraging them through their darker periods.

Q: *In a way, an MA can be the learning of how to ?fail better'?I know this is one of your favourite adages. But why keep trying if there's so much vulnerability involved? Is there a sort of masochism involved, too? Do you have to embrace failure just to be able to move on?*

AC: Yes, but I don't want to generalise from the example of me and say that all writers must be as obsessive-compulsive and as tempted by the possibility of self-sabotage as I am, or as insecure in their relationship to the language. In my case, it helps that I feel particularly insecure in that way, because it means I'm ever-vigilant to writing badly and never trust what I put on the page. I keep going back and trying to improve what I've written, and I think that vigilance, which is exhausting, is ultimately its own vindication, because the quality of the writing is often better because of it. But I wouldn't wish that form of insecurity and obsessive behaviour upon anyone else, just as I wouldn't advocate the way I write as a method for others, though I think it's given me an appreciation of others who are like that, so I can be sympathetic and helpful towards them. Then there are others who write more naturally, more freely, who are more robust, perhaps in personality, who are able to risk failure in a more high-wire sort of way, who experiment, take risks, and I recognize something in them which is the antithesis of me. It's like my shadow, and I feel very familiar with it. So when I find that in a student I think I recognize it almost as readily as I recognize the person who is like me.

Q: *As a writer, how much do you own language and how much are you owned by it?*

AC: Sometimes you might wish to be the slave of language. You might wish to be possessed by the language?that's our fantasy, isn't it? That we'll become the channel for some divine inspiration and it will all become effortless, the words will flow through us. That's the romantic fantasy. We all have these routines by which we hope to invoke the muse. It's often very important that we write at this particular

desk, on this particular computer, and it has to be done after a certain amount of ritualistic circling of the room. It's a kind of magical thinking: if we do everything just so, then the muse will speak to us, or through us.

It's a forlorn fantasy; I don't think it very often happens. The way in which one connects, I suspect, with that sort of flow of language and becomes possessed by it rather than the slave of it, is to work and work and work. You have to get so inside the process that you start to lose a sense of your own boundaries and your awareness of time. It's a very familiar scenario; lots of writers have described this. You get into a kind of recursive loop where you try this and that and it doesn't work, so you rephrase it, rework it, try again, and eventually you become part of the process and things happen that you hadn't anticipated or intended. That would be my definition of inspiration.

But more often than not, I feel completely alienated from the language. The achievement never matches the ambition, every word I put down is the wrong word, and no matter how many hours I spend with it, I seem never to get it right. That's to describe most of my writing life. And then I do feel that the language is separate from me. It precedes me, and sometimes I feel like it's somebody else's possession, that the language belongs to others. I've described this before, but I think a lot of it has to do, in my case, with class and class insecurity, with growing up in an environment where there were no books and people didn't read. It wasn't just that they didn't write, they didn't read either. So the idea of becoming a writer was as extravagant to me as the idea of becoming a World Cup winning footballer. It was a fantasy. In a way, coming to university and being educated out of my background was a process of self-alienation. Using the language always entails the possibility of betrayal, for me, betrayal of who I thought I was, betrayal of my background, of the place where I come from, because in order to write about it, I've had to adopt the language of the literary novel, which describes my background but doesn't often emerge from my background. There's always this ambivalence.

Q: *As we're touching on the politics of writing, can one still write about anything and everything nowadays; or perhaps this is possible now more than ever?*

AC: Obviously, there are social conventions which prevent certain things from being expressed at certain times. There are always things which are defined by the cultural and historical moment as unsayable, and often the moral obligation on the

artist is to test the boundaries.

But I would particularise it by saying that, in individual cases, it might seem impossible to say certain things. Certain individuals, because of their background, psychology, their particular neuroses, repressions?for certain people, certain things might seem unsayable. But sometimes the urge to write will come from precisely that tension within them. The psychological knots that make that person who they are ? somewhat neurotic perhaps, somewhat depressive, perhaps prone to anxiety ? these symptoms and characteristics that are so typical of writers and other artists, often they will find their expression in creative works. And sometimes, perhaps, the would-be artist will fail because they are simply unable to confront their demons or let go of their inhibitions.

There's this idea that writing may be therapeutic. In some complicated or conflicted or even twisted way, it may be therapeutic, because it provides a kind of outlet for some fairly dark emotions often. But it doesn't cure you.

Q: *Does story still reign supreme? Do other things, like language, character, or experimental tricks have their say too?*

AC: If you're writing prose fiction, I would say the two most important things are sentences and story. I think if story doesn't interest you, then perhaps poetry is your natural medium, where you can explore the tactility of language and engage more with words *as* words.

Q: *What makes a good story?*

AC: [smiling] I wish I knew.

Q: *Most of the time, when one talks about story, one talks about voice. How do you hear a good voice?*

AC: In simple terms, I think there are two versions of voice. One is that it's a form of ventriloquism. What the author is doing, via his narrative surrogate on the page, is ?voicing' or ?giving voice to' a character or characters, and from book to book that author will modify their voice. If they're writing about a seventeenth century swashbuckler, they'll adopt a very different voice than if they're writing about a

nineteenth century lady poet.

The other version of voice is that it's in some way inherent, the expression of the authentic you. In this version, what you do as a writer, especially a beginning writer, is try to achieve the signature sound of yourself on the page. When that happens, when you start to ring true, we tend to say that you've ?found' your voice. And that voice comprises many things, which includes a moral outlook on life that will influence the themes you're drawn to?that's one aspect, but it also has musical connotations. It's associated with cadence, the particular way in which you formulate your sentences, which will have a particular rhythm to them, and this may be consistent and recognisable from one book to the next. It also encompass the range of your diction; there will be certain registers of language that you won't use, because it would seem inauthentic, not ?you'.

That's a very simplistic division. One of my favourite writers is Richard Ford. He has this wonderfully mellifluous, flowing way of constructing a sentence, which may go on for a page or more, and the linkages in that sentence, the punctuation, the conjunctions and so on, will be very cleverly and subtly deployed. So what may have been written by another writer as several dozen sentences, will, in his hands, and especially in his later books, become a single sentence in which he will reference or display echoes of many registers of American speech. You'll have the language of the hot-dog advert, the gun catalogue, the ballpark commentator. He'll weave all these together into one voice, that of his narrator Frank Bascombe. In him, you get the polyphonic novel which encompasses all the voices of America It's an amazing thing, which always manages to sound authentically ?Fordian', while ventriloquising Bascombe, and yet subtly incorporating all these other registers.

Q: *Your novels have this poised, intimate and understated tone, very subtle and subdued, that stays with the reader. Is that a risk, in today's world of the sensational and the commercial?*

AC: Possibly. I will often close a book which is too loud or sensational. I often don't admire fireworks on the page. I often feel it's easier to make a loud noise than to make no noise. And I'm more engaged by subtlety and subtle effects in a novel. So, I'm trying to write the kind of novel that I'd like to read, and ?subdued' is part of that. Often I'm describing a way of being in the world which is cautious, watchful, sometimes too familiar with defeat, in which the challenges are often small

challenges of everyday courage, and it seems a subdued voice and a restricted palette are appropriate for what I'm describing. To have a rhetorically more inflated style would mean I couldn't actually explore what I need to explore.

Q: *There's a wonderful piece of advice in your guide: ?Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.' Truth in fiction seems to be a very sensitive thing...*

AC: Yes, true lies. There are different kinds of discourse, aren't there? Philosophy perhaps, the sciences, often purport to deliver the truth about the world we inhabit; some journalism makes a similar claim. But that somehow isn't sufficient for us. There's a sense we're missing something, the unsayable, the ineffable, the ?can't be seen', that there's something behind this bald presentation of the factual. And I think it's the role of fiction to tease that out, which often means coming in at an angle. The angle of vision in fiction is often oblique; it presents the world to us slant ? which was Emily Dickinson's injunction to poets actually. ?Tell all the truth but tell it slant'.

In fiction, the meaning is often to be found in what's withheld; it's found between the lines, in the white spaces. If you withhold as much as you reveal, you'll entice the reader in. The reader will be drawn into the white spaces. That's where they'll imaginatively inhabit the world of the book; it's where the writer's words and the reader's imagination will come together, and where the novel is invented. What you withhold the reader will supply, so the reading won't be a passive activity, but a form of active engagement. We often talk about ?getting into a book', and I think it's to do with this mysterious sense of entering into a world through the white space, so you have this sense of having had a quasi-experience. You remember the best books as if they were places you went to.

Q: *How do you render the inexpressible in a novel? A picture, a painting or a film have more visceral and immediate ways of grabbing the audience, whereas a novel?fiction in general?is a construct, more artificial, more cerebral, more distant?*

AC: All arts are in some way artificial and a construct. But they exist as material things in a material world, don't they? The performance of a dance piece requires people with bodies like ours, in the space that we share with them. A painting is a physical, tangible thing; if the attendant in the gallery allowed you to, you could reach out and touch it. But the world of a fiction is a very interesting illusion based

upon a system of signs.

Q: *Is this the hardest thing to do in fiction, to weave a world out of the two-dimensional paper, with just words as tools?*

AC: Yes, it's very difficult, because you're trying all the time to anticipate your reader and their likely misapprehensions and confusions. You're trying to guide them without confusing them, and without being so obvious that they lose interest because you're leaving them with no room for imaginative manoeuvre. And also, as a literary artist, you're trying not to construct your world out of bricks that are ready-made for you. You don't want to be using clichés of language or characterization, or deploying stock characters in standard scenarios. Literary fiction is always trying to ?make strange', to defamiliarise. That in a way is the moral purpose of art, to re-awaken our perceptions and, by extension, to re-awaken our moral engagement with the world we inhabit. Always you're trying to present familiar things in unfamiliar ways and that's the challenge, to find the words that will allow you to express something familiar in a way which is new.

Q: *?Write about what you know' is a recurrent theme in writing, but if writers should write only about what they know, how do they escape the trap of writing the same book over and over again?*

AC: Rose Tremain, who used to teach at UEA, has said that the point is to write about what you *don't* know, to use your imagination, and I understand what she means, but I interpret the phrase differently. We all know what it's like to fall in love or fall out of love, for instance, or to be cross, or sad, to regret things, to loathe ourselves or others; we've experienced all these emotions in our lives, we know them intimately. We also know what it's like to stand outside on a rainy day and feel exhilarated, and what it's like to be outside on a rainy day and feel depressed and miserable and cold ? we've have these sensory experiences. There are all these things we know about what it is to be a human, and we can donate them ? what we know ? to the characters in our fictions. And those fictions can be set in seventeenth century Holland or twenty-first century New York. You could write a book about what it's like to be knee-high to experience, about a vulnerable five-year-old, but that five-year-old could be living in India or Indianapolis. Your next book could be about an adolescent experiencing a tumult of volcanic emotions and, again, the particular facts of that adolescent's fictional life could take any form. You could sustain a

career writing about people, and every one of your books could be different and tell a very different story, but they will all depend on what you bring to the page from your own experience.

Q: *If you were to look back to yourself when you were a student here doing the MA, what do you wish you knew or that someone told you when you embarked on this course?*

AC: That's funny. I did the UEA MA simply because I was nostalgic for being a student. I came with ulterior motives: I just wanted to prolong my existence as a student, and so I really didn't make the most of the course; I drifted in at one end and drifted out at the other, and I didn't really write very much, or exploit the possibilities that the course opens up in terms of connecting with agents and publishers?I turned my back on that, I wasn't interested. We had publishers and agents come to visit and I didn't turn up to the meetings, I just thought that was irrelevant...

Q: *Do you regret that?*

AC: ...and I find it hard to regret. I don't know that it could have been any other way for me at that time. After my MA I didn't write for quite a long time, and then I had a long period when I was struggling with my first novel and losing faith in it. And although that was in some ways painful, it was also educative and formative. So I can't regret any of that.

Q: *It seems that a writer is somebody who lost something or is frustrated about something or deals with loss in some way or another. What is it that you want to save from loss, or to put it differently, to find in the act of writing?*

AC: I once developed quite an elaborate theory about loss?a sort of psychoanalytic-cum-linguistic theory. It's probably based on a misunderstanding of Lacan.

There's a sense in which, before we acquire language, we're in some way whole and connected to the mother. We have no sense of our separateness from the world that contains us, and our first articulations are cries for the mother. We're calling out for her to come back. So speech, articulation, is initially connected with

the experience of absence. We speak, we write, in order to call back what's missing ? a sense of wholeness and connectedness and security. Also, when you start to acquire language and to use the first person pronoun, every time you say ?I' or ?me', you're splitting your self off from yourself, because the person symbolically represented in the language is separate from the actual person who speaks. The very use of language is a form of self-splitting which involves a loss of self-coherence and wholeness.

That's the gist of the theory. In addition I think we often write to recall what's lost. The impulse to write ?Pig' came firstly from the death of my grandfather, plus the end of a relationship with a girl, plus the experience of going back to my home town, which had become a ghost town. These three things came together in a way that made me intensely nostalgic, and so the writing of my first novel was in some way an attempt to retrieve what had gone. Possibly all writing is an attempt to retrieve something we no longer have, which may be a sense of wholeness, belonging, or connection.

Q: *We were talking about what it means to write about what you know. There's also the other recurrent adage: ?Show, don't tell'. To break the rules you have to know them first. What do you think are the most important rules in Creative Writing?*

AC: Very often at undergraduate level you encounter students who haven't been in the language long enough, and haven't read enough, to quite know what the ?rules' are. So you don't have the sense that they're creatively damaging the form in a self-aware way, but that they're just going about it in a quite improvised, scattered sort of way which they tend to valorise as the true expression of their unfettered creativity, and the result can be a bit of a mess on the page. But as those students progress through their degree and they become more familiar with the canon and critical theory, they become more accomplished readers, critics and self-critics and you start to find that they write more in response to other writing and then you start to see genuinely creative things happening on the page, and I think what's happening is that the constraint of writing within a tradition, and the conventions of a particular form, those constraints release or force creative solutions. I think with any writer, if you box them in, you're going to require them to be that much more inventive in finding a way out. To write within a form, within a tradition, in a way which is new and original, that actually requires more discipline and more creativity than simply giving someone a blank sheet of paper and saying ?Go!'

Q: *Is there a risk, when you're constantly immersed in other writing, in somebody else's voice, that you'll reproduce it or unconsciously steal or appropriate their style?*

AC: I do think there are two types of writer. One type achieves a voice early, after which their writing career can be a struggle to escape that voice, or to stretch it. I've always written to a particular cadence, and with each of my books I've been trying to extend my range, to write to a different tune, to write longer, more complex sentences, to be more various in my rhythms. Then the other type of writer is the one for whom other people's styles are contagious. That writer is perhaps more adept at ventriloquizing different types of narrator or character. And the range, the population, of that writer's fiction will be broader and more disparate. But the problem is that they can catch other people's style like a virus; someone else's style can be as contagious as the flu. That kind of writer may need to avoid reading others when they're engaged on a project, whereas I'll constantly pick up other writers when I'm writing, as a way of clearing my mind and refreshing my palette.

Q: *If you were to spend a day in a book, not while reading somebody else's novel or writing your own, but physically enter that world and spend a day there, what book would that be?*

AC: That's funny, because often when I read books, the ones I enjoy the most are the ones where life's just a bit grim. They're in some way confirming the realities of the life I'm already living. That's partly why I like Richard Ford. There's a phrase in one of his books: ?The normal applauseless life of us all.' And I'm sort of interested in humdrum quotidian lives. I like reading about them and about the subtle changes in the emotional weather of a character's life.

Q: *Who do you write for? Do you have an ideal reader?*

AC: I was asked that by a publisher when I was trying to get my first book published, and my lame answer was: ?People like me!' I don't actually have a face before me. I can't see a cluster of faces either. The ideal reader is a benign figure who's eager to see what you've written and is going to enjoy it, but there's a malign version of that too, which is the hyper-critical reader who finds fault with every word, and that particular reader is often more present to me when I'm writing than the ideal reader is.

Q: *There's a very interesting quote by Graham Greene in ?The Art of Writing Fiction'. He talked about ?the splinter of ice in the heart of a writer.' How does one deal with sometimes hurting the people closest to you, just for art's sake?*

AC: I do a lot of disguising. Everything I've written is always in some way a shuffling of the deck. Every character is an amalgamation of several others. A lot of what I put into my novels comes from the facts of my life, from what I know, but it never actually appears on the page as a mirror reflection of the facts of my life.

In ?The Art of Writing Fiction' I use the example of the tree: the roots of any fiction are in the facts of the writer's life, but the tree that develops out of those roots is not a mirror image of the roots. The tree takes on a life of its own, has its own kind of ecosystem of connections and potential meanings. And the roots remain buried underground, out of sight, and that's where they should remain. Beneath most books there will be the dark, deeply buried roots of the writer's biography, but the art which emerges from those roots will hopefully have a life and a form of its own. Actually, with ?What I Know' I conceived a fairly reckless idea that I was going to write something that was undisguisedly based upon the facts of my life at that time. I was going to name names, and have a central character called Andrew Cowan who was going to live where I live and meet the people I would meet daily. And I thought calling it ?What I Know' would be highly amusing. Then I realised I'd lose all my friends because they wouldn't particularly like what I revealed about them. So eventually I found a way of disguising that by making the Andrew Cowan figure in the book not a novelist but a voyeur and a private detective, which are two analogues, and two disguises, for the figure of the novelist.

Q: *Is it easy being a writer and having writer friends and living with a writer? Do you ever think : ?I might show up in their books and I might not like it?'*

AC: I'm very sanguine about it, I don't mind, I think it comes with the territory. I have one or two friends who are writers, but they're friends because they're the kind of person I tend to be friends with. Writing is often a secondary or tertiary aspect of the people I know. They're just friends. ?Oh, and they write books, like I do.' And yes, my partner writes too and we're each other's first reader, so always, as I put things on the page, I'm aware that it's going to be read by my wife and, when she writes, she's aware that I'm going to read what she's putting down on the page, and

you almost expect to recognize aspects of yourself in what you're reading. I don't mind?as long as the books get published, that's the main thing.

Q: *What next? What are you writing now?*

AC: As I said, I did the MA here years ago and I didn't much enjoy it. I didn't write for a couple of year afterwards. Instead I became an oral historian and recorded lots of life histories, then many years later I came back to the transcripts of those interviews and realised there was a lot of really exciting material here, lots of exciting particulars about life as it was lived a hundred years ago. Then about six years ago I began to write a novel which has as a backdrop many of the details contained in these transcripts. But I've found it extraordinarily difficult, I think because I'm relying so much on research, so it's requiring me to be a different kind of writer. Partly that's why I'm doing it: because I'm interested to discover what kind of writer I could be. It's certainly been a challenge, partly in that it's historical, and partly because it has five main characters rather than one, and is third person and written in a register which isn't quite me. I'm trying to adopt the voice of History in a sense. The book has a style which is more rhetorically inflated than my previous books.

Q: *Does it have a working title?*

AC: The title I'm going with at the moment is ?Worthless Men', because two of the five characters are eugenicists, which was a theme of the intellectual age and a fairly unexamined theme. Eugenic thought was respectable in the early part of the twentieth century, and for some people the First World War represented a necessary cull, a necessary cleansing of the gene pool, ridding the race of degenerate types, ?worthless men'. The book is a depiction of several types of worthlessnes.

Q: *Would you rather be read on a Kindle or on paper? How organic is your relationship to the actual book, which can grow old with you, whose paper can get wrinkled, which exists in the same world as you?*

AC: I think most writers fetishise books. We love to walk into a room full of books and smell them. We love the atmosphere of a second-hand bookshop, the tactility of a book. It's something that goes back to childhood and we associate the feel of a

book with those first adventures in our imagination while reading a book. I'm sure there's some kind of connection which is as strong as the pleasure we would have taken as children in making mud pies?you're handling soil, and when you get older you step out on a damp spring morning and you smell the soil and it takes you somewhere nostalgic and comforting. Most writers would privilege the paper page, the book, but I don't really mind where I'm read as long as I'm read.

For a while, I was disturbed by the prospect of a bookless future, but I've been reassured by an article I've recently read which said that the trouble with electronic books is that they can never be made invulnerable to piracy. No matter how sophisticated their defences, there will be someone somewhere in the world who is smart enough to unpick the lock and once they've unpicked it, they can pirate the contents, whereas a paper book is protected from piracy through its bulk. It's costly to print out thousands of paper copies, whereas it's very, very cheap to produce millions of virtual copies. So this article was suggesting that the future might be a kind of strengthening of the position of the book as a commercial proposition. The electronic version might be offered as a free supplement to any book you buy. So the book will have a cover price, and readers will continue to buy books, but with the book they'll get the Kindle version, which'll mean they can read their book on a device if they're travelling. And that will protect the electronic version form pirating because it's free in the first place, so what commercial gain can there be in pirating copies of it? It's a smart argument. I was quite consoled by it.

Q: *If you were to write a letter to your sixteen-year-old self, how would that sound, what would you tell yourself?*

AC: ?Cheer up!'

I feel quite sorry for my younger self, I think I was quite an unhappy soul, really. Actually, now that I think about it, part of the reason I was unhappy is because I was a thwarted soul; the person I wanted to be when I was eighteen was a potter. I wanted to be a ceramicist. I certainly had no intention of being a writer. I left school hoping to become a potter and went to the local art college, where the pottery classes were run on a semi-industrial basis, very regimented, and I lost heart quite quickly and left. I think I might encourage my eighteen-year-old self not to lose heart but to stick with it because I've always felt completely natural when handling clay whereas I've never felt completely natural handling words.

I'm a perfectionist and a plodder and a very, very slow writer. I'm also in a very privileged position, teaching on this programme. It's a great privilege to teach the students on the MA, especially. But you also lose a lot, you lose a lot of creative energy which goes on the students and the course design. And you lose a lot of time. And my nightmare is that I'll give so much to the job, and so little to my writing, that my shelf life as a writer will expire, and I'll become one of those caricature figures who teaches Creative Writing but can't publish his own writing and is embittered and somewhat resentful of his own students. I think if it gets to the point where I have to go into the Creative Writing classroom as a failed novelist, that's when I'll finally have to become a potter.