



Zoran Živković

THE **CLAY**
WRITER

Shaping in
Creative Writing

 Springer

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Novi Beograd, Serbia

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To Ivana

Preface

The first seventy years of my life were very bookish indeed.

My first encounter with books occurred when I was only three years old. My mother used to read to me almost every evening; I couldn't fall asleep without hearing at least a few pages. Luckily, that was well before the glorious days of the Internet era with its surrogate mothers in the shape of a variety of digital gadgets that do anything but inspire their users to love reading, love literature and love books.

I started reading books myself at the age of eight and haven't stopped since. I studied comparative literature; both my MA and Ph.D. theses were about literary subjects. Then, I commenced translating, mostly from English; my translator's opus contains more than seventy books. The next step was publishing books; first as an editor and then as an independent publisher, I produced about three hundred editions.

I quit that job in order to become an author. In three decades, I have written thirty books—twenty-two fiction

and eight non-fiction. They were brought out in nearly two hundred editions in twenty-five countries around the world, including my native Serbia.

Eventually, I embarked on my final bookish voyage. Relying on my long experience in the world of books, I began instructing others on how to write fiction. I spent the last ten years before my retirement in 2017 as a Professor at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, teaching creative writing. During that decade I was a mentor to more than four hundred students who wrote on average seven short stories each—amounting to nearly three thousand pieces of fiction.

I wish I could say I was at least partly as fruitful in my last literary endeavour as I was (hopefully) in the previous ones, but it is far from certain. The fruitfulness depends on the yardstick one uses to measure it. If the objective of my creative writing course was to create writers, then it might seem a total failure. As far as I know, so far only a couple of my students have managed to make their modest literary debut after having worked with me: namely their first book appeared.

But maybe I should slightly change the yardstick without changing the main objective of my creative writing course: to create writers. Maybe it is still possible to achieve this goal—it only requires more time. In early 2019, as I write this Preface, it is only a decade since I got started with the first generation of my students. Ten years is simply not long enough for them to have become writers. After all, it was I myself who used to tell them, in the very first class, that one does not become a writer before the age of fifty.

If what seemed to my students a rather discouraging estimate happens to be correct, I can hardly expect to be still around in twenty years to verify how successful I was

as a creative writing professor. But I have grounds to hope that at least some of the prose seeds I planted will eventually grow into literary trees. As a mentor, I believe I gave them the best I could—the best any mentor is able to: the initial impetus. The rest is up to them.

Their lives would not have to be as bookish as mine. In order to become a good writer, it is by no means necessary to follow in my footsteps all the way—to be a translator, an editor, a publisher, a literary scholar... There is only one fundamental requirement: to read unceasingly and insatiably. It is principally through reading that a writer is shaped.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of my students are the contemporaries of the Internet era. They are incomparably more skilful than my humble self when it comes to handling various digital gadgets, but reading is hardly their favourite activity. Those rare few among them who were fortunate enough to listen to their mother's reading in the evening instead of solitarily playing with an iPhone or a tablet are most likely to become the highest literary trees.

I wish so much I had the chance to read their books when their time eventually comes. I would be in my early nineties then. Who knows, maybe they are not entirely unattainable after all...

Novi Beograd, Serbia
March 2019

Zoran Živković

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Part I

Essays



1

The Clay Writer

1.1 Introduction

From 2007 until my retirement at the end of 2017, I taught two courses in the creative writing of literary prose at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. The first and principal one was intended for regularly matriculating students; the second—the summer school of creative writing—for non-academic participants. I always started both courses by offering four reasons why those attending them should not be there.

In terms of the students, this approach was justified even from a practical point of view. As a rule, more than fifty of them would appear at the first class, which significantly surpassed the number of participants I hoped for (twenty or so), lest the quality of the course should suffer. This discouraging introduction, however, seemed quite inappropriate for the summer school attendees since (as opposed to the students, who had other elective

courses available if they did not enroll on the creative writing course) they had actually paid in order to participate in that very course of mine. Discouraging them from creative writing seemed cynical. As if I were telling them: “You just threw your money away.”

In spite of this inappropriateness, I still did not refrain from giving them the four reasons. I considered it my supreme obligation toward both the students and the summer school attendees. A few participants from both groups—especially the latter—applied for the creative writing course more or less convinced that here they would learn, if not everything, then at least the essential points of what it takes to become a writer. I learned this from a small survey I conducted when I was getting to know them, before I explained the sobering reasons.

Once I had done so, not a single one of the participants amongst either the students or the summer school attendees left the course, although my reasons seemed to me to be quite convincing. The students remained because they mostly came to class without any great expectation of becoming writers, so they weren’t overly disappointed by my announcing that my course would not lead to this result. In fact, they generally came without any expectation at all. They were enticed most often by curiosity, the fact that creative writing is in fashion as a relatively new academic subject in Serbia, as well as by rumors encountered on internet forums that I am not usually a strict teacher. Namely, it was no secret that giving low grades to my students was not my practice. I would tell them myself, soon after the beginning of the course, that I would not fail them. I was proud of the fact that I managed to teach all those who remained on the course to produce, after two semesters, a prose text of at least the lowest grade, no matter how unlikely that might seem after their

first attempts, in the early stages of my course, before I had begun training them.

(The reduction of the large initial number of students to the desired twenty-odd eventually came about for more prosaic reasons. Most of those who dropped the course did so as soon as they found out that they were to write seven stories during the academic year—prose texts amounting to some forty thousand characters with spaces. Apparently, they had hoped that the course would be “theoretical,” that they would become trained writers not by writing anything, but just by learning the theory of writing prose. Likewise, a significant number left the course after I informed them that class attendance was obligatory, that they had the right to only two unjustified absences during the semester.)

In the summer school, everyone remained, of course, primarily because they had paid to attend. So that they wouldn't be too disappointed, as soon as I informed them of the aggravating reasons, I would rush to offer them the mitigating ones. I indicated to them, in fact, why my course in creative writing, while not making them into writers, would still be useful on the road to perhaps becoming writers some day—that, in fact, the money they had invested had not been wasted. The latter reasons were no less convincing than the former ones. Not once did I receive a “complaint” when we parted after our one or two month-long literary gatherings. On the contrary, most of the summer school participants were interested in continuing to receive my mentoring in creative writing even after the end of the summer course.

It was mostly for the students that I primarily formulated the reasons for mediating their expectations that the creative writing course would turn them into writers. Still, they also applied to the non-academic participants, even though their demographics were quite varied in terms of

age, education, reading history and writing experience, so that naturally there were exceptions to whom certain reasons did not apply, or at least only in part.

So, finally, here are the four reasons that were intended to discourage participants from taking my course in creative writing or, in a broader sense, from writing at all.

1. *Even the highest grade at the end of the creative writing course did not mean that the participant had become a writer. One does not become a prose writer before the age of fifty.*

As statistics show, in every field of creativity there is an age when one achieves the most. In mathematics, for instance, that peak falls in the late twenties. In physics, in the early thirties. In the arts, maturity is reached earliest in music. The appearance of a *wunderkind* is still not uncommon there. However, in prose, there have not been genius children or young people for a long time—if there ever were any at all. There are very few writers, at least in the literature of the twentieth century, who wrote their best work before they turned fifty. (A famous exception in the nineteenth century was Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, who wrote the main part of his remarkable body of work in his twenties and thirties, while he didn't write at all in his fifties because he died at the age of forty-four.)

I reckoned that this would discourage students from the early twenty-first century. They are, namely, members of the so-called “instant generation,” whose ideal, regardless of what they do, is to become successful as soon as possible, preferably overnight. Fame is best reached via shortcuts. Their ambitions suddenly deflate if they have to invest literally decades of effort in achieving success, without any guarantee that it will happen at all, as is the case with literary prose.

In order to mock this way of thinking, I suggested that—if they really cared about instant success at any