

On Style and Learning

Janet Keen

Going to a Joan Rosier-Jones workshop organised by Rotorua Writers Group led to musings on the subject of being original. I'm an artist learning to be a writer, and I don't believe there's any harm in learning from experts who've gone before.

That's why I've made it a practice to go to so many writing workshops - I've attended over 20 in the last fifteen years. I take the view there's always something more I can learn. Plus I enjoy being a student again! I can also pick up teaching tips from observing the workshop tutor.

Many master-painters of the past were once apprentices, learning techniques in the studios of famous artists of their time. This did them no harm, and I suggest if you like someone else's style, try it on and see how it fits. Eventually you'll develop your own style, and what will it matter if it is a potpourri of influences?

I think this is also a good way to learn how to write, especially poetry. Experienced writers who've been published and know what their style is may feel they don't need to copy others or attend workshops. But I think they miss out if they don't have an ongoing commitment to learning.

For one thing, writing styles change over time. If you want your writing to be relevant to the upcoming generation, you need to know what they're willing to read and how they write; otherwise you'll get trapped in a time warp.

Joan Rosier-Jones said each book she's written has been different from the last, and this was detrimental to her writing career. Why? Do readers expect more of the same? That's an interesting concept.

Certainly, if you create a series of paintings in a similar style you build up a following of buyers. You're more marketable, especially to galleries. If you keep chopping and changing your subjects and style, you'll confuse customers and lose them.

This is the main reason I concentrated on mosaics. I had to become known to the public as a 'specialist'. Now I'd like to do more painting, but I don't because I need to make money from the thing I'm best known for.

Many professional writers do copy the example of others, and earn good money from it. The Artemis Fowl series followed on from the success of Harry Potter. Some authors pave the way - as in the art world, not everyone is a leader, and followers must eat, too.

Successful romance writers earn good money writing to a formula. Essentially they adopt a style for an audience that wants a guaranteed fix of romantic escapism. (Some call it soft porn...) If you like reading romance, you'll probably like writing it - and what's wrong with that?

I'm presently reading *How to Write Fiction* (and *Think About It*, by Robert Graham; *No Plot, No Problem* by Chris Baty and *So You Want to Write* by Joan Rosier-Jones. One of the best books I've read so far on the creative writing process is *On Writing* by Stephen King, who certainly knows how to hook his readers.

Bill Manhire is the head of the Creative Writing Course at the Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University Wellington. His publication *Mutes and Earthquakes* includes examples of student's writing, much of it based on exercises he sets during tutorials. Some I found difficult and challenging. Bill suggests you write what you DON'T know. This is contrary to the normal advice to "Write what you know."

I constantly read books about writing; attend courses; go to writers' retreats, and cultivate writers as friends. I belong to two writing groups that I attend as often as I can. I've put my name down for free writing workshops at the [Waiariki Institute of Technology's Summer School](#) in January. And I'm writing a novel - in a month. That means cranking out 50,000 words: no mean feat. It's difficult and time-consuming, but makes me feel like a real writer. When people say writing is 5 per cent inspiration and 95 per cent perspiration, I'll know what they mean.

My dream is to sign up as many people as I can for [National Novel Writing Month](#) next year. It'd be great fun, and we could meet up to discuss what we're doing or 'talk' online. But I'll have to see how I get on with this novel first...

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