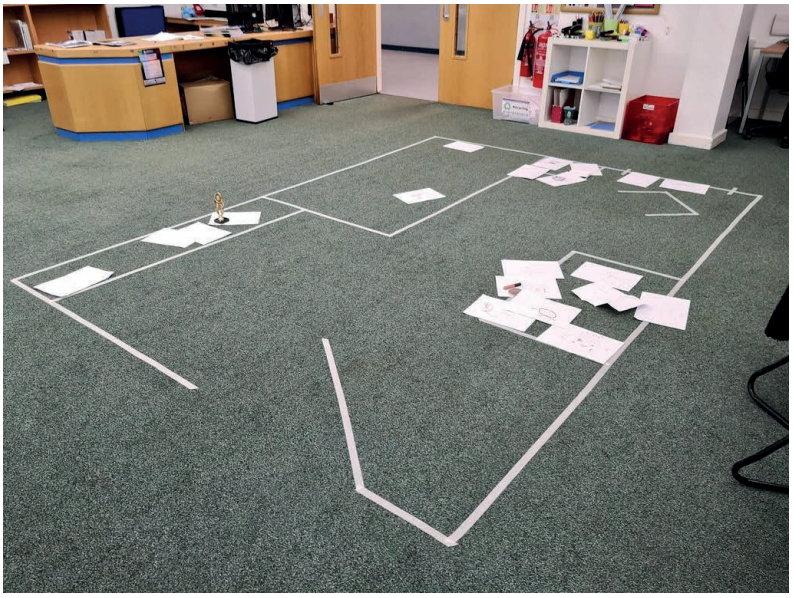
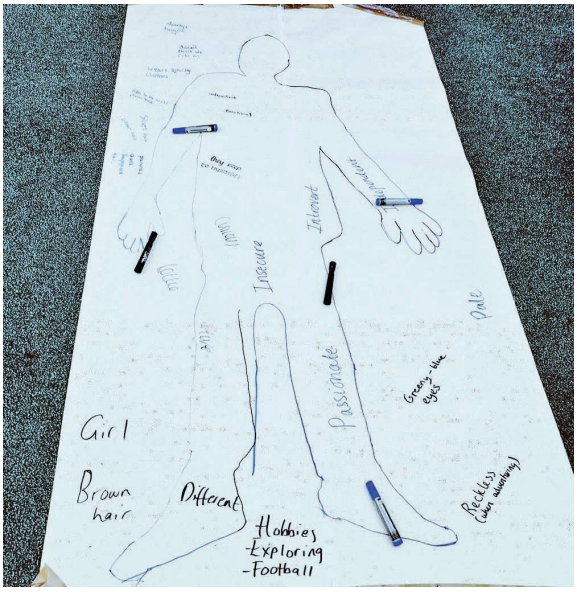
Creative Writing, Educational Practice and Academic Research: An Alchemical Experiment

by Daniel Ingram-Brown

I had the pleasure of chairing two sessions at this year's NAWE conference. At the first, Coventry's poet laureate, Emily Lauren Jones, discussed how to make teaching poetry less scary. Deanna Rodger spoke at the second, leading us through a process of reflection on our creative facilitation practice. I also enjoyed sharing my own creative practice in a session chaired by Seraphima Kennedy, who introduced me and guided the Q&A with enthusiasm and insight. As a creative practitioner who weaves various elements: writing, drama, educational practice and, currently, academic research as a doctoral student, I wanted to talk about how these different elements combined in creative and productive ways.

For my session, I chose the title, *Bea's Witch: An alchemical experiment in creative writing, educational practice and academic research.* What image does the word alchemist conjure for you? I picture someone in a darkened room, fierce-eyed, sweating over a labyrinth of tubes and crucibles, the flame beneath a copper pan casting flickering shadows onto a low timbered ceiling, a dark substance in the basin bubbling, moving and melting – transforming.





In her feminist revision of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, Susan Rowland (2002) points to Jung's study of alchemy as being of interest in postmodern times. Those early proto scientists believed in the "continuation between what was material, what was psychological and what was sacred" (p131), between the inner and the outer world. They believed their experiments to be transformative, both inwardly, transforming the soul, and outwardly, transforming matter. They lived in a world that had not divided mind and body, that had not yet imbibed that dualism of modernity. For them, the physical and the psychic world were interwoven, inseparable, each influencing and affecting the other. I find this an interesting metaphor for creative writing, in which we transform our experience and inner world into an object, into a text, mixing all sorts of elements in our writer's cauldrons to create our potions, following our quest for gold. (I could have used the metaphor of the witch's cauldron as much as the alchemist's alembic). I have also found the picture of the alchemist useful when thinking about my creative practice, which blends writing, education, performance and academic study, bringing them together in a way that is transformative for me and, hopefully, for readers, audiences, participants and students too.

In the session, I talked about my creative journey, following its different threads to explore how they wove to shape my current research.

My early career was as a director and writer for independent theatre companies, producing journey-based performance, large-scale community productions and small-scale touring productions to non-theatre spaces.

I spoke about how my educational practice was strengthened through being a *First Story* writer-in-residence and sharpened through an MA in Creative Writing and Drama in Education at Leeds Beckett University.

The shape of my career shifted as I became an adoptive father – being a parent is less compatible with months on tour. I turned my focus to writing novels, and over the following years had a trilogy of middle grade fantasy adventure books published: *The Firebird Chronicles*.

When I began my part-time PhD in 2018, these different ingredients naturally infused my research. The resulting project is made of three elements: a young adult novel, two secondary school residencies and a thesis reflecting on that creative and educational process.

The first element, my initial creative practice, was writing a young adult novel. The story tells of an adopted protagonist who encounters the ghost of England's most famous prophetess, Mother Shipton. Through this encounter, the girl, Beatrice, takes agency over her own story, coming to terms with aspects of her past and taking hold of her future. The novel, *Bea's Witch: a ghostly coming-of-age story*, was published in 2021. Throughout the writing process, I kept a reflective journal that documented the way in which I constructed the novel, for instance how I drew on personal experience, followed instincts, used archetypal structures, responded to feedback from readers, or made adjustments arising from theoretical challenges or insights. As part of the writing process, I also fabricated a collection of objects – a backpack belonging to my main character, containing, among other things, her diary, a letter from her birth mother, a worksheet given to her by her social worker, a broken cat's collar, a birthday card from her adoptive mother and her teddy, Turtle. These objects, as well as the many edits of the manuscript, became data for my research.

The second element in my research was undertaking two writing residencies at schools in West Yorkshire, working with two groups of self-selecting students from Years 7-9. I used the novel as a structure to underpin and shape the residences, facilitating a series of workshops that responded to the themes of the novel, for instance, home, family, belonging, identity, displacement, ghosts and memory, loss and hope. At the end of the residencies, the students' work was published in two anthologies – *You Are Not Alone: The Diary of the Girl in the Shadows* and *Lost*

and Found: Where Am I?

In my conference session, I focused on one of the workshops from the residencies. In it, I used objects as a prompt, drawing on my own experience of using objects in the construction of *Bea's Witch.* The students were asked to draw an object from their own home. As a group, we then gathered around a bedroom marked out on the floor in masking tape. In turn, each student placed their object into the room, deciding where it should go – perhaps it was a necklace placed in a locked draw, or a photograph on the bedside table, or a mobile phone discarded under the bed. As students placed their objects, I asked questions – was the phone new or was its screen cracked, did the necklace have a pendant, where and when was the photograph taken? This was a process of using drama, not as performance, but as an act of co-creating the story in a way that was low threat, cooperative and used oracy to build the setting. The students began to make connections between the objects, bouncing ideas off one another, making suggestions. I began to narrate aspects of the emerging story. We then created a character to inhabit the bedroom, inspired by the mix of objects they owned. We used a role-on-the-wall, drawing around somebody on a big piece of paper, writing on the outside characteristics that could be observed – they have short, chopped hair, they are wearing ripped jeans, they bite their nails – and on the inside writing their beliefs, attitudes or emotions – they are an introvert, passionate, insecure, independent. A dilemma was then introduced, intended to prompt the students to think, to open a space for negotiation, to engage emotions and to develop a point of view. I told them that their character had to leave this bedroom and their house. They would not be returning, and they would not see anybody who lived in the house again. This exercise was inspired by the Head of Children's Services at Barnardo's, who asked my wife and I to imagine a similar scenario as part of our preparation to become adoptive parents. The same thought exercise inspired a section of *Bea's Witch,* which I read to the students during the workshop. Their character, I told them, only had room in their bag to take five objects with them. They had to decide which the character would take. After discussion in small groups and then as a whole group, we moved into a time of writing, the students creating a diary entry about these events from the character's point of view, expressing their feelings and thoughts. These texts became part of the students' anthologies, published at the end of the residencies.
In the conference session, I then spoke about the final element of my PhD: writing a thesis to reflect on the process of constructing the novel and using it in schools. I've chosen to write my thesis as a choose your own adventure narrative – a second piece of creative writing. This less linear style attempts to capture the *experience of writing* and communicate that experience to the reader through its form. My thesis takes the reader on a tour of the town in which *Bea's Witch* is set. The reader can choose three different pathways, each providing a different theoretical lens onto the project and focusing on a different aspect of the process. At the start of the journey, the reader is given a 'footnotes earpiece' through which they can hear the author speak directly to them. The tour is also interspersed with a series of 'dialogues' with a fictional editor who comments on the text. I use these mechanisms as a way of bringing the critical and the creative aspects of the project into dialogue.

One of the things the participants in my conference session expressed an interest in, also picked up on in a later session about creative PhDs, was how the creative and critical elements of the thesis were inseparable, interwoven through the text. This brings me back to the image of the alchemist, melting distinct materials, transforming them into a new substance.

After the session, Seraphima gave me a challenge – to coin a term that described this form of academic text, one that weaves together the critical and creative in an inseparable way. I have been thinking about this since the conference and have some ideas. Watch this space…!

For me, the conference was a forum to meet new people, to hear about their work, and to reflect on my own endeavours, consolidating my thoughts and generating new ways to think and talk about my practice.

Perhaps, it might be described as an alchemist's crucible, a place in which base metals are melted, mixed, and are transformed into gold.

Daniel is an author, theatre maker and educator from Yorkshire. His books include *Bea's Witch: A ghostly coming-of-age story* (Lodestone Books) and *The Firebird Chronicles* (Our Street Books). He has a Masters in Creative Writing and Drama in Education from Leeds Beckett University, receiving the Dean's Prize for academic achievement, and is currently undertaking a PhD in creative writing and education. He has taught undergraduate teachers in creative practice and led teacher CPD sessions. Daniel is a *First Story* writer-in-residence and is part of the *Story Makers Company*. He regularly visits schools to speak and facilitate workshops.