

**Bishop, Wendy, and David Starkey. *Keywords in Creative Writing*. Utah State UP, 2006. (ISBN: 0-87421-629-X)**

**Reviewed by Robin Carstensen**

In his introduction to this interesting and resourceful book, David Starkey describes how he was daydreaming one afternoon and “imagined a nineteen-year-old undergraduate thinking of majoring in English, with an emphasis on creative writing” (xi). His anticipation of the many questions she is likely to muse over led him to imagine the middle-aged adult contemplating a shift from her business career into her dream of becoming a writer. He also imagines the English department chair outside of creative writing who needs access to information about the field in order to best serve his creative writing faculty. After settling into a few of Starkey’s keyword discussions about creative writing and writing instruction, it doesn’t take long to recognize how well the book addresses the needs of the diverse readership that Starkey envisioned. The book can be navigated alphabetically through forty-one keywords and phrases, from the first, “Adjunct and Temporary Faculty,” to the last, “Writing Groups.” But I decided to start by following the alternate contents (topic clusters), beginning with all of the keywords under *Academia*, followed by the keywords under *Publishing*, then *Literary Genres and Terms*, then *Writing*, and finally, the *Writing Life*. I found myself swiftly engaged among the eleven alphabetized keywords under *Academia*, such as “Creative Dissertation,” “Pedagogy,” and “Workshop” but soon just as easily moving back and forth between various keywords among the topic clusters, and swerving into delightful detours under different topic clusters before completing an entire cluster of keywords.

One doesn’t usually imagine a handbook as entertaining reading material, but this book manages to surprise and sustain one’s attention, with its narrative structure and engaging voice. Starkey writes that “the book was meant to be readable and reader-friendly, not a handbook of bland, faceless prose” (xiii).

The book succeeds in this, and Starkey gives credit to his co-author whose own voice and humor will be recognized by some of her avid readers. Early in his drafting process, Starkey was to draw in his friend and colleague, Wendy Bishop, for her creative writing talents and wide experience in bridging creative writing and composition. Though the well-known and admired Bishop was later to fall ill and tragically leave behind family, friends, and many colleagues, Starkey acknowledges that he was finally able to complete this volume due “in large measure out of a desire to see Wendy’s intelligence and wit in print one more time” (xv).

From my own perspective as a third year PhD student of English with a concentration in Creative Writing, holding an M.A. in English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition, I was impressed by Bishop and Starkey’s audacious honesty—one that could only be informed by the perspective of authors who have lived, read, reflected and written widely and deeply among the valleys and heights of the creative writing and writing instruction fields. Starkey and Bishop’s willingness to fully disclose the tensions and interpersonal, political, and pragmatic challenges in the fields of creative writing and instruction, especially within the academy and the publishing field, highlights the significance of this resourceful book. For example, turning to the keyword/phrase “Submissions,” readers will find a wonderful anecdote of the submissions process—through a fictional character, Sara. (Similar anecdotes are included throughout the book, enhancing the reader-friendliness.) Any writer who has ever tried to submit will certainly recognize Sara’s tale about trying to publish her poems and receiving her first rejection. Writers can empathize with the narrator’s thoughts: “There is no indication that her poem has ever been read by another human being other than the ‘Sorry’ someone scribbled at the bottom of the note” (158). Though Sara’s journey is fraught with realistic frustration, her perseverance eventually brings success in her first publication. For a writer just getting started in the submissions process, the information and motivation provided by the anecdote is useful. The information about print directories and writer’s market books

is helpful too, though the authors do not include key website addresses of important online sources for magazine and book publishers.

Another example of Starkey and Bishop's willingness to talk about harsh realities in this book is found under "Teaching Jobs"—a prospect that looms for most anyone who is writing, studying and/or teaching writing. Starkey and Bishop pull no punches in explaining that "very few creative writers with either MFAs or PhDs in creative writing will ever land tenure-track jobs teaching their specialty. The odds are just too heavily stacked against them" (163). However, they offer information on the range of opportunities—as well as the main job-listing sources—for teaching writing that offer the possibility of success, reward, and overall personal fulfillment. An insightful discussion under the keyword "MFA (Master of Fine Arts)" is consistent with this information, stating that "today, a tenure-track job in creative writing at any reasonably solvent institution of higher education is likely to attract anywhere from several hundred to a thousand applicants, many of whom are more than qualified applicants" (117). Under the "MFA" and "Workshop" keywords, and with the assistance of key scholarship in the field, Bishop and Starkey share the fascinating tale of the history and evolution of the MFA degree and the creative writing workshop (from their inception at the University of Iowa in the 1930s) and the emergence of the PhD in creative writing. Under several keywords, including "workshop," "Adjunct and Temporary Faculty," and "MFA," they reveal some of the controversies that mark these degrees and the biases that students of both will face from the academy, from English department faculty and colleagues in more traditional areas, and from each other. Starkey and Bishop's own experiences and voice resonate when they remind us that "since the struggle of MFAs to retain some dignity and power in the early part of the twenty-first century looks very much like a class conflict, unity among degree holders is essential" (119). Discussions over these controversies about the academy's role in creative writing resurface under other keywords across the five topic clusters. Rather than sounding

repetitious, each resurfacing helps the reader fit another piece into the mosaic of creative writing and writing instruction.

As noted above, Bishop and Starkey proficiently capture the keyword discussions among the current debates and cross debates across various English disciplines. Under the keyword “Theory,” for example, the authors introduce a longsuffering conflict between literary writers, critics, and theorists. They cite from D.W. Fenza, the executive director of the AWP (Associated Writing Program), who, in 2000, wrote: “Scholars, literary theorists, and writers are not compatible in their endeavors or temperaments, and they, necessarily will be compelled to criticize one another to protect and promote what they believe to be crucial to the enjoyment of literature and its future” (171). Bishop and Starkey chose Fenza’s statement to highlight a debate that has recently escalated. When *Keywords* was published in 2006, John Barr, a Wall Street banker and president of the Poetry Foundation, would not have publicized his infamously incendiary essay “American Poetry in the New Century” which came out in September of 2006. Two notable responses came from Sidney Wade, President of the AWP, and a lengthier one in December 2006 from D.W. Fenza. In an effort to get poetry out to a wider audience, Barr calls for a poetry revolution, claiming “poetry’s limitations today come not from failures of craft (the MFA programs attend to that) but from afflictions of spirit” (Barr 6). He writes that MFA writers are stuck in modernism, and that writers in the academy are trained to be academic careerists who need real world experience. D.W. Fenza addresses this claim as “a peculiar kind of myopia or amnesia,” and further notes: “One can only misrepresent the role of academe by misrepresenting it as a single remote place, when academe is really thousands of outposts, serving the rich, the middle-class, and the poor. Writing programs have helped democratize the art of poetry; the audiences for poetry are larger for it too” (Fenza 6). In response to Barr’s assumptions that writers are stuck in a modernist, political, and intellectual rut, Fenza writes, “contemporary writers are where the wild things are” (4).

Again, while Bishop and Starkey could not have been privy to this exact dialogue brewing on the future horizon, they were ardently aware of the contentions encompassing academe and creative writing. A passage under the keyword “Identity Politics” strikes me as historically grounded and relevant, when I read: “And here’s the catch about cultivating a unitary identity—contemporary writers, like all citizens, arise from not one culture but many cultures. . . . Hybrids all. And the more hybridity writers experience, the more likely they may be to value and seek to understand what was lost from each formative tributary” (108). In a memorable conversation under the keyword “Poetry” (and perhaps particularly memorable because I am a poet), Bishop and Starkey reveal a remarkable breadth of knowledge and insight that resonates with Fenza’s appreciation about academy’s crucial role in helping traditionally marginalized writers gain access to excellent instruction and guidance as well as recognition and dissemination of their work. Bishop and Starkey write: “Probably the most significant development in American poetry over the past fifty years has been the eruption of writing by women and people of color” (125). Valuable information and titles of key sources are shared and briefly discussed. A conversation follows about two of Dana Gioia’s critically acclaimed essays (written over a decade apart and extended into two books now by Gioia under the same respective names), “Can Poetry Matter?” and “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture.” The authors end this engaging keyword discussion with invaluable information about the emergence of spokenword and performance poetry onto the contemporary literary scene and the debates surrounding these genres of creative expression.

As shown above, one of *Keywords*’ hallmarks is its ability to illuminate the conversations and debates that encompass each keyword and/or to situate discussions among the central works of the scholarly and creative writers participating in these debates. Again under the keyword “Identity Politics,” I find myself engaged by a discussion over Carolyn Forché’s political activism in her poetry, which Bishop and Starkey include in order to illustrate the

questions regarding writers' influences, responsibilities, and choices—and in this case, the question of authorial power: “political activism or separatism? Are they [writers] in support of ‘others’ or *are* they the ‘others’? Do global communities appear to be a source of cultural pluralism or a scene of contact zones and conflict?” (109) Consistent throughout Bishop and Starkey’s *Keywords* are the questions they provoke in the novice writer/student just dipping toes in the waters and the seasoned graduate student and middle-aged writer whose writing and teaching seek growth and rejuvenation through such reflection.

In another current source for some controversy, discussed under the keyword “Creative Non-Fiction,” the authors negotiate several key sources, including Lee Gutkind and Lynn Z. Bloom, in order to illustrate the central ethical questions that challenge any easy definition of this burgeoning genre. Keywords such as “Pedagogy” and “Theory” surface these and other tensions surrounding new genres or fields within the English department, as well as highlight the importance that both Bishop and Starkey place on pedagogy and theory. Citing fundamental works written for or adopted into the Rhetoric and Composition field, such as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Bishop and Starkey help veteran teachers of writing rediscover the theories that drive their actions in the classroom, while briefly inscribing new student-teachers into radical changes in teaching theory and practice. In fact, in the section on “Pedagogy,” Starkey draws from Wendy Bishop’s instrumental work from the late 80’s, *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, where she brings the reader into her experiences with the inherent connections between creative writing and composition. Meanwhile, in the discussion over “Theory,” Starkey notes: “practice into theory and theory into practice is the normal ebb and flow of excellent teaching” (176). In these and many other keywords, such as “workshop” and “postmodernism,” where the question of authority over learning/instruction is raised (who owns authority in the classroom? How do students learn best?), Starkey and Bishop offer a resourceful handbook for the individual

student/teacher/creative writer as well as an indispensable text that both creative writing and composition teachers can utilize with their students in teaching the key concepts in these fields.

For writers contemplating a plunge into an MFA program or PhD in English with a concentration in creative writing, the book answers many questions and raises even more, offering an authentic portrait of the creative writer's prospects for writing, teaching writing, and publishing successfully, with or without academic affiliation. Additionally, for novice or emerging writers outside of the academy trying to carve a living from writing, this book is especially valuable for its direction, insight, and inspiration. I would love to have found this book years ago when I was dreaming about how to return to a writing life and make a living at it as well. Thankfully we have this resource now, and many writers have this valuable direction because Bishop and Starkey decided to put into action one of their own fundamental beliefs in writing, as stated under the keyword "Creativity": "Ultimately, literary creation is an act of human will. It signifies the creator's belief that something does not exist that should exist, that the world needs redefinition or redirection or reconstruction."

### Works Cited

- Barr, John. "American Poetry in the New Century." *Poetry Magazine* (2006): 1-6. <[http://poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0906/comment\\_178560\\_print.html](http://poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0906/comment_178560_print.html)>.
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