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On Writing for Young People Conference 2023, Keynote Speech

Julia Green

Abstract

A full transcript of Prof Emeritus Julia Green's keynote speech at the *Leaf Journal's* 'On Writing Conference 2023'. Julia sets out the origins of the discipline of Creative Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University and beyond. She discusses the early challenges and successes. She explores her own work and writing while in academia. Finally, she offers some hopes for the future of writing for young people.

Keywords: *Julia Green, keynote, writing for young people*

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This is a transcript of a speech given at 'On Writing for Young People Conference 2023'
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Introduction

I'm delighted to be speaking to you today as part of this great conference on writing for young people. Dr Elen Caldecott and Lucy Cuthew have done a wonderful job in creating and organising this event, bringing us together across the world.

From the start of my academic career in writing for young people, I set out to create and nurture a community of writers who support each other, who are co-operative rather than competitive. It gives me great pleasure to see this work carrying on – former graduates setting up courses in new places, pushing boundaries and responding to new challenges. Creating magazines, academic publications – even a bookshop, in Sheffield – and of course this first conference for Leaf journal. And writing and publishing wonderful new stories for young people – most important of all!

I'm Julia Green, author of many books and stories for young people. My first novel, *Blue Moon*, was published in 2003 by Puffin Books – my most recent publication is a picture book *The Boy Who Sailed the World*, inspired by the true epic sailing voyage of one of my sons, and published by David Fickling Books. Next year, my novel *Ettie and the Midnight Pool* comes out in June, with David Fickling. So, that's more than twenty years of being published as a writer for young people – and many more years than that of actual writing. My academic qualifications include a BA degree and masters in English Literature, a postgraduate teaching qualification for secondary English and a PhD in creative writing. I am an Emeritus Professor of Writing for Young People, and for 15 years, from 2004 until 2019, was Course Director of the MA Writing for Young People, at Bath Spa University in the UK.

I'm talking today about the beginnings of Writing for Young People as a distinct subject within academic settings, and my part in this.

The Academic Landscape Pre- MA Writing for Young People

I was part of a small group of academics at Bath Spa University who began work on creating a new MA specifically for writers for young people in 2001/2002, led by Philip Gross – poet and YA author. Bath Spa University was one of the first UK universities to teach creative writing (1988-89). By 2001 there was already a very successful MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa, with one module option on writing for young people, always heavily over-subscribed. There was also a popular undergraduate module on writing for young people. I taught on both, as an hourly-paid lecturer. For a short time, there was also a module on children's literature taught within the English Literature department. At this time, there were several members of the permanent academic staff who were writers for young people as well as adults – Philip Gross, Steve May, Nicola Davies and Mimi Thebo. Philip Gross was keen for me to be part of the team creating the new MA. And when in 2003 Philip left Bath Spa University to take up a

new post as Professor in Poetry at the University of Glamorgan in Wales, just as we were ready to start the MA Writing for Young People course, I was appointed as its first Course Director. What an opportunity! I'll always be grateful for that.

At this time, in the UK there were very few courses specifically for writers for young people. Andrew Melrose ran the MA in Writing for Children at the University of Winchester, which focussed on creative and critical writing, the first UK course of its kind, I believe. At Nottingham Trent University, the Creative Writing MA had a strand for students wanting to write for young adults, led by YA author David Belbin. Dave Belbin ran the first ever UK Conference on Writing for Young Adults in Nottingham in 2004, *Turning Point*, which I attended. There was a sense that we were all breaking new ground, carving out a space for writing for young people in university settings, taking it seriously as an area for academic study.

It wasn't an easy task to establish it as a legitimate discipline here in the UK. It had been the same with Creative Writing as a subject at university. It took years of work by the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) to establish acceptable guidelines for assessment of creative writing, and to make the case that our 'creative writing' (our novels) IS our research – still an ongoing issue in many universities. The terms of reference for the important 'REF' (RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK) were originally designed for science subjects. The criteria do not easily fit with arts, humanities and creative subjects. Even English Literature departments sometimes found it hard to accommodate creative writing as an academic subject – isn't it too 'subjective'/ not rigorous enough/ how can you assess it in ways that fit the University systems?

We faced the same sort of battles when we set out to create an MA in writing for young people. Maybe more so, because anything to do with the young, with children, in this country at least, tends to be undervalued and suffers from all sorts of prejudices.

To fit with university regulations, we had to conform to certain formats in terms of how we taught and assessed the subject. Rigorous documentation detailing course aims and objectives, measurable learning outcomes, assessment criteria. Rigorous admissions criteria. We used the model already established by the Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa, with significant differences. We were adamant from the beginning that there was a need for a course that focussed on the different and specific needs of authors writing for young people – in particular, on an understanding of audience.

We needed (and were very glad of) input from the children's publishing industry – we had advice and support from Mara Bergman at Walker Books. We involved industry experts in delivering one of the context modules (Contemporary Children's Publishing), as well as through a programme of Visiting Speakers. Our first external examiner was Dave Belbin from Nottingham Trent, a writer for young adults in his own right. Rosemary Canter, an agent at PFD and subsequently at United Agents, helpfully offered an annual prize for "the most promising writing for young people."

But at the heart of the MA Writing for Young People course we created there was much more than the academic framework, and that was to do with our shared values:

- A passion for literature for young people, past and present. We believed it was important for students to understand the literary context in which we write – to honour the writers who have gone before us, and to learn from them. We don't write in a creative vacuum. Reading widely and critically is essential for all writers. That's the main way we learn the craft – the skills of the writer on the page, at word and sentence and paragraph level.
- A belief in the real importance of what we do, its significance.
- An outward-facing perspective – a strong awareness of the young people for whom we write, plus a realistic sense of the children's publishing industry and its demands and limitations.
- The belief that writing really can change people's lives. An optimism and a lack of cynicism, which is perhaps unusual in academic settings in the UK. It's a quality shared by many of us who write for the young.

We wanted to create a course which would enable and support students to write a whole book – or a significant part of one - which at the end might be considered 'publishable'. Not that we could ever promise it would be published, of course. But that was the aim of many or even most of the people who applied to do the MA.

Over the years, we saw wonderful stories that never found a publisher, or were surprised by ones that did. And there is always that gap between what is considered by a publisher as commercially viable and writing which we saw as wonderful in other ways – original, beautiful, challenging, stylistically innovative or whatever. And it was important to us that the MA made room for those stories too – for play and experimentation, for the strange and unexpected. That it wasn't 'just' about getting published. That students could use their MA year to write something new and unusual and experimental if they wanted to.

It was very important to us, too, that the MA was taught by people who were all actively writing for young people and being published. Not 'editors', but writers who really understand the strange, weird and wonderful *process* of writing because it's what we do, day after day, ourselves.

Inevitably, our different focus – on real children and teenagers, and on a real world of publishing – put us at odds with most other academic disciplines. Our phenomenal success in graduates getting published (more than 70, in my time) seemed not to count to our university managers or even to some of our academic colleagues. The fact that we became a course highly regarded by professionals in the publishing industry – agents, editors – received little notice. There was always pressure to make us conform to other criteria – to reduce the length of the manuscript, for example, to

make it conform to other MA courses in universities. Changes in university practices brought new challenges – calculations over academic work hours, for example. We had a battle to establish that the way we teach – through small workshop groups – involved as much preparation and work as delivering a lecture to large numbers; that the small groups were an essential part of the subject, and one of the many reasons for its success; that marking a 40,000-word manuscript took many hours.

Was I Surprised That The MA Was So Successful?

Not really. We had a great team of writer-lecturers, generous with their time and expertise. We selected students very carefully, based on a sample of writing and an interview. We had excellent links with industry professionals. People wanted to do this course. We fulfilled a need – offering a safe place for writers to work on stories, to play and experiment, to get rigorous feedback, to be challenged but also supported and nurtured, to engage critically with texts as a reader, to make good writing friends who would help sustain them after the MA.

Did My Writing Change During This Time? (What is the relationship between me the writer and me the scholar?)

Hard to say, as my entire writing career was co-existent with working at the university as Course Director, with many demands on my time – the teaching itself, but especially the administrative load.

How can you do both things? Both have demanding deadlines. The administration and managing of a university MA course require different skills to the creative writer, perhaps. But I always taught with my ‘whole self’ – teaching is to do with relationships – your give of yourself – and that’s the same with writing. You have to give everything of yourself to the writing.

Thinking about it now, I am amazed that I managed it – publishing a novel a year (or two!) as well as teaching and directing the course. I learned to be very disciplined. Having my academic role meant that I didn’t depend on my writing to make enough money to live on, which took away that pressure. It kept my attention on other people – students, colleagues – rather than on myself and the highs and lows of writing. I met many more agents and publishers than I would have done otherwise, in the interests of the MA. I learned much about the publishing process, beyond my individual experience. I learned much through teaching others, by reading widely, by being critically engaged with other people’s writing. Anyone who has been in a writing workshop knows how much easier it is to see the problems in other people’s writing rather than in your own. We learn so much about our own writing through giving feedback to others – and that was true for me, too. I still sometimes ‘hear’ in my head my own advice given to my students!

Now I'm No Longer Working at the University, Has My Writing Changed?

Recently, I've written in different forms – picture books, poetry, short stories for adults – as well as fiction. I've taken longer over the re-drafting and editing of my most recent novel for children – but that was mostly due to the editor, at a new publisher, rather than my working practice.

I feel much less pressure. I'm no longer working such long hours. My life has changed very substantially. I walk by the sea every day!

Much has changed since my early days in the academic world twenty years ago. The demands and pressures on academics have increased exponentially. I'm glad not to be caught up in that.

And the landscape of children's books is changing all the time. As a writer, I hope my work is always changing and growing, too. I want each book to be better than the one before!

In my new novel, *Ettie and the Midnight Pool*, I have ventured into new, slightly darker territory. I have come to understand that some children need darkness in stories in order to explore and understand the sadness and darkness in themselves.

I still write with a sense of optimism and hope and have the belief that we have a responsibility to our young readers to offer that in our stories.

What Else Has Changed?

I'm sad we have lost much of the detailed, critical reviewing of children's books that used to exist in newspapers like the Guardian. We have lost some of the dedicated national children's book awards in the UK (e.g. the Guardian children's fiction award, Costa award), although there are still many smaller, regional awards. The world children are living in is changing too – some issues too alarming to be ignored by writers (climate catastrophe, war, poverty and inequality, for example). Maybe we are seeing an upsurge in fantasy writing again, which has happened before in times of crisis. Publishing has always gone through phases and fashions. The 'celebrity writer' phenomenon is relatively recent and affects us all – the over-hyping and publicity for a few books.

But children need and indeed do still read books, (despite the people who say they don't!). There are wonderful teachers and librarians doing excellent work at introducing young people to new books. More independent bookshops are flourishing too, in the UK. Children's books make up a large percentage of books bought and borrowed and read.

And I write first and foremost for myself, because I 'need' to do it to be myself. That hasn't changed!

What Do I Hope Happens Next in the Writing for Young People 'Academy'?

- I'm delighted to see the international flavour of this conference – there is so much we can learn from each other. We began to think more internationally

with our collaborations between the MAWYP at Bath Spa Uni and the MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts. So, international co-operation and friendship seems to me a very positive direction for the academy.

- I'd like children's literature to be taken seriously as an art form, seen to be culturally significant, recognised in all the national and international prizes. I'd like the writers for young people to be seen as part of mainstream literary culture and to be valued by academic colleagues in other disciplines.
- I'd like the emphasis to be not only on the 'new' and 'contemporary' – but for us to remember the continuum that exists with what has gone before – our literary predecessors.
- I'd like to see serious, in-depth critical discussion of writing for young people on national media including TV and radio.
- I'd like the academy to keep a real-world focus rather than the elitist 'ivory tower' model found in some university disciplines. One of our real strengths as a community of writers is what we know about communication and connection – keeping language accessible, not just writing for ourselves or each other, but for a wider community.
- It's great to see the new Leaf Journal providing a place for creative and critical thinking about writing for young people.
- And perhaps there are ways to work with the teachers, librarians and others in the education world who are themselves doing excellent work in the field of children's books. (Connection and communication are key strengths. Link with organisations such as BookTrust, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, Action for Children in the Arts, School Library Association etc).
- I hope the Academy remains a friendly and welcoming place for writers at every stage of their career, new and established.

So, keep doing what you are all doing already! Hold the faith! The stories and poems and scripts we write *do* make a difference. The books we read and love as children stay with us our whole lives.

There is a desperate need for more understanding and empathy in our troubled world, and we know that this is one of the many positive effects that reading has on an individual. Reading for pleasure is one of the main indicators for a child's success in education and in their wider life.

The work we do really does matter!

Professor Emeritus Julia Green
November 2023

Author Biography

Prof Emeritus Julia Green is the author of more than twenty novels and stories for children and young adults. She writes about family and friendship, the natural world, life and death, love and loss, joy and adventure. Her recent publications include Carnegie-nominated *The House of Light*, *The Children of Swallow Fell* (Oxford University Press), and *The Boy Who Sailed the World* (David Fickling Books). *Ettie and the Midnight Pool* will be published by David Fickling Books in June 2024.

Julia has a BA in English & American Literature (University of Kent), an M. Phil in English Studies 1798 – 1880 (University of Oxford) and a PhD in Creative Writing (Bath Spa University). She has worked as a publicity assistant for a publisher, a library assistant, an English teacher, and lectured in Further, Community and Higher Education settings. She co-created the MA Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University and in 2004 became its first Course Director, a role she held until 2019. In 2017 she became the first Professor in Writing for Young People in the UK.

Julia is Emeritus Professor of Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. She lives on the North-East coast.