

## CREATIVE DISSERTATION

*Scene: A Starbucks coffee shop in a university town. Two friends, Amy and Andy, sit at a table drinking latte.*

AMY: I'm going on for my PhD in creative writing.

ANDY: (*astounded*) Why? You hated going to workshop all during our last year.

AMY: Yeah. But I went to a writers' conference and listened to the options the panelists on "Living the Writing Life" gave me. And I decided that—unlike you, Andy—I don't want to flip burgers and write. And sex, drugs, and Hollywood isn't me either. Anyway, I hated the workshop because I was young and unsure. Because I didn't want to read *Mao II* that year. I mean, I was trying to write poetry. It was a bad mix of classes. And one bad professor, too, but let's not go there. Besides. Now I'm ready. I want to be Dr. Narrative. I'm back. I'm a fiction writer now. I want to teach. I need to get going. Hey, you know I love Don DeLillo.

ANDY: (*dubious*) Okay. But maybe you'd better see what it's all really about. Sounds pretty unlike you to me.

(*Exeunt.*)

In American universities, graduate students can complete one of three English department degrees that allow for a focus on creative work: the master of arts degree (MA), the master of fine arts degree (MFA), and the doctor of philosophy degree in English (PhD), each with a creative writing emphasis. The master of arts degree usually consists of coursework in English literature, craft and workshop courses, and the completion of a master's thesis, a collection of original writing. While this could also

roughly describe the MFA degree, the MA degree requires fewer hours than the MFA, sometimes a shorter thesis, and is considered a preparatory degree for the PhD. The MFA degree, on the other hand, requires more units of work, which in turn requires a longer residency in a graduate program, and a substantial thesis—often described as a book-length work in the genre studied (generally poetry, fiction, nonfiction, or screenwriting/drama).

As the professional association representing college-level creative writing teachers, the Associated Writing Programs has long supported the MFA as the terminal degree in creative writing, but many programs now offer a PhD in English with an emphasis in creative writing and a creative dissertation (see “MFA” for an alternate view of the situation described in this entry). Students in these programs take the same number of courses as English students who emphasize literature or composition and rhetoric, but they focus on writing-related courses and workshops. They generally complete comprehensive exams on reading lists in specified areas: some choose to focus on major writers, major time periods in literature, or special topics such as folklore and linguistics and/or to minor in rhetoric and composition. (Note: some programs require qualifying exams—reading exams taken before a student is admitted to a PhD program—with comprehensive exams to follow at the end of PhD coursework.) A PhD student generally is trained to teach first-year writing as part of her degree work (and to study and master one or two foreign languages as well).

In many senses, until it is time to complete the creative dissertation, there is no difference between the course of study for completing a PhD in literature, composition, or creative writing in many programs (though in our experience creative writers certainly attend and participate in more readings series, while composition students gravitate toward pedagogical events). In literature, the dissertation is often an extended scholarly work of five to eight chapters that will eventually, for many of these degree candidates, be submitted to university presses for publication. For the candidate in rhetoric and composition, a dissertation is an in-depth scholarly or research project that combines primary and secondary research and often helps theorize issues in teaching, explores current knowledge about and theories of composing, and/or investigates literacy history. For the candidate in creative writing, however, the creative dissertation is generally a book-length manuscript of original creative writing.

While some programs have restrictions about how much of the dissertation may be work that originated in courses the candidate took prior to

sitting for qualifying (reading) exams, most creative dissertations begin in the degree-program workshop. The writer shares work in her genre, meets professors, finds one who is interested in her work, and proposes a collection of poems, short stories or novellas, a collection of nonfiction, a novel, a screenplay, or a play. To date, programs resist coauthored work and genre writing (mysteries, science fiction, and so on). The focus is on the candidate proving himself in a literary genre like those he has been studying in his coursework in the English department.

Although a PhD program, including the writing of a creative dissertation, can be completed in three or four years—on paper—studies show that most candidates take from five to ten years; the dissertation is a not inconsiderable part of that work. After completing coursework, reading for and taking and defending comprehensive reading exams, the candidate forms a dissertation committee, beginning with a dissertation chair. First a prospectus is drafted—often describing the candidate’s interest in the project, history with similar work in that genre, readings of similar works; then a detailed analysis—in some cases, a detailed outline—of the proposed dissertation is presented. A working time line is set up and the candidate begins drafting, sharing chapters with the dissertation chair who has agreed to work with her and continuing to read widely while revising chapters, until a complete first draft is shared with other members of the committee.

Usually dissertation committees consist of three department members, including the committee chair, and a fourth member from somewhere else on the campus whose job is to make sure the university’s standards are met by the English department and the candidate. A chair must have doctoral directive status (as must the outside committee member), which has been conferred upon him, usually when he achieves tenure, by his department and college.

At the end of the drafting cycle, the candidate prepares a final creative dissertation manuscript and defends the project before being awarded the doctor of philosophy degree. It is assumed that the candidate will then seek to publish her book by submitting it to editors and agents; in some cases portions of the manuscript will already have appeared in print in literary journals, and in even rarer cases a candidate will end a degree program with both a dissertation and a publishing contract in hand.

To further illustrate the diversity of requirements as well as their commonalties—and to highlight the tensions that those in English departments appear to feel about these requirements, particularly the “special

case” of the creative dissertation—let’s look at five different program descriptions posted on the Web.

It should be noted, though, that some scholars of English literature find the “creative” dissertation suspect because they don’t believe it is generally submitted to the same type of scholarly scrutiny or rigor as is the research-oriented dissertation. While it is true that it would be possible for a committee to pass on a novel or book of poems that did not require extensive commitment, learning, or development from a PhD candidate, such an event would not be due to the “creative” quotient of the manuscript. Clearly, creative texts can be assessed if a committee discusses its standards with a candidate and applies those standards in a systematic way. Equally, standards for assessing the merit of a scholarly dissertation are not universal nor are they, in our experience, applied equally within programs. Both types of dissertation present the same challenges (and opportunities) to candidates and committees; the literary dissertation is simply more often the more familiar genre to all concerned.

Now let’s look at how such tensions play out in published descriptions:

Florida State University—After filing a prospectus, the candidate will write the dissertation in close consultation with the major professor and the committee. The dissertation may be an extended essay, three or more essays related by subject, or an extended original work in fiction, poetry, or drama. The candidate will defend a draft of the dissertation in a 1-to 2-hour oral examination by the supervisory committee. ([English.fsu.edu/graduate/brochure.htm](http://English.fsu.edu/graduate/brochure.htm))

Here is the first inkling of the quality issue. We see that the dissertation is of some length, original, and defensible.

In the next description, notice that students are encouraged to be active as creative writers by taking at least one workshop a year. Many writers feel that attending graduate school in creative writing poses a special challenge. While completing the other scholarly and pedagogical requirements of such programs (reading and teaching), a writer may feel that it is difficult to simultaneously find the extended periods of writing time she first aimed for by entering a graduate program. Not a surprising reaction when we look at the many requirements of such programs:

University of Georgia—Doctoral-level students complete a degree that consists of coursework in English and American literature and related fields. Doctoral-level students generally take at least one workshop per year. Doctoral students

also take the comprehensive examination and fulfill foreign language requirements. In general, Ph.D. candidates in creative writing complete all degree requirements, except for the creative dissertation, which is a book-length work of fiction, poetry, creative-non-fiction, or a combination of genres, in four years. ([www.english.uga.edu/grad/applinfor.html](http://www.english.uga.edu/grad/applinfor.html))

In the next entry, you'll see some further tensions between the literature and creative writing dissertation camps: this program requires that only one dissertation committee member be a creative writing faculty member. They wish the creative thesis to be read and discussed by literature scholars (perhaps including those in linguistics, folklore, composition, and other areas). Writing quality is desired—clear and graceful—and the work is defended not only before a committee but also as part of a public discussion:

Western Michigan University—The dissertation will be a book length manuscript of scholarship, criticism, research, or creative writing comprised of either a single piece of work or a coherent collection of shorter pieces that are methodologically, structurally, or thematically related. The dissertation must be approved by a committee of at least three members of the graduate faculty, one from outside the department. In the case of creative work, no more than one faculty member may be from the creative writing faculty. The dissertation should be so designed as to take no more than one year to complete. Clarity and grace of writing will be important criteria of acceptability. When the dissertation is complete, the candidate will present it in a public discussion chaired by the members of the dissertation committee.

Our dissertation requirement further defines the special qualities of our Ph.D. program. We do not want the dissertation to devour years of the student's life. We are not, as a primary aim, training research specialists but rather preparing future teachers with a thorough grounding in reading and an ability to write. Thus, for the Ph.D. in literature, English language, or pedagogy, we encourage not only the more traditional kind of dissertation, exploring a single focussed theme or author, but as an alternative, a coherent group of thematically or methodologically related critical essays. The creative dissertation option ensures that the student leave the program with a manuscript of publishable quality—a novel, a book-length collection of poems or short stories, a full-length play or a collection of shorter plays. ([www.wmich.edu/english/phd/diss.html](http://www.wmich.edu/english/phd/diss.html))

This final paragraph addresses the issue of how long it takes to complete a degree, mentioned above. In an effort to reduce the degree

process from seven to ten-years to a more reasonable period of three to five years (about the time spent by most students earning their MFAs), the literature dissertation has been modified to include a group or collection of essays. The creative dissertation remains one that should be “publishable.” (Note: the common term for having passed comprehensive exams but not yet finished with the dissertation is ABD, All but Dissertation. Some candidates remain ABD for life: they have completed a lengthy course of study and taken exams on those studies but not filed a completed and defended dissertation.)

The next school requires a creative dissertation of publishable quality but also asks for a critical preface. This program also goes into some detail describing the process a candidate should follow. Note the critical preface requirement is echoed in the defense, where the candidate should be able to talk about the implications of her work. Note also that “publishable quality” is a flexible and vexed term: publishable by whom, under what conditions, on what terms, for what audience?

University of Denver—A dissertation of publishable quality that is a significant contribution to its field. This will take the form of an extended scholarly and critical work (usually between 150 and 250 pages) *or* a creative work (fiction or poetry). The creative dissertation must include a critical preface which situates the dissertation in its literary context. . . .

When the dissertation is completed, it must be defended by the candidate. The Defense must take place no later than three weeks before graduation. . . . The student will defend the dissertation before a Committee of five readers of the work, including the dissertation advisor, three members of the English Department, and a Committee Chairperson from outside the English Department. The Department Chair, in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies, will assign the English department members and the Committee Chairperson. The Defense takes the form of a discussion concerning the content, context, and implications of the work. The Defense may result in a pass, a pass with minor revisions, or a pass with major revisions. . . . Once the Defense is passed, the candidate will prepare the dissertation in final form, incorporating, with the advice of the dissertation director, any revisions required by the full examining committee. ([www.du.edu/english/phdregs.html](http://www.du.edu/english/phdregs.html))

In this program a great deal of committee oversight is in place, including having the entire committee reading revisions.

Finally, the creative dissertation at some schools is viewed as a possible but potentially more rigorous option.

University of Iowa—Ph.D. *with creative dissertation*—The Program in Creative Writing confers only the M.F.A. degree. However, it is possible for unusually well qualified students in the Department of English Ph.D. program to obtain permission to submit a creative dissertation for that degree. In such a case, all application and course work deadlines and requirements are those of the English department's Ph.D. program, and the Program in Creative Writing assumes responsibility only for granting permission to do the creative dissertation and approving it once it is completed. . . . While the standards for admission to the M.F.A. program are formidable, those for approval of the creative dissertation are more so. Denial of a manuscript for the creative dissertation does not jeopardize that person's candidacy for the Ph.D. with scholarly dissertation. ([www.uiowa.edu/~iww/admissions/degrees.htm](http://www.uiowa.edu/~iww/admissions/degrees.htm))

In this description, we hear the echo of an earlier description suggesting that only one committee member be a creative writer.

To reprise (and this, now, is what we would tell Amy, the character in the opening dialogue), commonly, in English departments, there is a suspicion that the creative writing dissertation could be viewed as an easy option, an escape from the rigors of literary scholarship. This also explains why the degree requirements for the PhD in English with a creative writing emphasis and creative dissertation in most English departments are the same as those for literature students, right up to the moment of the drafting of the creative dissertation. We'd like to think that programs reviewing their procedures would look toward making their program "tracks" equivalent but would also strive to become more innovative and useful; that is, that the paths of literature, creative writing, and composition students might not need to remain identical until the dissertation (see North 2000 for a discussion of one such experiment).

Most writers soon realize that creative work is just as rigorous and demanding as scholarly work. Often it includes primary and secondary research, and certainly it is as critically challenging as much of the work done by writers of literary scholarship. In some programs, creative dissertation writers are writing metafiction, preferring to include critical prefaces, enjoying their work in literary theory and bringing it back in productive and innovative ways to the creative genres they are qualifying in. Creative writers are often in the vanguard, reenvisioning dissertations as they craft them.

Certainly, there are a number of similarities between the MFA thesis (potentially a book of publishable quality) and the PhD creative

dissertation (also potentially publishable). Supporters of the latter would point to the difference in duration (longer courses of critical study capped by exams), the types of work done (literary, critical, creative, study of foreign language—though some MFAs do this work as well), and the way this text provides an entrance into a particular academic community—the university English department—the members of whom prefer to replicate themselves whenever possible. These supporters would further argue that a writer hoping eventually to work in a PhD degree-granting institution will find working through one of these programs on his own is the best preparation for the “culture” of that type of English department. In other words, aiming for a PhD in English with the creative dissertation is not just a matter of liking to write, liking to teach, and hoping to be Dr. Narrative. At the same time, extended study of and attention to writing within these department environments may be the best hope creative writers have of surmounting the overwhelming odds of ever being hired to a tenure-track position.