

On the relationship between philosophy and creative writing?

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Abstract. I respond further to an undergraduate philosophy essay writing guide which tells readers that they are studying philosophy not creative writing. I note an obvious disadvantage of the claim.

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There are papers published in prestigious journals and there are books published by prestigious publishers, but there are other things we write. And maybe the most important thing we will write is something else, at least in terms of its causal consequences. Here are some words from an essay writing guide which I received as an undergraduate:

A well known philosopher may be able to get away with starting a paper with the words. ‘Granny and I think that things have gone too far, what with relativism, idealism and pragmatism at Harvard, graffiti in the subway stations, and Lord knows what all next.’ You, on the other hand, cannot. Remember that you are studying philosophy, not creative writing. (Beebee n.d. 10)

I very strongly believe the guide is by Helen Beebee, but actually it does not have her name on it! And believing this, I suspect she is perpetually being punished for these words. And that she and Alfred Mele wrote that opening to the paper “Humean Compatibilism” as part of repentance, which sounds to me like Laura Riding’s *Progress of Stories!*

What to make of the statement quoted? There are two main points I wish to

make, but before that a confession and a kind of warning. I confess I was not and am not especially bothered by the words quoted; but since 2022 I have been incorporating more “creative writing” in my public work, of the lowest risk variety (or so I very foolishly assume). Tactical gain? Now the warning: I doubt Fodor wrote what he did from a desire to share his creative writing in public, which is an impression some people might have. I imagine them extending the criticism to Fodor himself: “why does he not just save that for his creative writing MA?”

1. I do think the words quoted from Beebee are a mistake if philosophy is to establish good relations with the creative writing department.

2. Also, some philosophers might develop as follows: they see a style of writing by a philosopher which they like, they start imitating it, putting into it their own thoughts where they fit, and eventually the content part comes to dominate rather than the style part. I think this way of developing is nothing abnormal and it is unclear to me that this pathway of development is always bad. They start out closer to creative writers.

Appendix

On Joel Smith’s television channel today, I think I am asking the spider, “Who is the nicest person in England I know?” “Helen Beebee.” “What is her level of niceness?” “3/10.” “What is mine?” “9/10.” “How can I trust you?” “I need a reputation for honesty, for the deeds I wish to commit.”

References.

Beebee, H. n.d. How to write a Philosophy essay & exam preparation. *Centre for Philosophy. University of Manchester Department of Government.*

Beebe, H. and Mele, A. 2002. Humean Compatibilism. *Mind* 111 (442): 201-223.

Riding, L. 1982 (1935). *Progress of Stories*. New York: Persea Books.