

Course sample

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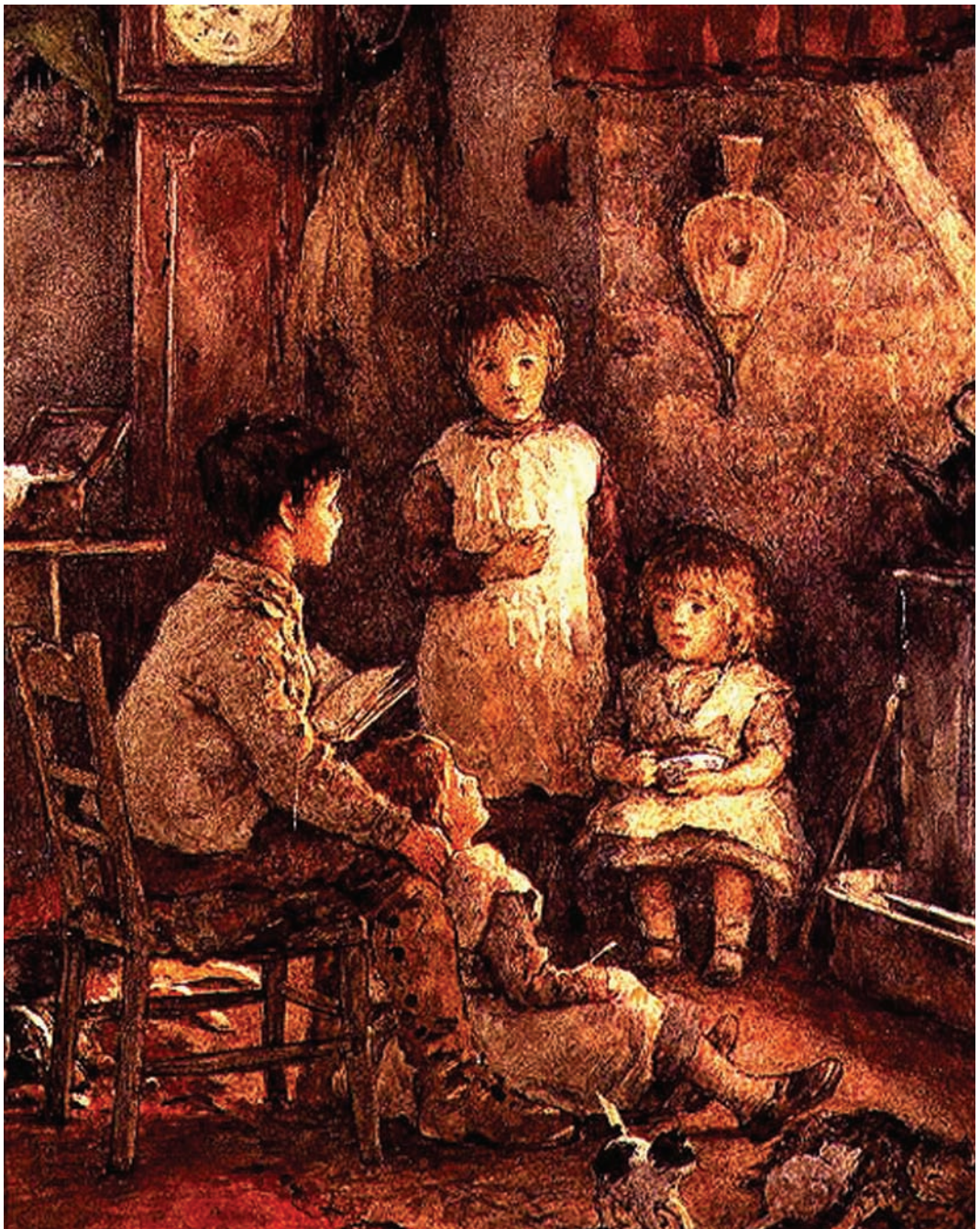
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Creative Writing 2

Writing for Children



Children round the Fire Alice Clausen

Level HE5 – 60 CATS

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Before you start

Welcome to *Creative Writing 2: Writing for Children*. Your OCA Student Handbook should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA courses, so keep it to hand as you work through this course.

Course aims

Writing for Children looks at fiction for a wide age range, from the developing reader (6–8 years) to the young adult (12+). The aim of this course is to inspire and encourage you to develop your creative writing for children. The course will develop your awareness of the range of contemporary children's writing, the requirements of different kinds of writing, such as fantasy or action, and encourage you to experiment with your own work. You'll develop your critical awareness of your own and other people's writing, supported by constructive feedback from your tutor. The course will develop your skills in writing, drafting and editing and presenting creative work, and enable you to build a professional approach towards preparing work for publication.

On successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- explore the structure, form, historical context, limitations and the specific strengths and problems of writing for children
- draft and edit your own writing, choosing appropriate forms and techniques based on the critical skills you've developed
- participate in the direction and design of your own learning experience
- complete a critical review of a contemporary work or movement, or a critical essay on a children's author.

Writing for Children doesn't cover:

- Picture books for very young children. These rely heavily on design, layout and specialist illustration, and form a distinct genre. If you're particularly interested in picture books, look at the relevant sections in *The Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. You'll also find an article by author Gillian McClure and an extract from her picture book *Tom Finger* on the OCA website.
- Writing for generic series to which a range of writers contribute, working under a general pseudonym. This course is aimed at developing your own unique style but if you're interested in this sort of writing, talk to your agent once you get one.

- Writing for comics. Nowadays most comics are tied in to TV programmes and licensed characters, or to particular toys, and are written by in-house teams rather than individual writers. Again, see the relevant section in *The Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*.
- Poetry. It's notoriously difficult to market poems for children. If you're doing this course simply for pleasure rather than publication, however, feel free to respond to any of the exercises in poetry if you wish.

You may have a personal writing goal you wish to pursue – anything from completing your first story to publishing a full-length novel for children. On the other hand, you may want to do this course purely for leisure. Wherever you are in your writing career, **Writing for Children** will give you the inspiration and stimulation to start, improve, complete or move on. Above all, enjoy yourself!

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your **Student Handbook**.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help them to understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your **Student Handbook** at an early stage in the course. Your **Assessment and how to get qualified** study guide gives more detailed information about assessment and accreditation.

For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on the course:

- the three course assignments of your choice (2,500 – 3,000 words each) (chosen from Assignments Two to Five)
- a critical review of up to 2,000 words on a contemporary work or movement in children's writing, or a critical essay on a children's author
- your reflective commentary on the course as a whole (1,500 – 2,000 words)
- your tutor report forms.

The critical review accounts for 10% of your final mark if you decide to have your work on this course formally assessed.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Pre-assessment review

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you'll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark. Because of this your tutor is available to guide you on presenting your work.

What to do

Put together your portfolio for assessment as directed in the submission guidelines at the end of this course guide. Photograph or scan the work you plan to submit, and email it to your tutor. Don't photograph every page of your notebooks, learning logs or sketchbooks, but describe what you're planning to submit. You should also outline the way you plan to actually present the work so that your tutor can make sure that you're making the most of the work you are sending in. Your tutor will give you feedback and guidance so that you're well prepared to make the best of your work at assessment.

Your learning log

Your learning log is an integral part of this and every other OCA course. If you're new to OCA courses, read your **Keeping sketchbooks and learning logs** study guide for further information.

Use your learning log to record your progress through the course. Your learning log should contain:

- the work you do for each exercise (clearly labelled)
- your thoughts on the work you produce for each project
- your ideas and observations as you work through the course
- your reflections on the reading you do and the research you carry out
- your tutor's reports on assignments and your reactions to these.

If you wish, you can post your learning log as an online blog on the OCA website so that your tutor can see how your work is developing between assignments. It's particularly important that your tutor sees regular evidence of your development if you're planning to have your work on this course formally assessed.

Planning ahead

This level 2 course represents 600 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and learning log development. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 12 hours each week on it. You'll find the course much easier if you've already completed a Level 1 writing course.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Writing for Children is divided into six parts, corresponding to the six course assignments. Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up and feed into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

Each assignment will ask you for around 2,500 – 3,000 words of writing. You may submit a

single short story of up to 3,000 words or, because fiction for children works well in shorter forms, two stories of up to 1,500 words each. You'll also submit a short reflective commentary (up to 500 words) with Assignments Two to Five, describing the writing process and your experience of that part of the course. You'll be asked to write an extended reflective commentary (1,500 – 2,000 words) on the course as a whole as part of your final assignment.

For your final assignment you'll also complete the 2,000 word critical review of a writer, work or movement, for which you'll need to work up ideas and an outline plan during the course.

Managing your time

Each part of the course should take about 100 hours to complete. You'll need to decide how to divide this time in a way that works effectively for you. Here's a suggested model for how it might work:

Exercises and learning log work	30 hours
Reading (course guide, suggested reading and other)	20 hours
Research	20 hours
Assignment work (including reflective commentary)	20 hours
Redrafting in light of tutor feedback	10 hours

Each assignment should take about six to eight weeks to complete, so you can allocate the hours accordingly, or after discussion with your tutor.

The time you spend on each part of the course will depend on how quickly you work, the time available to you, how easy or hard you find each exercise, and how quickly you want to complete the course. Don't worry if you take more or less time than suggested provided that you're not getting too bogged down in a particular part of the course and that your tutor is happy with the work you're producing. If it helps, draft a rough study plan and revisit this at the end of each part. The course structure is intended to be flexible, but it's always useful to bear deadlines in mind.

Reading

The following books are not 'set books' as such but the course makes regular reference to all of them and it's therefore strongly recommended that you make time to read them. You'll find a longer reading list at the back of this guide and on the OCA website. The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

Anthony Horowitz, *Stormbreaker* (London: Walker Books, 2005) (9+)

Derek Landy, *Skulduggery Pleasant* (London: Harper Collins, 2007) (9+)

Sophie McKenzie, *Blood Ties* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2008) (12+)

Michael Morpurgo, *Private Peaceful* (London: Harper Collins, 2004) (9+)

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell, *Hugo Pepper* (London: Random House Yearling, 2007) (7+)

Jacqueline Wilson, *Little Darlings* (London: Doubleday, 2010) (8–12)

You'll also find it useful to refer to *The Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. This has plenty of articles of interest to the aspiring author, including articles on the role of the literary agent and how publishers spot new talent. Visit www.writersandartists.co.uk for further information.

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing – see the *Harvard referencing system* guide on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people's work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.



Reading the Angel Book Nicola Bealing

Project two Children's fiction today

Contemporary children's fiction is such a vast field that it's difficult to make generalisations. However it is possible to identify certain trends.

- The current children's literary scene is dominated by series fiction (*Rainbow Magic*, *Alex Rider*, etc.). Most agents will be much happier to take you on if you have more than one story to write and they will be especially happy if you have an idea for a series in mind.
- The emphasis is on entertainment rather than education.
- Fantasy is currently the most popular genre (see Part Five), although certain kinds of fantasy are more popular than others. Time-slip adventures such as *Tom's Midnight Garden*, for instance, seem to have given way to novels set wholly in a fantasy world (*Harry Potter*, *His Dark Materials*, *Mortal Engines*). There is also a current vogue for stories in which a human character from this world encounters a supernatural or otherworldly being, e.g. *Skellig*, *Twilight*, *Skulduggery Pleasant*. Note that most of these examples of modern fantasy are also series fiction.
- There are always children who don't respond to the fantasy genre at all, and true-life dramas such as those written by Jacqueline Wilson or Anne Fine remain perennially popular. An interesting addition to this genre has been the sudden growth in popularity of the 'misery memoir' among young people of 12+. These include such titles as *Once in a House on Fire* by Andrea Ashworth, *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer, and *The Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah.
- Apart from *Harry Potter* and *The Worst Witch* series by Jill Murphy, school stories seem to be in decline. Both Rowling and Murphy set their stories in fantasy academies in which magic is the chief subject on the curriculum, whereas earlier authors like Angela Brazil, Elinor Brent-Dyer, Frank Richards and Enid Blyton set their school stories in the real world. The boarding school setting had the advantage of liberating the main characters from their parents' control, but it's clearly less relevant to the modern young reader.
- Historical fiction, by such writers as Rosemary Sutcliff or Henry Treece, is less popular nowadays, although there have been notable successes: *Coram Boy* by Jamila Gavin, set in the 18th century; Michael Morpurgo and Michelle Magorian's world war stories; the action adventure series *The Roman Mysteries* by Caroline Lawrence. It's tempting to speculate that the national curriculum determines the popularity of particular history topics and periods, because schools will buy fiction books that reinforce the subjects they teach.
- In the past ten years there has been a rapid growth in the popularity of young spy novels, such as those by Anthony Horowitz and Robert Muchamore. This may be partly because of an eagerness in the publishing world to encourage boys to read, although girls also read these novels.

One of the golden rules of children's fiction has always been that boys will not usually read books with a female central character, or with a pink/lilac cover. Girls, however, will read books centred on a male hero, and are less particular about the colour of a cover. The world of children's fiction remains strongly gendered, with books marketed specifically at either girls or boys. Do you think that this is simply cynical commercialism or does it reflect the fact that boys and girls have different literary tastes? Make some notes in your learning log.



The Bookseller Artist unknown

Exercise: Explore your local library and bookshop

- Visit your local children's library and see what books are featured on the shelves. If possible, talk to the librarian and see if you can work out what is currently popular among different age groups of children. What categories does the librarian use when talking about children's books?
- Do the same thing at your local bookshop. It should be easier to assess what's popular here, since shelf space is usually allocated according to sales. Again, see if you can get talking to a bookseller about their perceptions of children's books. Does your bookshop display children's fiction by category? What different categories do they use?

Fantasy, action and true-life drama

The difficulty in categorising this enormous and expanding field of writing should already be apparent to you. Whatever categories we apply need to be flexible rather than definitive; categories will overlap, and there will always be some books (*Marianne Dreams*, *Skellig*) which defy precise categorisation.

For the purposes of this course, however, think broadly in terms of three categories:

- fantasy
- action/adventure
- true-life drama.

Each of these has a long pedigree, and is still vastly popular today.

Fantasy

Fantasy is a vast and expanding field. It has its roots in myth, legend, folk tales, fairy tales and fable, and therefore has some claim to be the original genre of children's fiction. A classic fantasy will be read by boys and girls, children and adults. (*The Lord of the Rings* was recently voted the nation's favourite book in a television poll.) At its best, fantasy has a timeless quality; because it's not set in the real world, it doesn't date in the same way as other fiction. Classic fantasy, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is still read today, but modern classics, such as the four books in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series, are being produced all the time, and new ground is constantly being broken. The scope is limitless because, in this genre more than any other, imagination reigns supreme.

These are some of the most popular fantasy titles of recent years:

Skulduggery Pleasant, Derek Landy

Twilight, Stephenie Meyer

Cirque du Freak, Darren Shan (first of *Vampire Blood Trilogy*, which in turn forms the first three books of the 12-book *The Saga of Darren Shan*)

His Dark Materials, Philip Pullman

The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents, Terry Pratchett (28th novel in the *Discworld* series)

Far Flung Adventures, Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell (including *Hugo Pepper*)

Mortal Engines, Philip Reeves

Coraline, Neil Gaiman

And, of course, *Harry Potter* by J K Rowling

Note that all of these except *Coraline* are fiction series. As you'll see when you come to Part Five, creating a new and distinctive fantasy world is a formidable undertaking. It's hard to make it work, which may be one reason why authors and publishers are keen to keep a successful idea alive in a series of novels. If you're particularly interested in this genre, you should read as many as you can of the above, to get some idea of the range and variety that is currently available.

Action/adventure

Action/adventure is usually set in the real world (or some parallel version of the real world) but the focus is less on emotional conflicts and relationships than on danger, ingenuity, investigation, risk. The thriller and the spy novel both fall into this category. Classic texts would include *Treasure Island*, *Swallows and Amazons*, *Biggles* and many of the series by Enid Blyton – *The Famous Five*, *The Secret Seven* and so on.

Here are some contemporary classics:

Blood Ties, Sophie McKenzie

Noughts and Crosses series, Malorie Blackman

Flood Child and *Flood and Fire*, Emily Diamand

Tamar, Mal Peet

The Kite Rider, Geraldine McCaughrean

Alex Rider series, Anthony Horowitz

Cherub series, Robert Muchamore

A Series of Unfortunate Events series, Lemony Snicket

Young Bond series, Charlie Higson



Pirate William Kidd burying treasure on Oak Island Howard Pyle

If this category appeals to you, please read as many as you can of the above. Again, note the variety in this category: from historical and political fiction to science fiction, detective fiction, spy fiction and general spoofs.

True-life drama

True-life drama is, by contrast, set in the real world, and the emphasis is on real-life situations, family, relationships, friendships and emotional complications. The classic texts in this genre include *Little Women*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Heidi*, *The Family at One End Street* and *Kes*. These are some contemporary best-sellers:

Little Darlings, Jacqueline Wilson

Private Peaceful, Michael Morpurgo

Diary of a Wimpy Kid series, Jeff Kinney

Horrid Henry series, Francesca Simon

The Tulip Touch, Anne Fine

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, John Boyne

The Chinese Cinderella, Adeline Yen Mah

Martyn Pig, Kevin Brooks

True-life drama is a large and flexible genre, as you might expect, incorporating comedy, tragedy and history. If you want to write this kind of book, then please read as many as you can of the above, as well as any other titles that you come across.

Exercise: Keep reading

Select the genre (fantasy, action or true-life drama) that most appeals to you and get hold of a copy of at least one book on the relevant list. Read your chosen title carefully and make notes in your learning log. Ask yourself questions like:

- What age group is it marketed at? (There's more on this in Part Two.)
- Is the book directed at boys, girls or both? How can you tell?
- Is the book part of a series? Where in the series does it come? How does the book deal with what's gone before or flag up what's coming next?
- What does the book look like? What's on the cover? How is it illustrated?
- Is the book part of a clear trend or does it occupy a place on its own?
- Would the book be enjoyable for adult readers (other than those doing a children's writing course)?

Even if your tastes lie strongly within a particular category of children's fiction, don't restrict your reading entirely to this category. Branch out and read at least a few books that fall outside your comfort zone – you may be surprised by your own reaction to something new.