



# the WRITE stuff

BATH SPA UNIVERSITY'S CREATIVE WRITING MA UNLOCKS THE WRITERS WITHIN, SAYS MONICA SHAW

Tania Hershman used to tell people she was “trying to be a writer”. That was before she published her short story collection, *The White Road and Other Stories*, had three of her stories and a week of flash fiction produced for Radio 4, and became writer-in-residence at Bristol University.

These days, there’s no question that Tania is well beyond ‘trying’.

But the transition from aspiring writer to full-time professional took Tania more than pure will.

“It was during the Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa University that I first felt I could call myself a writer,” she says. “The MA, the structure, the deadlines, being among a community of writers, all contributed to taking me to the next level, to declaring myself in public as a writer.”

Tania isn’t the only writer who’s found success through Bath Spa. The Creative Writing MA has continued to churn out award-winning novelists, poets and screenwriters. In recent years, two of Bath Spa’s students were long-listed for the Man Booker Prize, three for the Orange Prize, and one for the Guardian First Book Award.

Bath Spa’s success is due to its unique combination of coursework and community that enables aspiring writers to not only be good at their craft, but to also succeed in the real world of publishing.

“We combine academic rigour with professionalism,” explains Steve May, head of the Creative Writing department. “We demand that students take an academic interest in writing

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because it helps them develop strong work patterns and make more informed choices.”

Those choices are, in part, learned in the classroom, where lecturers include prestigious writers such as novelist Julia Green, who is also course director for the specialist MA in writing for young people. But as Julia explains, many lessons are learned through interaction and positive reinforcement from tutors and peers.

“At the heart of the MA is the creative writing workshop, a small group of students who each week bring their work-in-progress for discussion,” says Julia.

“The ethos is positive and constructive, our aim being to help each student to make their work the best it can be.”

Bath Spa recognises that learning to write and getting published are two unique challenges, and it is its emphasis on professionalism that has enabled so many students to succeed as published writers.

“Our students are very well prepared for the real world of business,” says Julia. “They understand the role of agents and editors, the importance of sales and marketing, and the types of promotion they will have to do as new authors.”

Students also learn how to support their writing careers, even if they have yet to make it to the bestseller list.

“We provide students with an awareness of the creative industry on the whole so that they can find congenial ways to support their work through, for example, teaching,” says Steve May.

Bath Spa students agree that the course imparts more than just writing skills; students develop the courage, self-discipline and network of peers to turn their existing talent into a full-on career. This was the real turning point for Tania Hershman.

“The course gave me a huge confidence boost,” says Tania. “I felt like I could really ‘do’ this writing thing, and it provided me with wonderful writing friends with whom to share work.

“I wouldn’t say that it taught me how to write, but that isn’t the aim of an MA in Creative Writing: it is much more about being given the time and space to write, and being among others in the same position.”

<http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/creative-writing.asp>

## the NOVELIST’S story

One of Bath Spa’s early successes is Bath resident Sarah Duncan, author of five best-selling novels, including *Kissing Mr Wrong*. She also teaches writing courses in Bath and at Chateau Ventenac in southern France. We talked to Sarah about her experience at Bath Spa and how it shaped her career.

**TBM:** How did Bath Spa help you get started?

**SD:** The MA gave me the permission to write – and I needed it, given I was mother of two and desperately short of money. It

Novelist Sarah Duncan has written several best-sellers since graduating from Bath Spa's Creative Writing MA course

also gave me a deadline -- if I couldn't write a novel with the support of tutors, students and a whole year devoted to writing, then I was never going to and should give up. Luckily, I managed to write my first novel that year.

**TBM:** *What did you like most about the course?*

**SD:** It was probably the most stimulating year of my life – I experimented with writing, read books I never would have otherwise and learned so much about reading and writing. I also made good friends and established a writing group – ten years on, and we still meet every three weeks. The MA didn't teach me how to write a novel, but I wouldn't be a novelist without it.

**TBM:** *What inspired you to teach?*

**SD:** I always liked the idea of teaching, but didn't have the confidence. Then I discovered a fellow student whose work I didn't rate highly taught a creative writing class. I felt if she could teach, then so could I! Since then I've taught at lots of places, including Oxford University and an American university. I'm the Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Bristol, too. And I only started writing ten years ago ...amazing!

**TBM:** *What is your approach to teaching?*

**SD:** I concentrate on craft techniques. Depending on the genre, writers have a duty to entertain, inform, challenge, delight, or thrill, and you can learn how to do it. As writers, we're all on the same road. Sometimes we move more slowly than others, sometimes we're sprinting ahead. But it's the same road for a published writer as a novice. We're just at different places, that's all.

**TBM:** *What is your advice to aspiring writers?*

**SD:** Write. Read. Do a course, for the learning and support. Write. Learn about the publishing world – subscribe to e-newsletters, read magazines, websites and forums. Write. Get involved with the writing community. Oh, and did I say write?

<http://www.sarahduncan.co.uk/>



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