

Review Essay

A Kind of Magic? *Work of Fiction: Making a Living from Writing in the UK*

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ABSTRACT

Review essay of Christina Williams's recent qualitative monograph on UK writers, their lives, their inspirations, and the industry in which they attempt to survive.

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In a new contribution to a broadly-conceived 'sociology of literature' oeuvre concerned with the practicalities of writing and publishing, Christina Williams has succeeded in coherently crystallising the tensions between compulsive and determined creativity, harsh economic reality, and the potential psychological side-effects of desiring that arts for art's sake transforms (seamlessly) into a solid career path. Her work distinguishes itself from focussed theoretical criticism of the impact of art and creativity on the individual (cf. Goldmann, 1980: 105 on how art is a lucid substitute for our natural ineptitudes), joining instead a scholarly tradition encompassing the art of writing and the connection with biography, readership, society, and economy that arguably stretches back to Schücking (1931 [1966]) and Q. D. Leavis (1932 [2000]) and onwards via Escarpit (1965), Laurenson and Swingewood (1971), Hall (1979), and more recently observed in D. J. Taylor's *The Prose Factory* (2016). There is also arguably a strong scholarly overlap here with conceptual innovations regarding the processes of creativity present in the output of Raymond Williams (1961) in the sixties and onwards to more recent work engaging philosophy and sociality (see: Miles, 2019, 2024; Horvath and Carpenter, 2020) and authorial practice (cf. Bennett, 2005). If anything, in contributing further to this established discourse via extensive qualitative insight, *Work of Fiction* revises intellectual stepping stones from the 1920s to the 2020s that serve to identify one consistent element in the lives of writers over time: while inspiration is limitless, sustenance is – more often than not – quite the opposite. In light of this, Williams is perhaps at her very best (in a very good book) considering stubborn notions of authorial *hope* as it seemingly appears to continually rebound outwards from the exterior shells of a variety of social closures, offering only the dimmest possibility of eventual penetration, but persistently acting as a driver of continuity and continuation in the noble art of writing. The nature of instrumental networks, the value and drawbacks of elective personal isolation, the lack of agency relating to forces of invidious, profit-driven capitalism, and the omnipresent tenacity in self-reflection are all present here alongside the functional and contemplative act of creation. These elements provide the book with a sophisticated intellectual structure: the dynamics of creative writing; the frustration of Weberian externalism; personal and industrial economics; and self-identity and the vagaries of the exploitation of social capital (and attendant status anxiety it can generate). These foci function as an interplay of

ideas that have, at their heart, a mission to understand writers' agency, their sense of power, and their unbending resilience in the face of ubiquitous challenges. Williams is skilful in her analysis, portraying creative writers as having a natural equilibrium of talent, determination, and stoical acceptance – there is no particular glamour, but then again perhaps there never has been, even at the 'top'. For example, Hilary Spurling's (2017) brilliant recent biography of Anthony Powell is one testament among the wider canon of life writing that notes the (occasionally surprising) relative penury of writing despite authors in previous eras benefitting from the lower cost of property. It therefore appears to have both historical precedent and the characteristics of a continual circle. Thus, the contemporaneous insight here appears to be its primary originality, but Williams is interesting and fresh in her analysis of *effect*; in short, this is not a book about impecuniousness. Beyond the challenges of personal finance, the fluctuating whims of the industry and the continual presence of risk, this is instead a book that is primarily about the sparkling value of labour and the innate *spirit* of writing.

Consequently, the text shines brightly, regularly having the very effect on readers that her subjects desire in their own work: *Work of Fiction* is a *page-turner*. Initial encounters with her text and structure persuaded towards bracketing the work broadly within a 'sociology of literature' as thematically renewed from its golden era of the theoretically-driven CCCS (Hall et al., 1980), the critically-driven 'Essex Conference Proceedings' (Barker et al., 1978), and aforementioned work in the field on industry, not to mention the debts to the plethora of pivotal theory of the sixties and seventies of, *inter alia*, Barthes, Foucault, and, notably, Macherey (1978 [2006]). Writing appears a mirage of wealth, something of a fallacy of acknowledged intellectualism and social status, and a choppy harbour of self-doubt. There is, defined by the reach of her data gathering, a 'British' focus here, but this is valid, interesting, and relatable. The narrative therefore slots effortlessly into the commentary on developments in the publishing industry, the culture of writing, and generic aspects of social, economic, and cultural change. One is struck by the stubborn sub-narrative that publishing is – inevitably – something of a neo-liberal profit-making exercise; consequently, the writer struggles, Williams notes early on, with 'insecurity, inconsistency, unpredictability' coupled with the internalisation of emotions relating to writing and the experience (and paradox) of reward and punishment (Williams, 2025: 4–14). This is a narrative that is ostensibly driven by interest in self-sufficiency, of the capriciousness of discernible income, and the fickle nature of the otherwise dependable 'public interest' in a writers' work (during the pandemic, we are informed, reading – and book sales – rose, but this temporal apex benefitted mainly those with established authorial profiles). Becoming a bestseller during a lockdown illustrates that some authors' profiles are more equal than others (Ibid., 24–25).

Williams sets out clearly her approach to understanding her subject, creating typologies and criteria to identify the dynamic minutiae of creative labour ('hope' or 'agency', 'magic' or 'creativity', and discourses of writing are to feature heavily in later analysis), and a well-organised and informative review of literature is present, setting the scene. It is here that the intellectual themes of the work begin to crystallise, based on identified aspects of the character of creative labour, omnipresent forces of arbitrary commercialism, drivers of individual agency and the threat of powerlessness, and the potential-shaping metier of specific motivations. However, this is intrinsically 'human' and 'ideological' in its manifestation, and it becomes apparent, very early on, that there is to be no mention of the effect of AI on the noble art of literary innovation that is faced at present; to be fair, this is a text that was developed and written prior to the somewhat sudden emergence of AI as, arguably, a threat to both the invention of novelty and the livelihoods of creative people. Therefore, regretfully there is a sense that the arguments developed so eloquently within this text are now receding in their significance due to this opaque spectre. The importance herein is in the sense of personal gratification that is taken from the act of labour, the generation of novelty, the *resistance* to exploitation, and – perhaps – the potential renaissance of the agency of creativity in an age of anti-intellectualism and deliberate denigration of the value of the humanities (*vide*. Small, 2016). Resultantly, Williams heads straight for the synthesis of social capital, ambition, quixotic vocation, and the weird instrumental equilibrium of capitalist exploitation and, combined, gives the book a projecting theme, a lasting value, and an intellectual vanguard in spite of the (largely) unforeseen emergence of (arguably) corrosive technology. This is therefore about agency and structure, writers and publishing, demographics and individualisation, and the latent philosophy of creativity. Writers are inevitably forced into frugality, endure passivity, distance, and powerlessness, enduring the shaping by forces of fashion and commercialism beyond their control and the 'calling' to continue with a chosen vocation. This is posited – by the midway point of the book – as a way of resisting alienation (after McRobbie, 2016) and, arguably, anomie (Williams, 2024: 103–111). Writing is proactive self-therapy, it is social commentary, and a desire to be heard. But this is also a vocation that emphasises milestones and recognition, a status anxiety driven by a prize-winning culture, reader feedback and so on; Williams (as intimated) is versatile enough to develop a strong central argument about agency and the writers' lack of power – but hope, it seems, is the wordsmith's best comfort. Luck and chance are writ large, leading to Williams's seamless transition between her development of hope and her theory of 'maybeness' (ibid. 136–148). If anything, this concept is where she merges ideas relating to praxis and philosophy of creativity, resembling what I call a 'mezzanine condition', or a *hesitation in creation*, a condition for progress towards invention (Miles, 2024). Williams posits that the 'maybe' is

something that is beyond hope and persistence and the corrosive *expectancy-as-inspiration* model of Gross and Musgrave (2020) (this ‘don’t expect much and you’ll be ok’ approach is itself reminiscent of Phil Cohen’s theory of ‘cooling out’ in education; Cohen, 1997), instead facing towards a nurturing, self-reflective acceptance of the neutrality of perceived success and the self-reassurances that this can provide. This is interesting and valuable but one initially wonders why a whole chapter is deemed necessary on the topic of ‘hope’ and the lack of firm agency. If anything, Williams doubles down to good effect; it is in the exposition of hope as a form of exploitation by the industry that displays the greatest resonance here – cultural labour, as discussed throughout, is potentially – and practically – ‘free’ to those that benefit most from it. In the meantime, as Williams suggests, authors can be ‘like Schrödinger’s cat [...] both a winner and loser at the same time.’ (Williams, *ibid.*: 149). Being in the moment seems to be the greatest instance of satisfaction and happiness.

Such an ‘instance’ is what Williams focusses upon as ‘magic’. This conceptual analysis is sandwiched in-between an introduction to – and discussion of – ‘discourses of writing’, narratives that are categorised as ‘love’, ‘luck’ and ‘magic’, proceeding through those discussions of passion and strategy. However, in ‘magic’ there is something that seems to exist arguably beyond such determined discourse(s) on fallibility and fate. Magic, it seems, is reminiscent of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls ‘flow’ or ‘the feeling when [creativity is] *almost* automatic, effortless, yet highly focussed state of consciousness.’ (2013: 110, my emphasis). However, as is noted here, the process requires conscious awareness of agency; ‘magic’, it seems in Williams’s work, is conceptualised as being *within* a moment rather than *outside* of a moment (Miles, 2019, 2024) and, while she cites Banks’ (2014) observation that creativity can be experienced as ‘time without time’, the notion of magic remains compromised between the sense that the stories of Williams’s sample have emerged from ‘somewhere outside [of] themselves’ while also arguing, essentially, that writers are hardwired to be storytellers (a natural instinct *within*). These are people who function on an intertextual, discursive, and meditative level, but appear ultimately a product of what I call the ‘creator-reader’ phase of creativity (or conscious, creative praxis) rather than offering an insight into the fissure and fusion of the liminal, fleeting, Bergson-influenced clarity of my own ‘mezzanine condition’ (or, the unconscious and subliminal micro-pause before praxis).¹ Thus, Williams – and her authors – are perhaps concerned with conceptualising the practicalities of *making sense of* the magic (post-creative), not contemplating what intra-creative *essence* the magic has (Miles, 2024). Each approach is distinct; magic struggles to be magic if one is aware of magic. The magic is characterised as essentially natural, quasi-mysterious, performative, and self-affirming (Williams, 2024: 171–179). It is, itself, quite philosophical and instrumental, but arguably here it is presented as representative of a confirmation of identity, a need to believe that one is a bona fide writer (*ibid.* 180). It is, therefore, perhaps less *magic* as more *self-affirming of a natural skill and technique* – it’s a moot point.

Throughout this excellent book, Christina Williams presents an outstanding analysis of the vagaries, challenges, and rewards of creative labour, organising her approach into her aforementioned ‘discourses’ of writing that are, in truth, helpful and clear narratives; these are descriptive vistas of the characteristics of the trade, self-conscious and rarely reductive (on the part of the respondents), and always entertaining. The writer is aware and realistic, wedded to a passion to write, occasionally embarrassed by the status, and recognising of the latent performativity of the role. Therefore, one is aware of a subliminal narrative relating to a strong sense that an instrumentality of ‘being a writer’ relates somewhat to Bourdieu’s ‘capital theory’ and, in light of this, Williams is keen to note – late on – that her sample could have been broader, including ‘working-class’ authors to add sufficient context to the notions of productive penetrations of incidences of social closure and the struggle to gain equilibrium in time, finance, and sociality (*Ibid.*: 190). However, there remains here a fascinating commentary on the tangible connectivity between writers, an honest and revealing representativeness of the profession as it is now, an insight into the sociological-integrative method of creation, and the unwritten treatise that declares that imagination must always outmanoeuvre a partial (real or imagined) social and economic exclusion. This is about making a living from natural curiosity, intrinsic talent, and hard (and regularly unrewarded) graft. *Work of Fiction* is a superb and highly accessible intellectual narrative, representing a valuable contribution to the continuing discourse on a sociology of literary production.

¹ It is possible to understand the mezzanine as an ‘interruption’ within the ‘la durée’ theory of time-space Bergson (2014: 80–86); ostensibly, the mezzanine is part of a wider ‘process’ of action but is the condition necessary for such action to be initiated. It is, in effect a stage, or platform, within a space of creation that is apparently superficial but crucial – an ‘in-between’, transitional, functional, and liminal *connection* between preparatory awareness and creative delivery. Creativity is effectively posited as ‘outcome-related’ here – what I term the ‘creator-reader’ phase of any creative process occurs when the actor is aware of the creation taking place. The mezzanine is the subliminal transmutation between idea and development; it is almost a ‘where did that come from?’ recollection, something that can only be (partially) understood after it has taken place.

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