

Women's

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Your Own Personal Yoda?

Q&A with writing mentor Dr Jane Messer

QUESTIONS BY JACQUI BROWN

Ever wondered if you need a writing mentor, but not known what to ask? Dr Jane Messer was formerly Course Director of the postgraduate Creative Writing programme at Macquarie University. Now she's sharing her 30 years plus teaching and writing experience through her creative mentoring service. I'm thrilled she is able to share her experience with us.

Hi Jane, Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I've been writing about my family background for my book *Raven Mother* which is a part-memoir, part-biography of my father and his mother, and it's become really clear to me how eclectic my parents were for the times. My father moved from science grant to grant in different countries. I grew up moving around, and hearing my parents' life stories, listening in when their friends come to the house and regaled them with their adventures — and being read to every night. I had dyslexia and synesthesia, and was slow to learn to read. I think that all combined to me wanting to do my own thing. That pretty much sums up my most significant influences.

How and why did you get into mentoring?

I came to it through teaching creative writing for many years, first at Johns Hopkins University, then UTS, and then for 16 years at Macquarie University where I was the Course Director of the postgraduate Creative Writing programme. Before

'Love sentences, understand how to use a comma, listen to your doubts, but also be bold.'

teaching I'd been working in the community sector and with independent publishers doing marketing and event management work, and sort of slid into teaching at a time when there were more opportunities, after publishing my first novel *Night by Night*.



Mentoring, working one-on-one with a writer, working closely with their text, giving feedback about characters, the structure, the language, everything associated with the creative text itself was a favourite part of my university teaching. So it was the obvious thing for me to continue doing after leaving academia.

What do you enjoy about it and why?

It's very rewarding working with writers to support them to develop a piece of work, learn new techniques, solve creative problems, and so on. I love the close reading part of mentoring, of working with the creative text, and thinking about how the author can make it the best it can be. I enjoy the listening, watching out for what the writer is needing—often the writer doesn't know it themselves. It's very rewarding seeing a writer become more skilful, seeing their work simply get "better".

I can get very fond of a particular manuscript too, and really want it finished and published and out in the world! It's fun to be excited about another writer's work and to share that excitement with the

author in a practical way.

What's the hardest part about being a mentor?

I always remind myself that for the writer, sharing your work with another person, an expert so to speak, can be a terrifying experience. I remind myself how very, very important this experience is for that writer, and that it needs to be a positive one. I've also worked with writers who're coming-out in their writing about their sexuality, or past trauma, or in the case of an Indian writer, coming out as an atheist. Respecting the trust the person has placed in me isn't 'hard', but it's not something I take for granted.



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Does it help your own creative work?

I'm sure it does. Not in a specific way that I can point to and say, I wrote this because of my mentoring. But yes, my writing has been helped immeasurably by the many years of thinking and working with writing 'problems' as a mentor, reader, editor, teacher. I've been very lucky in my work. There's a creative symbiosis there for sure.

Why might it be important for aspiring authors to be mentored? What about published authors?

Well, there's quite a few reasons. Firstly, you can learn a great deal with a good mentor, about technique and craft, and ideally you take those new skills with you through to your other writing projects. Those delicious 'aha' learning moments. You're working on a specific piece of writing or series of works, but you're also learning as a writer in more general ways. A writing mentor will help identify problems in the work, or talk with you about issues you've raised and you can canvas ideas, solutions, basically a mentor is someone to have deep conversations about the work with.

I'm working with a published author currently, but she's working in a totally new genre. The difference for her is that when we're talking about the work, or we're going through my comments on the page, she understands the issues more quickly and is more confident in her rewriting and revisions.

Deadlines: a mentor will hold you to them. It's great to have a deadline that isn't one you just made up for yourself. It gets people going with their work. They write more often, they write more words, and revise more rigorously.

Once your work is at a potentially publishable stage, a mentor can help direct you to appropriate publishers, agents, journals, competitions and so on. Agents and publishers are expecting very finished work from new and established authors. The industry economic model has changed and there's not the money or time for a publisher's editor to work with a writer to rewrite the 'promising' text. That's why the mentoring sector

has grown so much in the past few years; writers need to present much more developed work than they did, say, twenty years ago.

Getting a mentor costs money, with no guarantee of being published or earning it back, which can be a block for some writers.

It's true, there are no guarantees of publication. I've worked with some incredible emerging writers and manuscripts, but they don't always get published. Conversely, most writers who're published have had other readers working with them on their manuscript, be they professional writer friends, or a writing group, their agent, a mentor, or series of mentors. If publication is your aim, working with a good mentor will improve your work and thus your chances of publication. You're also learning skills and techniques that go way beyond that particular manuscript. Mentoring can be an 'investment' in your future writing, as well as the manuscript you're working on right now.

How would you recommend someone goes about choosing a mentor?

That's a good question, because how can you be sure? It's important to choose wisely, and that goes both ways – most mentors will want to see an example of your work beforehand so they can judge if they're the right 'fit' for your work. I was recently offered a military/espionage history novel and said no, because I know nothing about military

Q&A WITH WRITING MENTOR DR JANE MESSER: CONTINUED

history and there's others that do.

Look at the mentor's testimonials, and how long they've been teaching and mentoring. Are they familiar with the genre that you're writing in? So, if they're focused on scripts, and you're a short story writer it's maybe not the best fit. Ideally, you can have a first conversation at no cost, as it's important to feel you will get on at a personal level. If you can, ask other writers who they've worked with, and why it was beneficial. And get into specifics of how the mentor worked: find out if the mentor reads the text in progress closely, or if they're more oriented to talking about writing process in general. What are your expectations?

If you're just starting out, a mentor isn't the right approach. You should start with just writing, doing some short courses, maybe a university programme, or have some substantial writing already accomplished.

What's the best way for someone to approach working with the mentor – how does a writer get what they need out of it?

What an excellent question. Sometimes, of course, you're not sure yourself what it is you exactly want. Giving the mentor information about your writing experience and background is important; any publications you've had, writing courses you've done, and so on. Explain what it is that you're working on now, and what you hope to achieve: for instance, maybe you want to finish the manuscript and learn new techniques. Alternatively, you might be wanting to start a new work, and you're not exactly sure of its form. Or you might struggle with a regular writing practice, in which case talk about that and devise a schedule together that helps with that. The important thing is to begin by saying what you believe you need and want, and be open to suggestion.

How can the mentor and mentee best work together so it's a positive experience for them both?

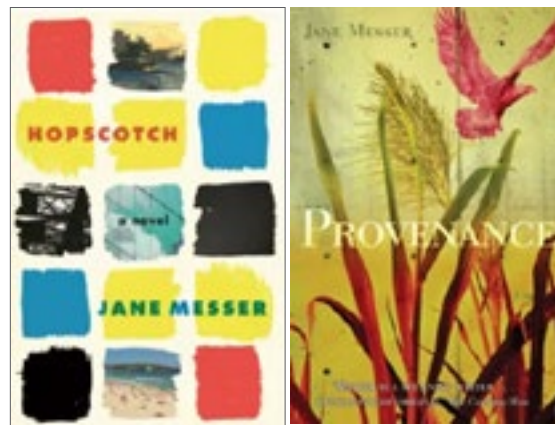
Good communication, naturally and mutual respect, it always works. Send well-proofed copy. Don't be afraid of your mentor, but don't pester with thrice-weekly emails. Ask questions, tell them what you want them to know, or ask for what you need. Your mentor will try to read your mind, but

it's not a foolproof method.

What advice do you have for aspiring authors?

Writing takes time, it is an art that can be practiced, and must be practised. It's also very time-consuming and there just isn't any way around that, so you need to find a way to enjoy yourself while working hard for many years. It takes time to develop your craft. While you're doing that read widely and attentively. Love sentences, understand how to use a comma, listen to your doubts, but also be bold. Finally, writing can be heart-wrenching and make you feel low, then high, then irritable, then elated. People don't talk about that roller-coaster much, though all these emotions are all 'normal'. Embrace them.

Thank you, Jane!



Dr Jane Messer has mentored many writers and student writers over the past thirty years in her work as a creative writing teacher, mentor and editor. She has published novels, anthologies of world literature and new Australian writing; written and produced two radio dramas; and published experimental and realist short stories. As well as being passionate about her own writing, Jane loves working with writers to help them hone their craft, explore new techniques, become confident about process, and to write the best possible work.

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