Background

This guidance complements RD 17.9 of the Research Degrees Regulations.

Creative writing research has been a growing strand within the wider research culture of the English Department since 2008.

The PhD focused on Creative Writing presents particular challenges and opportunities because its core requirement is the creation of a book-length work of literature written specifically for the degree and perfected to a publishable standard. In tandem, it requires an accompanying critical/reflective thesis which elucidates the researches and creative strategies involved in the making of the work.

The two parts of the thesis are not separately conceived and realised – they must cohere and illuminate each other. The essence of the Creative Writing PhD is research through creative practice. The final creative piece emerges from and embodies the research questions, decisions and discoveries made in the course of producing the work.

‘Research questions’ in relation to creative works are the underlying reference points, speculations and questions that writers have in mind when approaching new work. For example, when planning a historical fiction, a writer might be interested in the legitimacy of inventing or embellishing ‘facts’ about real people or about how research and imagination might fuse. Or a writer might want to portray the subjectivity of a marginalised individual, for example, a character with severe learning difficulties. Here, the research question might be about how to render or imaginatively inhabit an unarticulated consciousness. For a PhD application, such driving research questions must be made manifest at an early stage.

Requirements

The PhD focused on Creative Writing includes several kinds of research:

Acts of writing, in their stages of spontaneous drafting, considered revision and redrafting, are recognised in the PhD as a form of exploratory research that emerges from and refers to the creative process. PhD researchers keep notebooks and a record of source materials. They supply accompanying commentaries with drafts of creative work. After supervisions, they write an account of the discussion including insights, agreements, and plans for future work. Through this process they devise and analyse their own system of ‘poetics’, which forms the groundwork for the eventual critical/reflective thesis part of the PhD.

Research into craft and technique is performed through readings of comparable literature in the same genre or from studying the work of creative writers who have written about creative strategies from a practitioner’s point of view. Experimentation and adaptation of studied methods and evaluation of the effects are recognised as forms of research.

Most creative writing projects also require formal research to facilitate and authenticate acts of invention. Such research may involve field visits to explore locations; exploration of historical
All PhDs are required to ‘contribute to new knowledge’ and the creative work in particular must contain elements of originality and create new insights and understanding in order to fulfil this criterion. 'Originality' in this context does not simply mean 'of the writer’s own making': the literary text must be a significant contribution to the art of fiction/life writing/poetry/scriptwriting for the degree to be awarded. The writing of the literary text is a project which demands the full exercise of the technical skills of the craft and a critical awareness of both the tradition and the current issues, practices and debates within the selected genre and form.

Project proposals should be for a novel or collection of stories or poetry or for a book-length piece of life writing (biography, autobiography or memoir) or for dramatic script- or screen-writing as the core of the research. The critical/reflective thesis may be an essay contextualising the work with others in its genre or in relation to critical theory. It may be more of a personal exploration of the processes involved in its creation.

The PhD usually takes the form of the creation of a book-length work of 80,000 words in the student’s chosen literary form and a critical/reflective thesis of 20,000 words. 20,000 words is the required minimum for the critical/reflective thesis but it may, in certain cases, go up to 50,000 words. Variations on the 80/20 division may be negotiated but are more suitable for writers of poetry, scripts, or shorter fiction such as a novella or story collection. Because the creative element has to be a fully realised work of literature, novelists need to adhere to the basic 80/20 split. In fact, some novels may be permitted to exceed 80,000 words if the word limit would result in an aesthetically impaired work with obvious structural or plot gaps. Such cases have to be negotiated and approved.

Eligibility

Applicants for the PhD focused on Creative Writing should have a strong academic and creative record, usually with an MA in the subject and some relevant publications. They should be highly experienced writers of proven talent. This degree does not teach the basics of how to write a novel, for example. It is more of a place to test and enlarge existing capacities. It is suitable for writers who are prepared to have their ideas and pre-conceptions challenged and to move beyond their comfort zones. It requires stamina and commitment to work on a project for several years. It should only be considered by writers who are deeply interested in the critical/reflective aspect of the PhD as well as the creative work.

Submission

Students may submit their own creative work forms together with the thesis, if those creative work forms are essential to the thesis, as a point of origin or reference, or as a substantial part of the intellectual enquiry. The creative work must be clearly presented in relation to the argument of the written thesis and the creative work should be set in its relevant theoretical, historical, and critical or design context. The final submission must be accompanied by some permanent record of the creative work, which where practicable is bound within the thesis.

Combined word lengths must be appropriate to the subject area covered and must not (including footnotes) exceed 140,000 words for a creative writing Doctor of Philosophy.