

Honing the craft of words

ESTABLISHED in 1997 by poets Brendan Kennelly and Gerald Dawe, Trinity College's M.Phil in Creative Writing was the first degree of its kind to be offered by an Irish university.

The one-year, full-time programme, based in the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing, is designed to facilitate "practising, or prospective, authors who wish to develop their writing within the framework of a university course and in the context of an Irish literary milieu".

The question is often asked, can creative writing be taught? Is it possible to cultivate the crucial instinct that distinguishes a really good writ-

Trinity College's
M.Phil in Creative
Writing aims to help
writers sharpen their
skills, says
Sorcha Coleman

er from his merely proficient counterparts? "You can't teach ability," says Dawe, who remains director of the programme. "What you can do is shape it, strengthen it and encourage it. We concentrate on the individual. We try and draw out of that individual, in a group setting, the best that they can do at a particular time."

Two writer fellows, one Irish and one international, are appointed each year to assist faculty writers in this endeavour. Past fellows include John McGahern, Sebastian Barry and Anne Enright. Numerous visiting authors also contribute, offering criticism and guidance to students.

Students participate in seminars and workshops and attend some lectures, developing their own individual work all the while. It is an intensive year, with a large amount of directed reading. Dawe underlines the level of dedication required.

"One of the keynotes from our point of view is that the individual is very committed, very engaged in what they're doing. Students learn to analyse and shape their own writing and that of their peers in the workshop environment."

Under the moderating eye of an established writer, original compositions are submitted and discussed. Daunting as it may be, students seem to relish the opportunity to have their work aired and scrutinised. "The workshops are invaluable. It's an environment of trust,"



**Gerald Dawe:
Students must
be committed.**

says Eleanor Hooker, poet and 2010 graduate. "People are very honest, they'll say 'this is of no relevance, you have to edit it.' You have to be prepared to listen — if something has no place in the work, be ruthless and cut it out."

A defining element of the Trinity M.Phil is the interplay of disciplines. "Writers are accepted onto the course for the quality of what they have done, irrespective of its genre," says Dawe. "They're bringing to the table different kinds of priorities, expectations and insights, which makes it all the more enriching."

The emphasis is on the practical task of writing rather than literary analysis and criticism. "Often I'll use an illustration from a piece of work where it's appropriate to something that we're discussing, or I'll refer somebody to a piece of work which I think is relevant," says Dawe. "We don't actually sit down and parse a poem, we don't unpick literature. We live inside the writing and pop up out of it, instead of looking down on it."

The course also covers the professional techniques of book editing and publishing. With such focus on the business end of the process, is there a risk that graduates will produce works geared for commercial appeal, perhaps at the expense of experimentation? "That's always a danger," says Dawe. "We all like being published. But there's a long, arduous way to get to that stage, and that's what we're involved in."

Competition for places is fierce, with only 14 writers accepted each year. Selection is based on a portfolio of recent creative work. While candidates must hold a university degree or equivalent qualification, this need not be in a literary field. "We have people of all ages, all cultural backgrounds, from all over the world," says Dawe. "What they all have in common is they're very passionately committed to writing."

Information on Trinity College's M.Phil in Creative Writing can be found at www.tcd.ie/OWC/courses/creative/