

# CHAPTER 1

## Let's Begin the Journey

### Warming-up activities

#### *Birthday Circle*

Let's all get into a circle according to our birthdays, and starting from the earliest birthday in January, everyone shares your birthday and your name with the whole group. Each person is a unique birthday star!

Then, we will get into groups of four seasons according to our birthdays: Spring (March, April and May), Summer (June, July and August), Fall (September, October and November) and Winter (December, January and February). You will share a two-minute story with your seasonal group members, which can be a story that happened on your birthday, or how you got your Chinese name or English name, or anything interesting about your birthday or your name.

At last, we will get back into our big circle and tell a story as a group, either in English or Chinese, whichever language you are comfortable with. The first January birthday star will begin with the first sentence, and each star will contribute one sentence to the story, and the last December birthday star will finish the story. Have fun!

#### *Study Guide*

My story

What is creative writing?

Please write a letter

## My story

Dear friend, we are about to begin a journey together.

Like two people who just meet on the train, we are complete strangers to each other, but we sit face to face, and we smile to each other. That's a good sign. So we start to talk very naturally, and gradually, we are amazed by each other's life stories.

Hours pass by and we are still talking, feeling that we have become best friends. But then we have to say good-bye, sadly. We may write to each other, and we may never see each other again, but our talk on the train will never be forgotten. In fact as years go by, that will become even more sweet and precious to us.

Studying creative writing is like meeting such a great friend on the train. And I had a most amazing journey with my American writing teacher Mrs. Lander when I was a junior English major at Qingdao University. From September 1991 to July 1992, it was Mrs. Lander's love and encouragement that guided me to discover the voice of my heart through writing in English. Mrs. Lander was a playwright herself. She introduced me to the monologue *My Last Duchess* by Robert Browning, the short story *Chrysanthemum* by John Steinbeck and the book *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. I was encouraged to "brainstorm" and I learned to be "specific". I learned both words from Mrs. Lander and I practiced them seriously.

Then one day, a long-buried memory came to me. I remembered I was that six-year-old little girl who walked for miles on her own just to see a movie in another village. I wrote about that painful and joyful story in English and was invited to read it in class. Mrs. Lander and my classmates applauded for me. I was so happy. And I was awed by this self-discovery that I was born to be brave and persistent.

Mrs. Lander and I said good-bye to each other in July 1993 when I graduated from the university. She returned to the United States. We wrote to each other, but then in 1995, the sad thing happened—she had cancer. I was heart-broken and tried my best to help, but gradually, we lost touch.

In the spring of 1998, I dreamed of a mighty hand reaching down toward me and

lifting me up all the way to the top of a mountain. I was inspired. Then, in 1999, I finally went to the United States to pursue my creative writing dream, but Mrs. Lander was no longer there—she passed away in January 1997. Not until after I arrived in the States did I learn about her death. I cried. I mourned. And I learned to accept. I had the privilege to study creative writing at both the University of Arizona and the University of Southern California and met many famous writers and writing teachers, but Mrs. Lander remained the most special one in my heart.

In 2006, I chose to return to China to start the first official creative writing class for junior English majors at Renmin University of China. When I saw my students, I felt as if I saw myself years ago. That young college student was trying desperately to seek the truth of her heart and luckily, she met her kind and loving creative writing teacher.

In 2011, my play *The Mighty Hand* was performed at Rulun Hall on the campus of Renmin University. I was also the director and leading actor. The play was based on my true story, and it all began with Mrs. Lander. At the end of our performance, when we sang *You Raise Me Up* together with audience, I was in tears—Mrs. Lander, how happy you would be if you could see this play!

## What is creative writing?

Now I feel as if I saw you, my dear friend. Maybe you are young. You are the hope and pride of your family. You have a tender and sensitive heart, and you also have your worries and confusion. Maybe you are not young any more in the world's eyes, but you have a youthful heart and have always been seeking the truth of your life. Age does not matter; all that matters is your heart. I hope I can be of some help to you on your journey, as we learn to write from our hearts.

So, what is creative writing? By the way, the stress is on “creative”, not on “writing”. Read it right now and feel the creative spirit. Read it aloud three times. Creative writing. Creative writing. Creative writing. Feel it? Now, we are ready to go.

Find some A4 size lined paper and a pen. Let us try a free writing beginning with two words “Love is...”, and we will continue to write whatever our hearts desire. We will write freely for five minutes.

Please don't worry about your grammar and spelling. Please don't stop and think. Please don't go back, cross out or change. Just write freely, and as fast as you can. Time yourself. When time is up, stop immediately.

Now, read it silently to yourself. Honestly, how do you feel about it? Yes, it is messy (creative writing usually starts out as “messy”), and there may be a number of grammar and spelling mistakes, but—are you also moved by yourself? Do you feel that you have heard your own voice in English, maybe for the first time in your life? Treasure it. Keep it. At this stage, you don't have to share it with anyone. It's your precious baby.

If your five-minute free writing does not come out smoothly, please don't worry. Be patient with yourself. Be kind to yourself. It will come to you. In the next chapter, we will talk more about free writing. I have full confidence that you will become an expert in the near future.

I'd like to share with you the five-minute free writing I did beginning with “Love is...”, together with a dozen graduate students at Nanjing Normal University, in September 2005, when I was invited to give a lecture there.

Love is a game. Love is a beautiful game. People enjoy playing it all the time. Why am I here? Because I try to be a teacher? Because I want to see whether it is possible/feasible to return to China to teach. It's a dream. It's something so unrealistic. And yet, I always want to try something very impossible. To embrace the impossible. To challenge myself with the impossible task is my favorite game.

And why love? If it had not been for the sake of love, I wouldn't have the

guts to come back. I am willing to take this risk. It's easy to go to America, because everyone went there, but a lot more difficult to come back because that was not popular at all. Yeah, some people started to return to China. They said "more opportunities for development", maybe for making more money. Well, I could have been prejudiced.

As for me, I come back because of love, the love that my teacher gave me, and the love I finally realize after this long...

Do you hear my voice? I was trying my best to find a way to return to China to teach creative writing at that time, and I was not sure what would happen. It was something I felt very strongly about at that time. As I read this free writing years later, I was still moved by it, and I was truly glad that I took the risk coming back to China. Love never fails.

Usually in free writing, my handwriting is not that easy to recognize, and I use a lot of space. That is cool, as long as I can figure it out myself.

If we want to use free writing in a formal writing piece, usually some revision is necessary. For example, in this free writing, maybe I should not say "Love is a game", because "game" is too light-hearted and even frivolous, while I was so serious about my choice. And also, "something very impossible" sounds awkward; I will probably change "very" to "extremely". But those mistakes are not that difficult to fix. At this stage, we just write freely. We will talk about revision later.

So, what is creative writing? What did you get from doing the free writing exercise? What is different from your other writing classes?

To me, creative writing is first of all, writing from my heart without fears, and just let the strong message come out. Free writing is a great exercise in creative writing class. The first rule we need to learn is "no rule", just write, but we have to make sure we are writing, not thinking too much or worrying, and we have to write reasonably fast. This

is exactly the opposite of the traditional writing class which usually gives us many rules to follow and as a result, we write slowly, calculating the words to meet the requirement, and we rarely experience the freedom and joy of writing.

In the United States, creative writing has been established as an academic discipline in higher education to encourage the creativity of college students and nurture young writers. Usually, four genres are taught: fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama (including play and screenplay), and students study one genre in one class. Guided by the teacher who is usually a practicing writer, students write and read each other's writing and help each other to revise—this is called a workshop. The class is small, ranging from ten to fifteen students, and the students work closely with the teacher and among themselves.

In China, we are just getting started. In the Fall semester of 2006, Renmin University of China offered the first creative writing class to junior English majors. I had the honor to be the teacher and wrote together with my students. Most of the stories that you will read in this book were written during that semester. And it is my students who inspired me and encouraged me to write this book, to share our stories with you.

In this book, you will learn to write creative nonfiction which means that you will be telling the stories that only you can tell—Shakespeare cannot take your place; he is dead and you are alive and you are living a unique life different from all the past western writers, different from Lin Yutang and Hushi—all of them were great, but none of them could diminish your importance as a creative nonfiction writer. You are a promising writer living in China today and the stories in your life are unique. English is a foreign language to you, but the language of truth is universal. When you write nonfiction, you don't have to make up anything; all you need is a heart that is willing to tell the truth.

## **Please write a letter**

Now, I'd like to share with you two letters my students wrote to me in September 2006. The first one was written by Alexis.

Dear Linda,

I don't know if you believe the antiquated rite "zhua-zhou" or not (a little child is made to choose one thing from many which symbolize different careers). I've taken one when I was still too young to remember any detail about it. All I know is that my parents who had witnessed the whole process seemed quite satisfied about the result. "You will be a writer," they kept telling me this for quite a long time, "because you grasped a pen with no hesitation."

I'm no type of the persons who consider those rites as predicable. Sometimes I'll even explain jokingly that I was just too small then and so were my little cherubic hands. How can such small ones catch the big things like, if there was one, an abacus?

Despite of the unconcern of the rites like that, being a writer somehow rooted in my heart. As I grew up, however, this seed shriveled instead of booming into a sapling. I've been told to abide by a set of rules to frame my works. If the entire purpose of writing were to cater to the standards of a perfect exam-oriented composition, I dare say I've achieved that. When the teachers wrote commentaries like "true feelings" on my paper, I would care not a bit of that because it was actually not my feelings but adroitness of techniques had brought me there. And I just don't believe the teachers who had given such comment really meant that; he or she just used it as a criterion to grade us while cared nothing about the credibility of the feelings. This can never be named "writing" because it's more of a trade. And students like I, who never stuttered to write an 800-word composition full of tears and conflicts with relaxed manners of assurance to get a high grade in the exams, are, to some extent, liars.

People say writing compositions for exams are just like "dancing with shackles", and they think as long as we depart the middle school, leaving the exam-oriented life of writing behind us, we can write whatever we want.

But things don't go that way. Even the shackles being smashed, we, the ex-jailbirds are not free yet. Long period of overcaution has stiffened our wings, asphyxiated our breath of imagination and most importantly, the desire to fly.

Frankly speaking, I'm now in the bog of the impulse of writing; I really don't know why I should write and I'm expecting this creative writing class to be a turning point. For me, it's not that important to learn bravura techniques to make essays flowery but more important to find my initial inspiration for writing. I don't want the seed of dream to rot in the soil, without a chance of sprouting.

That's what I feel about writing and what I'm expecting. It's not at all important to be a writer; I just think people who have no passion for writing will also gradually lose the passion for life. When I hold my pen here, I'm not in want of fame or income; I want to write something to remember with simple and pure pleasure.

By the way, never feel unhappy about the combination of Hangzhou and Xiaoshan. To tell you the truth, I'm one of those who think Hangzhou dialect is not at all sweet-sounding but tough enough to frighten any hoodlums away because it makes the speakers sound rude and hard. But a dialect is just a dialect; it can never be a criterion to judge a city and its people. I love my hometown and you love yours; but, hey, it's OUR common hometown now.

Best wishes!

Yours,  
Alexis

A letter is a most precious gift to me. When I read Alexis' letter again years later, I felt we were even closer. Yes, I was only too familiar with "zhua-zhou". I had a picture taken when I was one year old, and I was—yes, holding a pen. My chubby face was quite serious then. Were we born to be writers? That question is to be answered by God only.