Deakin University

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Reading, writing, crafting: Innovations in first year tertiary writing pedagogy

Abstract:

This paper outlines the thinking informing, and strategies contributing to, curriculum revision in first-year creative writing at Deakin University in 2012 – delivered in that year and currently running in 2013. The process aimed to produce two consecutive offerings, with distinct but strategically scaffolded preoccupations. This paper deals with the first of these. The design process for this offering, named 'Writing Craft', involved addressing two central concerns: (a) the decision to untether the *initial* encounter with tertiary creative writing pedagogy from a preoccupation with 'genres' or the 'forms' of creative writing (such as prose fiction, creative nonfiction, script, poetry, and so on) and instead to reorient efforts towards establishing an engagement with craft *per se*; (b) to address a narrowness in the range of texts to which students had been exposed prior to commencing study – in other words, to emphasise the practice of reading widely to facilitate the practice of writing. The curriculum design also involved reimagining assessment, noting the 'messages about making' sent to students via the framing of tasks and rubrics. Aiming instead to deemphasise the role of inspiration and 'work arriving fully formed', it sought to offer assessment that provided clear – and bounded – prompts for incidents of making and the practice of craft, as well as to provoke conversation with a broad range of texts as a way of courting intertextual inspiration and aesthetic formation.

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Introduction

The nurturing, disciplining and benign-neglecting of creative practitioners are arguably art forms in themselves. Pedagogical approaches to creative writing know themselves to be risky and, at times, gauchely approximate, and as Donnelly has noted, can be marked by a 'reflective cycling' (2013: 3), as thinking in the discipline evolves as well as repeats. Aware of this, the authors and their colleague, Dr Patrick West, embarked on a process of course renewal at Deakin University for the first year offerings in Professional & Creative Writing. These units would be available to students commencing both the tagged degree and to those taking units via the Bachelor of Arts from the start of 2012. Due to the importance of the first year units as an entrée into the discipline at tertiary level, the first and second trimester offerings were targeted for renovation in tandem, although only the first of these – 'Writing Craft' – can be discussed in this paper.

We will share here the thinking informing the revisions and their perceived impacts at this early stage in their implementation. The two-limbed intent can be summarised as follows:

> (a) to unhook the initial encounter with creative writing from a preoccupation with 'genres' or the 'forms' of creative writing (such as prose fiction, creative nonfiction, script, poetry, and so on) which had dominated the previous curriculum design and to reorient efforts towards establishing an engagement with technical craft *per se*;

> (b) to expose students to a broad range of texts, as examples of what 'creative writing' might look like – in other words, to emphasise the practice of wide reading to facilitate writing, and to emphasise reading itself as a creative and performative practice.

In what follows here, we will address these two pedagogical manoeuvres, and go on to link these to assessment strategies that were put in place in order to reinforce our teaching aims. These manoeuvres have been considered in light of studies by Nigel McLoughlin and Patrick Bizarro (2013), Dianne Donnelly (2013), Indigo Perry (2013), Tim Jarvis (2011), Philip Edmonds (2007), Kim Wilkins (2005), Donne Lee Brien and Philip Neilsen (2001) on the practice of reading fiction in creative writing workshops and the mechanism of genre.

Entry-Level Writing Pedagogy

The previous formation of first-year students is often opaque to university teachers and not homogenous. Coming as they do from secondary learning environments, the workforce, periods of unpaid family work or other places, the mix in the cohort is one of liter*acies* rather than any shared, standardised liter*acy*. Students are also likely to have various degrees of what can be called traditional 'literacy' as well as what Healey calls 'creative literacy' (2013: 61ff). At Deakin University, there is a greater trend towards large numbers of students being 'first in family' to attend university. There is also a large cohort of students from low SES backgrounds, especially at the Waurn Ponds campus in Geelong.

Since students are potentially entering into a new phase of their lives with arguably some aspirations as 'creative people', which sit alongside practical concerns relating to their place in a future field or workforce, the aims of the initial encounter with creative writing at university might nurse the ambitious wish to foster both perceptual and textual sensibilities (as fraught as this term clearly is), as well as skill acquisition to build confidence. One would seek at once to equip students at Level One with an introductory gamut of technical skills pertaining to their craft and its shifting boundaries (or at least a flagging of their nature and scope) – the beginnings of a toolkit for them as potential practitioners with words; while, at the same time, to apply all the knowledge, sensitivity and understanding of artistic process and its nurturing in order to offer an experience that, at the very least, *holds open* their curiosity and motivation to keep writing. In other words, we took the attitude that we could support students' burgeoning ability to write ably and professionally, all the while performing a commitment to creative practice and experimentation that could be curious, risk-taking, robust and not pushing towards too-hasty realisation.

If writing is both a broad vocation with a foundational (but not finite) set of crucial tools and also involves a sensibility pertaining to literary histor*ies* (popular, experimental, non-English, canonical, and so on) – and in this historical moment operates in hybrid ways across various forms of media (see Donnelly 2013: 8-9) – then an entry-point offering to this formation could seek to address adequately, and even thoroughly, these multiple aspects.

Craft before 'Genre'

The prior offering in this instance had been one that had involved an introduction to writing forms, sometimes called 'genres' or 'modes' of written production. This, at first glance, wouldn't seem to be a bad thing although as Wilkins (2005) points out, '"Genre' is almost a dirty word among creative writers. It seems to imply something derivative rather than original, commercial rather than artistic, prescriptive rather than innovative' (n.p.). Many courses begin by showing the students different sorts of texts, by breaking those texts up into modules, and then allowing the encounter of the student with the exemplary (innovative or crisp or elegant) work to happen via the lens of that genre or mode. For example, one can show the student a Chekhov play and a blockbuster screenplay in a module called 'Script'. One can introduce the idea of creative nonfiction using a recent personal essay and a saucy excerpt from a memoir. And so on, and so on. There is nothing particularly flawed in this approach, indeed, Katharine Haake (2013) is quick to defend genre by arguing for its 'transgressible nature; stable enough to hold together as its function and fluid enough to allow for its transformation.' (p. 182) But in our case, we wondered whether a certain message were being communicated to the cohort that was, not necessarily worrying, but perhaps adding burdens of decision and encouraging a narrowing of focus that was premature. As Marcelle Freiman argues, 'Writing "with" the genre encourages social conformity, while writing "against" genres, challenges its ideological assumptions. The creative "playing with genres" generates social critique at the level of textual production.' (2001: 1)

Our logic was that, for most of the students we had encountered, they barely had a grasp of the basic mechanics of their future craft, let alone any sense of the genre to which the latter might contribute, and whose discipline might finally shape and refine their practice or, for example, where relevant inform their strategies in relation to publishing. Instead, we decided that the entry-level offering would commit to almost no mention or emphasis on genre or writing mode. The terms nonfiction, prose fiction, script, screenplay, poetry and so on would neither be a highlighted part of the pedagogical vocabulary, nor inform the implicit structuring of the offering. Of course, *genre would operate*. However, by avoiding its explicit mention, we hoped, a space might be left for other initial preoccupations, which could at a later moment be supplemented by genre's at once limiting and productive vocabularies.

The examples of creative work that were set as readings (see below) mostly aligned with one of the traditional writing modes. What we wanted students to see, to track, to identify about those examples, however, was not their genre category. Rather we wanted to encourage a fluency with texts and the ability to notice the operation of, and potentially to experiment with, the basic elements of writing craft at play in those excerpts. Indigo Perry articulates that courses:

> should focus on creative writing without slicing it up into genre and form…Why not teach creative writing courses that wholeheartedly encompass the freedom of questioning boundaries…. If it looks like poetry mixed with memoir with a bit of street art thrown in, well and good. If it's a film script that is designed to be cast – as-is, in the form of script rather than film – onto a wall in a gallery, then so be it. (2013: 155)

We identified ten aspects of *basic* writing craft that we deemed relevant regardless of writing mode. We knew that these aspects were a mere springboard, since the discipline of the genres would require students to acquire far more numerous and broader skills and critical/analytical abilities. However, we saw that these most basic elements were not established for our students, and that there was scant opportunity after first year to concentrate on them adequately and exclusively – as things in themselves, as terms the student could master.

Writing, as discipline, can also be plagued by its misleading similarity to a pedestrian skill: being able to write (i.e. be literate) and being able to *write* (as vocation/chosen artform). This, we'd perceived, can mean that writing students undervalue what they know or the skills they might acquire, and lead to a distinct disinterest on the part of less experienced writers in the very matter of their trade. One comparison that invites itself is between writing students and, say, photography or painting students. The latter, from anecdotal experience, often seem to be quite obsessed with the *stuff* of painting and photography: medium, canvas, lenses, flashes, computer software for manipulating images, brushes, and so on. This is a deep engagement with the 'stuff' of one's compulsion or practice. What the current authors and their colleague had observed, to varying degrees, with writing students was that they often didn't seem to notice that there was a tool-box for writing at all, one which was arguably just as riveting and specialised. Questions then arose: how to present – say – *verbs* as being just as obsession-worthy and 'material' to writing as, for example, delicate piles of

vibrant pigment in an art shop, or a well-crafted palette knife to an apprentice in the visual arts?[1]

So what, then, might be some basic concepts or so-called *ur*-tools of a writer's craft, acknowledging that craft cannot *ontologically* be separated from genre (or the mechanisms of its structural difference)? (see in general Derrida 1980 and Frow 2006)

Working within the time constraints of a trimester system, we settled on ten themes, plus an introductory week. We decided to use the spectrum of interrogative terms, such as 'how', 'when', 'who', and so on, to flag the inquisitive nature of our practice in this moment of their learning, and to give them simple ways to pose the kinds of questions a writer might ask before embarking on any writing practice. The schedule reads like this:

>   Week 1 – **How?** Beginning to Write
>
>   Week 2 – **How?** Research: Observation and Accuracy
>
>   Week 3 – **How?** Memory and Incident
>
>   Week 4 – **When?** Structure: Sentence, paragraph, story
>
>   Week 5 – **When?** Tense
>
>   Week 6 – **When?** Pace
>
>   Week 7 – **Who?** Audience and Voice
>
>   Week 8 – **Who?** Point of View and Focalisation
>
>   Week 9 – **Who?** Character and Dialogue
>
>   Week 10 – **Where?** Place and Setting
>
>   Week 11 – **Why?** Choosing to Write

Of course, there could be other themes, endless themes. However, for the purposes of an entry point offering, this has gone a long way towards equipping the cohort with a shared vocabulary. The lectures for the offering are delivered each year afresh and so the content can be changed, modified etc. but ultimately a certain gamut of concepts and skills is – at the very least – indicated. Given students' access to online public materials, in some ways, we hoped to point them in the direction of content, rather than see ourselves as the sole source of it. Students' problem is that they don't know what matters. While the internet is democratising, it doesn't discriminate between voices. In this way, voices can become cacophonous as they compete with one another or, reduced to white noise (see Jacoby 2009: 42).

What's more, one of the difficulties in the creative writing workshop can be that, although students are encouraged to participate in the reading and critiquing of others' work, quite often they have no technical scaffolding upon which to hang their various responses. These, in turn – as we all know – can sprawl between the empty poles of 'like' and 'dislike' or more often 'don't know'. Paul Kane, a poetry lecturer at Vassar College articulates this in his decision only to teach using workshops at senior level.

> At the introductory level, which is in the second year, I sometimes teach a course in the writing of poetry. However, I don't do it as a workshop. I give them exercises

> and though they are meant to be producing original writing, we don't discuss it in class. We discuss instead the craft of poetry and we look at the nitty gritty elements, the nuts and bolts. I do meet with them individually and give them feedback since, really, they don't know enough in an introductory course to truly help one another. In the senior writing seminar, I do teach using workshops because, at that point, they have the training to comment helpfully on one another's work. (Atherton 2013: 54)

If, despite Kane's convincing cautions, we persist with entry-level workshopping, then it must serve, among other things, as a place where the tutor or lecturer *performs* the voice and stance of constructive critique, the pondering of, and also the delaying of categorising, a fresh piece of writing. If the terms of that performance, however, are not clarified, then they can just operate as jargon in the mouth of authority, instead of solid, *material* framings of what might be happening on the page.

This offering, therefore, by de-emphasising mode and genre, attempts to reorient students' curiosities regarding the technical aspects of writing craft. Steve Healey endorses this by suggesting that students aren't 'particularly attached to traditional literary genres, but seek access to a more general creative literacy' (2013: 2).

An anecdotal example of this was that, when asked at the end of the semester 'what did you get better at over the last 11 weeks?', the spontaneous responses were telling. In a workshop tutorial where students at first had not had a confident grasp of technical terms, the following kinds of answers emerged (paraphrased): *I am realising the usefulness of voice for making my pieces more compelling*; *I have realised how I can change the direction of a piece of work by shifting the focalisation elsewhere*; *I have come to see that a different decision around verb tense for a piece of work will shift the atmosphere of the writing a lot*, and so on.

By teaching a 'diversity of craft elements and strategies writers can use across all genres' (Vanderslice, in Donnelly 2013: 2), students can, subsequently, embark on an exploration of the genres or modes, but without the belief that this is the first question they should ask themselves as writers. Rather than saying, 'I am a fiction writer', the student might come to view themselves as an artisan of words, who is capable of being flexible in terms of what form their work ultimately takes. Just as in certain enclaves of multi-media arts, the chronology of the query can be firstly 'what is the problem here' and *then* secondly a decision around which genre/form might serve as the best medium via which to think this question through deftly, imaginatively and rigorously. This is a reversal of beginning by default *within* one's craft and seeking a solution on its terms. One suspects that in practice, both 'orders' operate, but this artificial separation can assist with articulation of strategy or description of process *post factum*.

Naturally, this capacity to choose which genre, and to experience the way that writing is a kind of thinking, requires also a broad exposure to forms, informed by curiosity and over a long period of time. It is to this second emphasis of the curriculum planning that we now turn.

Writing through Reading

Students can embark on tertiary creative writing study invested in 'flashes of inspiration' as the guiding principle in their creative process (Dawson 2005: 88). For this reason, they can leave writing tasks until the last minute and become stressed when the writing task hasn't 'appeared' to them, either as a Kubla Khanian 'vision in a dream', or all at once in a Kerouacian rush. In this way, they aren't *looking* for inspiration; they are just waiting for it to appear, fully formed on their computer. When this doesn't happen, they can experience the anxiety of the blank screen (or the Word document). Serge Tisseron argues, 'the anxiety of the blank page may just be the anxiety that there is no thread to pull or follow, the apprehension of being left behind, with no link to anyone or without even the first half of the thread.' (1994: 29) Students who struggle to find inspiration can be looking within themselves, rather than without, to find their creative stimuli (Clark 1997: 1). This can lead to a quietly building sense of – what we might call – experiential inadequacy. They fret that they haven't lived enough, loved enough, seen enough, travelled enough. And while such experiences might contribute to a writer's palette, writers work, and have always worked, in different ways, from within different circumstances. Thus intertextual provocation is a valid (and often more affordable!) source of content.

Likewise, students can approach their creativity insularly rather than as something communal or collaborative – springing from participating in conversations and communities (of all kinds) rather than only from isolated bouts of 'creative' musing. This is most obvious when asking students in writing workshops what or who inspires them. Responses can be demoralising or unexpectedly wonderful. Students cite sources from music to visual art and even Bronyism [2], which started provocative discussions in the workshop. However, there are also frequent versions of: *I inspire myself.* Either this could suggest a narrowness of exposure or a lack of words for what they do access, or it could point to their reluctance to view the writing workshop as a conversation between writers. In this way, in devising a new offering for first year creative writing students, we were intent on inviting the students into a different thinking space.

Similarly, debunking the image of the Romantic writer as a receptacle for unconscious bursts of inspiration allows the students to embrace the act of writing as a process of honing craft. As Martha C. Pennington states, 'Creativity unmoored and ungrounded makes no sense: it is meaningless and hence indistinguishable from chaos and insanity, from nonsense and nothingness…' (2012: 151). When students have scarce external inspiration and little artisanal craft to draw on, they may find themselves producing superficial or derivative work that lacks structure and actuality. Teaching students that the foundation of all good writing is striking a balance between inspiration and craft provides them with a good infrastructure for approaching publication. While it is not the creative writing teacher's intention to crush their students' vision of their own creative space, it is important to foster an environment of concerted work coupled with creative insight. Pennington acknowledges that, 'Experienced writers tend to their psyches, but they also practice their craft.' (2012: 151) This way, the students can be offered an abundance of sources on which to model their writers' craft and their creative space can be filled with stimulating texts for them to riff off, subvert, emulate or ignore.

In developing a first year writing offering it was our intention to emphasise the practice of reading to facilitate writing. Ironically, while students expect and anticipate a readership for their own writing, many of them acknowledge that they aren't inclined to read other writers' work. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles believes that this could be the fact that writing classes 'need to employ richer visions of texts' (1992: 344). For this reason, we decided to choose some provocative, experimental and unconventional excerpts for a book of readings, which the students would read each week alongside the lecture materials, and to inform the composition of assessment tasks. It was important to consider that some students were freshly out of high school and in many cases, exposed only to VCE set texts in the classroom. These texts are most often taught in 'English' and 'Literature', with an emphasis on the examination or assessment task. By handpicking excerpts for the students' book of readings we were able to enrich their writing environment by offering them thirty-one different fragments and ideas from a range of texts. This supports recent scholarship on choosing set texts for writing classes discussed by N. K. Hayles, who posits, 'My students won't read long books, so now I assign chapters and excerpts' (2010: n.p). Using excerpts can also have the effect of encouraging students to locate and read the full text from which the pieces of writing were excised. It also models a different reading attitude: that of the practitioner, who is not solely preoccupied with a narrative arc, but rather with close, technical reading. The latter can work very effectively with a focus on a small but pertinent section of a text.

Reading as 'craftspeople' can fuel the writing process. Teaching students to 'read before they write' and providing them with models of effective writing, prepares them for writing *after* the academy – since their trajectories as writers will not stop with the completion of their undergraduate studies. Reading texts of all kinds can be a provocation to writing, therefore students who don't read (or only read texts from one mode/lineage) run the risk of producing something derivative. For example, a student who decides to write a zombie story set in Regency England, but who has not encountered the very recent and popular text *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009). In this way, such students can tend to posit all their ideas as if they are wonderfully original (which they may, but they already exist and have been realised in the cultural space). Nessa O'Mahony is a good example as she has stated that, as a PhD student, she wrote her creative artefact without realising:

> that my writing and my concerns had a great deal in common with Elizabeth Barrett Browning… It had not occurred to me…that I might be following in the footsteps of generations of other women writers…Thus through my wider reading, I began to see how I could place my own work in a wider context. (2007: 46)

In creating a compilation of readings for first year Creative Writing students, we attempted to manoeuvre them into this 'wider context'— not an easy feat. In undertaking the task of selecting readings, we drew on our treasured and seemingly stylistically incongruous texts – specifically those which had inspired us and those which provided diverse reading experiences and disruption of student expectation. We chose texts that we saw 'offered practical strategies to enhance students' creative behaviour and increase their skill level and creative output' (Flaherty 2004: 20). The first excerpt for the module: 'HOW? Beginning to Write', was from Alan Warner's

The Sopranos. A provocative piece that is unlikely to be taught in secondary schools, and placed alongside a Mishima excerpt in the reader, it begins:

> No sweat, we'll never win; other choirs sing about Love, all our songs are about cattle or death! Fionnula (the Cooler) spoke that way, last words pitched a little bit lower with a sexyish sideways look at none of the others. The fifth-year choir all laughed (1999: 1)

The voice in this piece is instantly appealing and the use of adjectives is surprising: 'sexyish sideways'. As part of the first two chapters, Warner includes a table of 'Choir Order on Length-of-Legs'; a 'population' sign for the town: 'Population 6700 + ONE' and some jokes: 'Know what the Hoor's school motto is?....It's "Noses up…kickers DOWN!"' The students cannot identify this text as a traditional piece of fiction or prose, given its more experimental qualities. The focus, then, becomes not on the genre or style but on the writer's craft in creating something entertaining and subversive. This supports Pennington's view that 'Creative writers [should] stretch structure and language to maximize originality and to remake the genres in which they work, innovating in forms…' (2012: 151) This reading of *The Sopranos* is introduced as a way for writers to read – not as literary studies scholars – but as fellow (or apprentice) writers, depending on their experience. Set in a school, *The Sopranos* excerpt connects with many of the first year Creative Writing students' recent secondary school experiences but provides a new way of viewing and writing about it. Given that the subject matter is, at times, bold and the narrator wonderfully impertinent, the discussion of these texts is built into tutorials. This supports Flaherty's insistence on a 'tolerant environment with abundant resources [to] foster creativity.' (2004: 154) After reading this text, Deakin students began to incorporate pictures, graphics, diagrams and other visual material into their writing as well as coining their own unique adjectives to underscore their work's voice. They seemed less focused on genre-classifying their practice and more intent upon creating something compelling.

Pressures of publication, deadlines, word limits and so on, are mimicked pedagogically via the assessment process. It has been convincingly established that student learning is heavily influenced by the demands of assessment and students prioritise what they do based on their perception of how they will be assessed. The final section of this paper addresses the strategies employed in planning assessment for this offering.

Messages About Making

We sought to make transparent the content of each task, emphasising its obvious link to the course content up until that point. The first task – due early in the trimester – gives students the chance to practice one foundational skill: observation and accuracy in description. The task can baffle students, since it insists on abstaining from the motor of narrative, and for many the absence of that intention leaves them flailing. The task is introduced as a kind of 'still life' or sketching-practice-in-words (and the resonance with the visual arts is not accidental). With a restrained word length, students are left to respond as they wish, without explicit instruction about

mode/genre, or indeed any introduction to them. The outcome was reliably varied, with students, once reassured, employing elements of poetic form, prose layout, script conventions, including a melding of these forms in single works. Assessment feedback also did not focus on genre, but rather on the precision of language and observation demonstrated, avoidance of clichés, and ability to engage a reading audience.

Several weeks later, and once the 'How?' and 'When?' modules have been covered, students are then asked to complete the longer 'Memory as Seed' task, which instructs them to take up 'a remembered episode character or landscape and to use it as the basis as a piece of writing'. Note here again, that they must only produce 'a piece of writing' – genre is not specified, nor of relevance in the rubric. They are required to demonstrate development of the original memory. Thus is memory divested of its link to purely autobiographical modes, and comes to be part of a toolkit for the fashioning of artefacts, and it is the skill in fashioning not the glamour of the memory that is assessed. They must also show competency in the range of tangible writing craft skills that have been covered in lectures and workshops up until that point (assessments do not take anything for granted that has not been explicitly covered). For this task, those skills are: appropriate use of verb tenses, awareness of pace, structure of paragraph, sentence and the overall structure of the piece, and of course, an integration of the first assessed skill, namely clarity of observation and description.

The final assignment scaffolds the skills of the first two, coupling together the twin motors of setting and character – 'Place as Encounter'. Students are guided to approach setting as having a kind of agency in the causal consequences of their imagined world, and to read 'encounter' in the broadest sense: as collision, collusion, accident, meeting, or otherwise. For this task, all previous skills are transparently assessed, and their choice of mode is irrelevant to their mark. By the end of the trimester, a student may well have a sneaking sense of their preferred mode, but in the absence of over-emphasis on this, they can work unencumbered by such genre rules and considerations.

With a tiered set of tasks, we hoped to make clear to the learner that their craft has built over time, and that their arsenal of techniques is widening and can approach challenging creative problems with growing confidence. It is neither a message to the writer that they are a genius, nor that writing is a secret and exclusive club, with hidden codes. It is rather something to be honed and acquired through dedication, even if its practice might be graced with moments of magic.

Conclusion

Now in its second year of running, the offering will merit a review in a year or so, in order to evaluate the outcomes as the students move through the cohort and onto the other levels. We remain in close conversation with lecturers at second and third year in order to track the lacunae in the skill set or other areas where students need entry-level support. At this stage, we remain encouraged by the anecdotal feedback, and the actual demonstrated capacity seen in submissions and retention.

Endnotes

1. For art forms that involve tools that are seemingly rare and specialised, the craftsperson can invest and build their creative identity through the tangibility of these physical objects and tools. For the writer, who once had the fountain pen, the Remington No. 5 of Ginsberg, or the lined foolscap pad, today's ubiquitous use of laptops and tablet technology also means that marking out the space of writing practice from the humdrum of daily tasks is very difficult.

2. Bronyism – from the term 'brony': a name typically given to the male viewers/fans (whether they are straight, gay, bisexual, etc.) of the My Little Pony show or franchise. They typically do not give in to the hype that males aren't allowed to enjoy things that may be intended for females. (see http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Brony, retrieved 18 August, 2013)

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