Interview: Dr Luke Harley
The *Grammatica* Editorial Team



Dr Luke Harley is an English master, Assistant Headmaster (Senior Housemaster) and Old Sydneian. After studying English, philosophy and music composition at the University of Sydney, he worked for years as a music journalist in London, completed a doctorate on contemporary American poetry and spent time as a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. He returned to Grammar in 2011 and now teaches Form V and VI English, writes on literature and performs as a jazz trombonist with Dr V's Swing Thing. We were delighted to have the opportunity for a sit-down interview with him.

1. ***You have experienced Grammar as both a pupil and a teacher. What has stayed with you from your school years, and what convinced you to come back?***

   I arrived at College Street in 1992 after attending Mimosa Public School on Sydney's Northern Beaches – the same school attended by the astrophysicist Bryan Gaensler (OS '90), though I would not claim anything like his scientific talents! As a boy, I loved music, poetry and cricket, and I came to Grammar on a music scholarship. The School in the 1990s was not so different from the Grammar of today: intellectually ambitious, culturally rich, and full of exceptional teachers. There was a sense that scholarship mattered, and that the arts mattered. But I was restless to see the world, and when I left in 1997, I never imagined I would one day return as a master.

   In my early twenties, after completing a double degree at Sydney University, I embarked on a round-the-world trip that eventually brought me to London. Hopelessly naïve – at least in retrospect – I worked a series of odd jobs and lived in some of the city's less salubrious areas before landing a dream position as a music journalist and editor with Rhinegold Publishing, just near the British Museum.

   It was a fast-paced, often eye-opening world. I reviewed concerts at the Barbican, Wigmore Hall and South Bank, interviewed musicians and politicians, and acquired the editorial skills that later transformed my own prose style – the understanding that good writing, no matter the topic, should be concise,

elegantly structured and engaging. Journalism could be a hard-boiled environment, and I grew up quickly through those years. At the same time, I played trombone with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra, performing alongside some extraordinary young musicians at the start of their careers. Amy Winehouse, for example, passed through the ensemble around that period. Yet I found myself increasingly drawn towards academic life. I eventually made the difficult decision to leave the journalism world and undertake a PhD. Later, I spent an extended period in California at UC Berkeley and subsequently taught for a short while in the English Department at Sydney University. By then, however, I had begun to feel the pull of school teaching. It was less a career plan than a vocation, something that appealed to me at a deeper level. So when the then Headmaster, Dr John Vallance, heard that I was interested in teaching and an opportunity arose in 2011, I jumped at it.

Looking back, I think what drew me back was the same thing that had impressed me as a pupil: a culture that genuinely values learning, ideas and intellectual curiosity. It has been a privilege to experience Grammar from both sides of the desk and to contribute, in some small way, to a place that had such a profound influence on my own life.

2. ***You studied English and now teach it as a subject. In a world increasingly defined by efficient and easy access to knowledge, what value do you see in studying English and how do you think this will change?***

That's one of the key educational questions of our time. When AI can generate text, summarise information and even imitate aspects of human creativity, it's reasonable to ask whether studying English still matters. My view is that it matters more than ever!

There is a misconception that education is primarily about acquiring information. Information is abundant. The challenge is learning how to evaluate it, connect it, question it and use it wisely. As AI becomes more capable, our ability to interpret context, navigate ambiguity and exercise sound judgement becomes increasingly important. Literature and the humanities help develop precisely those capacities.

English also teaches intellectual flexibility. When pupils compare texts, synthesise ideas or wrestle with competing interpretations, they learn how to navigate complexity, uncertainty and disagreement. Those capacities extend far beyond the classroom.

Reading Jane Austen, Tolstoy, Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison reminds us that while technologies change, fundamental questions about identity, morality, love, loss, power and meaning endure.

To borrow Ophelia's phrasing in Hamlet, there is a profound difference between the "primrose path" and the "steep and thorny way". Genuine intellectual growth is rarely easy. It is through sustained labour, rigorous thinking and perseverance that we deepen our understanding of the world. The easy path may offer

comfort, but it seldom leads to discovery. In scholarship, as in life, I have always believed that the steep and thorny way is the one that leads most often to insight, wisdom and self-development.

3. ***Young people today have access to more books, information and entertainment than any previous generation, yet many educators worry that deep reading is in decline. What would you encourage pupils to read beyond the classroom, and how can they develop a lifelong love of reading?***

   I suppose it depends on your age. Broadly speaking, I think all reading is good reading! If you love fantasy, wonderful. Read fantasy. If you love biographies, read biographies. But keep stretching yourself and gradually tackle more challenging books.

   I've gone through phases of reading Australian novels, nineteenth-century realist fiction, modernism, Russian literature and French symbolism. More recently, some people might say I've become a specialist in contemporary American poetry. The point is that reading tastes evolve. In the classroom, we explore a wide range of texts, and I wouldn't want to prescribe a particular canon. There is simply too much worth reading. If you've developed the habits of close reading and careful analysis, you can apply them to almost any text.

   What concerns me today is that so much information is consumed in fragmented forms. We are surrounded by short videos, snippets of content and constant distractions. Books ask something different of us. They demand patience, concentration and immersion, qualities that are becoming increasingly rare and increasingly valuable.

   Ultimately, the goal is not simply to be well read, but to remain curious. A pupil who leaves school with an appetite for learning will continue growing long after examinations are over.

4. ***You are known around the school as both an English teacher and a musician. How has music shaped your life, and what do you listen to that might surprise your pupils?***

   I began writing music when I was young, and at the age of eight some of my compositions were selected for the Australian Bicentenary celebrations. My interest in composition deepened in Forms V and VI at Grammar and later led me to study at the University of Sydney with Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards, Anne Boyd and Matthew Hindson.

   At the same time, I played classical viola and trombone. During university, I was a violist with the SBS Youth Orchestra and toured extensively, performing in Spain, Italy, Russia, Finland, Japan, China and elsewhere. Jazz trombone has also been a lifelong passion. At Grammar, I was fortunate to study jazz with the late Vladimir Khusid, a legendary educator – highly proficient in what would nowadays be called character education – and one of my dearest friends. Alongside Vlad's generosity, warmth and infectious enthusiasm for music, what

attracted me to jazz was its unique combination of discipline and freedom. The finest jazz musicians possess extraordinary technical command, yet they must also improvise, take risks and create something new in the moment. That blend of rigour and playfulness has always fascinated me. Good writing is similar. It demands technique and structure, but also imagination and a willingness to venture into the unknown. In both jazz and writing, the fundamentals are important precisely because they create the conditions for creativity.

I've often thought of teaching in similar terms. A text provides the framework, much as a jazz standard provides the harmonic structure, but every lesson evolves differently depending on the ideas pupils bring into the room. No two classes are ever quite the same. At its best, a classroom discussion has something of the spontaneity, responsiveness and collaborative energy of a jazz performance.

As for what might surprise pupils, I'm eclectic in my tastes. Some are surprised when I mention artists such as Olivia Dean, RAYE, Clairo or Bruno Mars, but I've never been interested in dividing music into "high" and "low" culture. What matters to me is originality, craftsmanship and expressive power, whether that's found in Mahler, Wayne Shorter or contemporary popular music.

5. ***If you could have lived through any era in music history, which would you choose, and why?***

I think the current era is pretty exciting, actually! There's a tendency to romanticise the past, but we're living through a remarkable moment in musical history. Technology has made it easier than ever for artists to draw on different traditions, cultures and genres, and that creative cross-pollination is producing some fascinating work.

That said, if I could visit one period, it would probably be the emergence of bebop in the 1940s and the extraordinary flowering of jazz that followed. To hear Charlie Parker live in New York would have been remarkable. Parker transformed jazz, and I would also have loved to hear John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Eric Dolphy and Thelonious Monk at their peak.

6. ***Your doctorate explored the relationship between poetry and music. What first drew you to that topic, and what did you discover along the way?***

At the University of Sydney, I wrote my thesis on Amiri Baraka, a Civil Rights-era poet, jazz critic, political activist and cultural commentator. Through Baraka's work, I discovered Nathaniel Mackey's essay The Changing Same (1978), which explores the relationship between music and language. That question immediately captivated me. Poets strive to make language musical, while musicians often speak of finding a voice. Both are searching for rhythm, nuance and expression.

When it came time to pursue PhD research, I was surprised to find that almost nobody had written about Mackey, despite the originality of his work. Today he is

recognised as one of America's leading writers – he's won the National Book Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and so on – but at the time he was largely overlooked.

I had received the Arthur Macquarie Scholarship to study at Cambridge, but Mackey's work was scarcely known there. Instead, I wrote to Lyn Hejinian at UC Berkeley out of the blue, explaining that I wanted to work on Mackey. She replied: "I have an interest, if not reverence, for Mackey's work. Come if you can." That was all the encouragement I needed.

Berkeley was a life-changing experience. I lived at International House with 900 students from around the world and could see the Golden Gate Bridge from my room. I attended regular poetry readings and jazz concerts, spent long evenings discussing poetry, jazz, philosophy and politics with colleagues, worked with Lyn Hejinian, befriended Nathaniel Mackey, and even met Amiri Baraka when he visited campus.

What my research reinforced was that the boundaries between intellectual disciplines are more porous than we often imagine. Some of the most interesting art emerges where language begins to sound like music and music begins to speak like language.

7. ***You have lived and worked in Sydney, London and the San Francisco Bay Area. Which place has shaped you most, and where would you still like to explore?***

Sydney will always feel like home. It's an awesome city, and it's a privilege to teach the next generation of Sydneysiders.

At the same time, I loved living in the Bay Area. Berkeley was a thrilling place to be. I was surrounded by extraordinary writers, musicians and scholars, and there was a real sense that ideas mattered. London, meanwhile, was the city I explored most deeply. I spent countless weekends wandering its streets, learning about its history and culture.

As for places I'd still like to explore, China intrigues me enormously. I first travelled there in 1998, and it was a very different country then. It is home to one of the world's oldest and richest civilisations and is central to global affairs.

8. ***As both a teacher and an Old Sydneian, what's something you wish every pupil understood before leaving school?***

More than anything, I'd encourage pupils to enjoy their learning and not become too fixated on marks. Sometimes you do well, sometimes you don't, and that's perfectly normal. What matters most is curiosity. If you genuinely engage with your subjects and immerse yourself in the learning process, the results will usually take care of themselves.

When I was at school, I thought a lot about marks. By university, however, I realised that what mattered was diving deeply into ideas and learning as much as I could. As one progresses through higher levels of study, marks begin to matter less than the habits of mind, knowledge and skills developed along the way.

So my advice is simple: enjoy your learning, stay curious, and keep challenging yourself. And every now and then, put the phone down and pick up a book. It requires a little self-discipline, but it's worth it.

9. ***You are a man with a mysterious "aura" at the School. What are your favourite things to do, outside of English and music?***

Well, spending time with my family would be the main thing. My three children keep me active and entertained. Like most parents, I spend a good deal of time driving them to activities, teaching them music and sport, and trying to keep up with their ever-changing interests. Watching them develop into their own people is one of the great joys of my life.

When I find spare time, I still enjoy writing. Throughout my career, I have published articles on literature and music, and I try to maintain that side of my life whenever I can. Most recently, I was invited by Wesleyan University Press to review Lola the Interpreter, Lyn Hejinian's final work. I've also written for University of Iowa Press and numerous poetry journals in Sydney, London and Paris.

Music remains a large part of my life. I perform regularly with Dr V's Swing Thing, the alumni jazz band. Its members come from a range of professions, but we share a commitment to making the band sound as good as it possibly can. Remarkably, we've now been playing together for almost twenty-five years! We toured Darwin last year and are playing at the Sixth Form Leavers' Dinner this year. Through the band, Mr Khusid's legacy lives on.

Beyond that, I enjoy reading, travelling and exploring new ideas. Whether through a book, a conversation, a piece of music or a new place, I'm happiest when learning something new.

10. ***Looking ahead to 2050, what gives you hope, and what changes would you most like to see in the world?***

Look, I hope we have a world that is less fractious. That's what I really hope for. Yehudi Menuhin, the violinist, used to talk about a world without borders, and I think there's something powerful about that idea. We're fundamentally similar as human beings, and it's painful to see national rivalries, cultural differences, and religious differences constantly flare up into war. At the same time, I'm optimistic about the potential of technology. Advances in medicine, computing and artificial intelligence have the capacity to improve millions of lives and help solve problems that once seemed insurmountable. There are good reasons to believe that technological innovation can be a force for genuine good.

The challenge is ensuring that our ethical judgement keeps pace with our technical capabilities. Character, wisdom, imagination and critical thinking remain just as important as innovation. As a teacher, those are the qualities I hope schools continue to cultivate.

11. ***If you could invite any five people, living or dead, to a dinner party, who would they be and why?***

So many options! Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson and Katherine Mansfield, the writers we study in Extension English, would all be fascinating, but if I had to narrow it down to five, I'd probably choose the following. First, Sir Garfield Sobers, the legendary West Indies cricketer. He was the greatest all-rounder the game has ever seen: brilliant, charismatic and, by all accounts, excellent company.

From American poetry, I'd invite William Carlos Williams, who somehow managed to combine a full-time career as a paediatrician with being one of the twentieth century's most innovative poets. He was a wonderful writer, a gifted raconteur and a larger-than-life personality. Williams also seemed to know everyone in the Modernist world, including H.D., Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. I suspect I could spend the entire evening just listening to his stories.

Third would be the historian William Dalrymple. I've become slightly obsessed with his Empire podcast with Anita Anand and have probably listened to hundreds of episodes while driving around Sydney. He has an extraordinary ability to make distant people, places and events feel immediate and alive.
I'd also invite Dmitri Shostakovich. He produced some of the greatest music of the twentieth century while living under one of history's most oppressive regimes. I also have a small personal connection to his work, having performed one of his symphonies in Moscow in 1999. It remains one of the most memorable concerts of my life.

My final guest would be Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, one of the most remarkable figures of German Romanticism. A writer, critic and formidable intellectual, she stood at the centre of the Jena Romantic circle and contributed to the celebrated Schlegel translations of Shakespeare.

Would everyone get along? Probably not. Sobers and Williams might hold court with stories, Dalrymple would supply historical digressions, Shostakovich would sit quietly observing it all, and Schlegel-Schelling would almost certainly be the smartest person at the table. Whatever happened, it would be an unforgettable evening.