For author Maria Takolander, writing is not so much a means of making a living; it's a way of living.

"Being a writer means living in an intense way that engages with and strives to make sense of the world," says Takolander, a senior lecturer in creative writing and literature at Deakin University.

She is receiving critical acclaim for her first fiction book, The Double, a collection of short stories, but, despite the praise and the thrill of having her first work published, Takolander says little has changed.

"I don't feel any different now than when I was a teenager writing intense poems," says Takolander. "I'm someone who needs to respond to the world through words, and that has never changed. The challenges of doing that are still the same."

Takolander moved to Geelong 10 years ago to take up a role at Deakin, and says she enjoys the vibrant, energetic arts community.

Her work first came to the attention of Text Publishing after one of her short stories was published in the literary magazine Griffith Review in 2009.

A year later she was awarded the inaugural Australian Book Review short story award, after which Text invited her to pitch some book ideas. "Of course, the first idea was for a short-story collection," says Takolander.

She says it was rewarding and challenging to work with Text Publishing editor David Winter on the collection: "To undergo a really rigorous editing process, and at times to be pushed to do better."

The collection includes intense themes of madness, death, desolation and obsession. "Some people tell me they find the stories very dark," she says. Several of the tales dip into the realm of science fiction. "I enjoy [that] genre because without the constraint of time and place it enables me to focus intensely on the human drama and the human characters and their experiences."

Takolander has begun work on her second book, a speculative fiction novel. "I am just at the early stages of the novel, so I am quite hesitant to talk about it with any certainty."

She says she is aware of her audience when writing but doesn't aim to present all of life's answers. "As a life-long reader I always look for some sort of insight into my own experience of life."

And will her publishing success change the way she teaches? "Maybe it's made me realise that it's important to be able to talk about your work, and to be able to think about what writing is and what writing does."
"I have known many creative writers who are more interested in writing than reading and I would always encourage anyone who wants to write, to read as much as possible."