

THE ESSENCE OF FICTION

*A Practical Handbook for
Successful Writing*

Malcolm
McConnell

"A book that tells the beginning writer how to pack his parachute, how to hook up, and how much fun it is going to be to jump out of the airplane."

James Crumley, THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

ALSO BY MALCOLM MCCONNELL

Matata

Clinton is Assigned

Just Causes

Stepping Over

Into the Mouth of the Cat

Incident at Big Sky (*with Johnny France*)

With Carol McConnell

First Crossing

Middle Sea Autumn

Living Well at Sea

THE ESSENCE OF FICTION

The Essence of Fiction

A Practical Handbook for
Successful Writing



MALCOLM McCONNELL

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A Personal Note from the Author

THERE ARE a number of excellent creative writing books available today. I found more than a dozen on the shelves of a university bookstore when I began to research this project. So, it could be argued that there's a certain coals-to-Newcastle redundancy in my wanting to produce yet another "definitive" handbook for the aspiring fiction writer, whether he be a college student or a would-be professional who works weekends on a novel or a collection of short stories.

Nevertheless, I offer this book with the confidence that what I have assembled here will, in fact, complement, not attempt to supplant, the existing body of creative writing literature. This confidence stems from the goals I have set and the experience I draw upon at the outset.

In chapter one, I discuss at length that perennial academic bugaboo, "Can you really teach writing?" I've taught enough people how to write fiction to state without hesitation that, yes, indeed, writing is a teachable skill, just like driving a car, flying an airplane, tap dancing or picking pockets, for that matter. But there is, I think, implicit in the perennial question another, unspoken and more germane point: "Can you really teach someone to write *well*, with inspired grace, with genius?" In short, can any creative writing book, teacher, class or workshop

take normal human clay as raw material and turn out a contemporary Shakespeare, Coleridge, Charlotte Brontë, Hemingway, Thomas Pynchon or Joan Didion?

Drawing on my seventeen years' experience as a professional writer and a teacher of writing, I can also answer the implicit question. No, definitely not. No book or class, no matter how well structured, can produce a literary genius. As confident as I am in my own abilities to teach, I would never presume that my book could help create a great writer. But I would suggest that this book could help *train* such a writer. We must never forget that every highly skilled individual, every virtuoso, learned that skill somewhere, acquired it from some *external* source in his life. Unlike the ants and the bees, we do not have programmed into our DNA the ability to produce instinctively works of great and complex beauty.

Having made that obvious point, let me state the obvious corollary. No virtuoso—literary, musical, dramatic or medical—ever reached that pinnacle of skill ignorant of the basic elements of his craft. A great brain surgeon first studies pre-med chemistry and physics, then, in medical school, biochemistry and anatomy, microbiology . . . and so forth, until the day, perhaps fifteen years into his apprenticeship, the surgeon lays the cool scalpel edge on the moist, white tissue of the living brain.

So it is with writers. No novelist ever wrote a complex and emotionally moving work of fiction who had not first mastered such elemental skills as writing effective dialogue or maintaining consistent and relevant point of view and narrative voice. Good professional writers, like good brain surgeons, are careful craftsmen. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that they are *cautious*—far from it. Being careful does not imply a lack of venturesome spirit. I'm simply pointing out that the mature, professional virtuoso has spent an intense apprenticeship. He has command over all the fundamental elements of his profes-

sion. He may not be sure of the outer limits, of what can be accomplished in a surgical procedure or in the chapter of a novel, but he knows the pitfalls, the problems he must avoid. Here's another truism, but one pertinent to my case: they don't pay professionals to make mistakes. *Ergo*, one definition of a professional craftsman: a person who has learned sufficient skills to avoid or correct mistakes.

Let's think for a moment about the creative writing classroom. On one side of the seminar table we have the professional, hopefully a true virtuoso—the writer as teacher. Across the table we have the amateur writers, the students. All too often, in my experience, the educational transaction that occurs here is incomplete . . . that is, the teacher is unable to teach very much, and the students do not learn any practical craft that will actually help them as aspiring writers. All too often, by default, these sessions become diffuse *literature* discussions, not writing workshops.

The analogy that occurs to me is of the crusty old brain surgeon standing before a room of pre-med students, holding up the detailed technical report on an operation and asking the students what they think of it. Replace the doctor with the fiction workshop writer who flourishes a Chekhov story and calls for the opinions of his class.

What the hell *should* they think of it? The pre-med students don't know a hemostat from a serum electrolyte, and the kids in the writing seminar wouldn't recognize point of view if it bit them on the ankle. "I think it's interesting," replies the eager boy in the fatigue jacket. The girl beneath the Farah Fawcett mane states, "I liked it better the second time I read it."

Interesting? You *liked* it? Who cares? What I want to know is this: How does Chekhov integrate dialogue and physical action within setting and conflict situation? Does the point of view remain consistent throughout the story? Why does it shift, what's the *purpose*, from the writer's perspective? *Huh?* *What?*

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I don't know what you mean. Nobody ever taught us about setting. (We haven't gotten to hemostats or serum electrolytes yet, Doctor.)

Every honest, self-respecting creative writing teacher should read "The Emperor's New Clothes" each night before he goes to bed. Then, on rising in the morning, ask himself this question: Am I really teaching my students a craft? Am I helping them form skills that they can apply to the practical problems of writing? Or, like the fawning Mandarin courtiers who praised the Emperor's non-existent robes, do the members of my workshop apply the irrelevant standards of literary criticism to student stories, then exacerbate the problem by interjecting purely subjective personal opinions?

All too often, in my experience, creative writing textbooks and the teachers who use them fall victim to what I call the Emperor's New Clothes Fallacy. These teachers use finished literature, usually classic novels and stories—perhaps the works of Chekhov—as models for student discussion, and, in theory, I guess, student emulation. This is, I feel, like asking the nineteen-year-old pre-med student to comment on the neurosurgery report, then, *somehow* to absorb craft by osmosis from this report and replicate the feat of medical virtuosity.

I hope that this book avoids the worst of those errors and fallacies.

If you want literary models (and we all do, we *need* them) go to the library. But, if you want to discover what dialogue really is, how it works in a piece of fiction, and, more importantly, what dialogue can and cannot accomplish in your fiction, then read this book. If you're curious about the potential value of one physical setting vis-à-vis another, if you wonder about the best way to move a character from point A to point B without needless and clumsy exposition, then read this book.

In short, if you want to learn how fiction, effective narrative storytelling, actually *works*, from the perspective of the writer,

not that of the literature student, read this book.

The models I employ here are not Chekhov or Hemingway or Margaret Atwood. I use student stories to prove my points: the work of amateurs just like the readers of this book. Moreover, I do not limit my examples to finished, polished student fiction. Instead, I lay out student *draft* fiction, with all its clumsy knobs and pimples, for you to examine, then lead you, the amateur writer, through the logical, unavoidable work of re-writing, the drafting process: the only way truly effective narrative is ever written.

To protect the privacy of the student writers, and also to save them some embarrassment, I have changed the names of certain authors and melded several drafts of certain stories into one version. In this manner, an earlier generation's "mistakes" can help a new generation of writers learn professional habits.

In the course of learning this set of professional habits, you will pass through an abbreviated apprenticeship, maybe in as brief a period as one college semester. Don't kid yourself; you will not have absorbed all of it, or even most of it, in that short a time. This book is not intended to function that way. Rather, I am writing a handbook, a practical guide that you can re-read as your career and level of skills progress. Ten years from now, when you're in the middle of your second novel and you're having trouble with the third-person narrative voice, I'd like this book to be there to serve as a guide.

So that the book will work both as a theoretical primer and a practical handbook, I have written the sections and chapters with a different intensity and scope. The chapters of Part I are densely detailed, replete with fundamental principles—a kind of basic training for fiction writers. Parts II and III are seemingly less crammed with fact, and their more open form makes them more accessible for use as a practical day-to-day handbook.

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Writing, they say, is a lonely profession. Maybe. But it is a profession, and as such, involves craft, even if it is practiced alone. I want this book to be there when you need advice on elements of craft, but also when you feel the need, as we all do, to step back and examine the fundamental nature of this storytelling impulse that we are compelled to practice.

Fiction as Drama



PART ONE

