# Letters to a Fiction Writer

edited by

Frederick Busch

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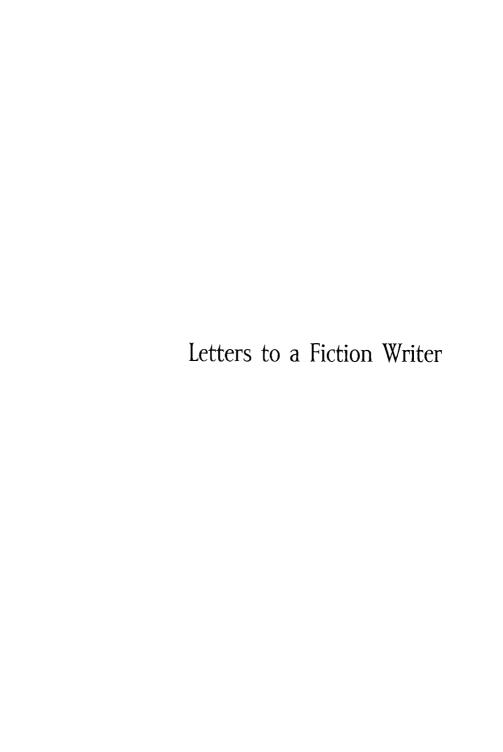
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#### **FICTION**

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### Note

The editor is responsible for flaws, omissions, mistakes, and misconceptions readers may find in this book.

Although he will have committed his share of errors, the editor has, on the other hand, been at all successful because he was blessed by the patience and assistance of members of the writing community, acknowledging whom—while absolving them from any share in his gaffes—is a pleasure: Sally Fitzgerald, who offered wise counsel and active assistance; Pam Durban, my good friend; Linck Johnson of Colgate's Department of English; David Hughes, Head of Reference at Colgate's Case Library; the Colgate University Research Council; Christina Licursi; Elise Vogel, good writer and good friend; David Jauss, longtime amigo; Dan Chaon; David Markson.

A sweeping salute to Jill Bialosky of W. W. Norton, who was seized by the first glimmers of this book in the bar of the Colgate Inn, where all we drank was mineral water and all we discussed was how, in our writing, to talk straight.

—FB

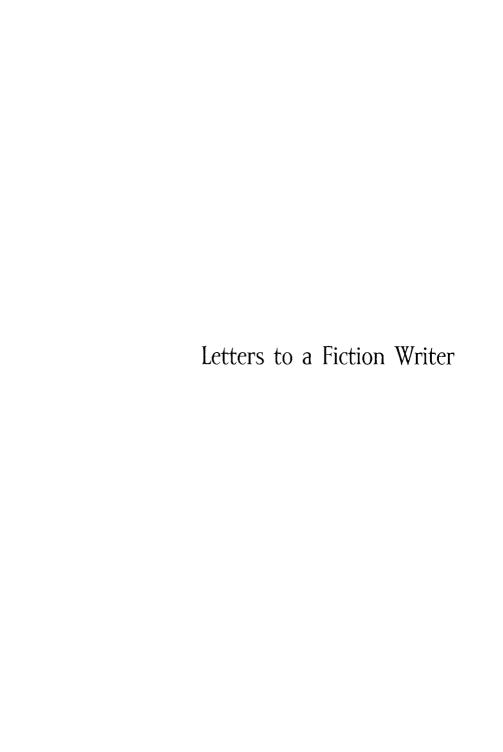
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# Frederick Busch

## Introduction

Dear Sir:

It has been quite awhile since I received, b pastiche of answer, your reply to the novel I a runty your consideration.

I was twenty-five or twenty-six, and I had already perpetrated two and one-half novels. (The half, a runty pastiche of Malamud and Faulkner—truly—constituted my first, tottering steps.) Editors at a number of houses had been very kind to me, and had written of their sorrow when my manuscripts did not appeal to their colleagues. A writer passing through Colgate had suggested that I send my book to his agent (and then had sped on, before I could press my brilliant work upon the writer himself). You were his agent. Perhaps you still are. I sent you the best letter I could compose, begging you to read my novel, telling you what I thought then were the fresh, vivid, exciting stories of my near-misses with several houses. You responded at once, and with hospitality: I was welcome to send my manuscript.

I waited the usual six centuries for a reply, and I performed the usual tricks: I called your office and rang off when my courage failed. I awaited the mailman on our front porch, and then at the corner of our street and, at last, on *his* front porch. And then, when the Ganges had filled with opals and the Hudson had turned to Bâtard-Montrachet, up our walk came the postman, edging warily toward me perhaps because I was snuffling and sidling and tipping over with anxiety. Maybe he knew that I saw him holding out letters, but no padded envelope containing a manuscript that someone did not feel "we can optimistically represent."

Well, the manuscript did come the next day. You sent it, you noted, "under separate cover." What you sent first, with

a nice sense of timing, was your letter of rejection. You did not employ euphemisms about my self-obsessed characters or dumb plot or gassy prose. You did not, on the other hand, suggest that I could actually compose narrative fiction or that my work possessed some promise. You said only what you knew needed saying. This is the entirety of your note:

Dear Mr. Busch:

Ah, if only you wrote fiction as well as you write letters of inquiry.

And you signed with regret, which was not, may I say, quite so sizable as my own. I regretted my inquiry letter, I regretted writing fiction (or whatever it was I had written) and I regretted that we weren't face-to-face. I fantasized about modes of delivering violence to the person. I considered weeping in the weak sunlight of early spring on Payne Street in Hamilton, New York.

However, I went inside and I sulked. I pouted for Judy, my wife, who came home after a day of teaching in a rural elementary school. She might be fatigued, I pointed out, but I was, after the agonies of inventing a character just like me who suffered existential crises not unlike my own, humiliated and rejected and inconsolable and failed.

She had been coping with third graders until half an hour before, so it took no major changing of gears for her to comfort me. And, soon enough, I was muleheadedly writing more fiction, more letters to publishers and agents, complaints to my friends who had, only the day before, sent me letters about their out-of-the-typewriter experiences with publishers and agents. If one has talent—and it is the vastest of assumptions, is it not?—then the next necessity is energy: the energy to find and sustain story—that vivid and continuous

dream about which John Gardner taught. It is an energy, sir, that permits one to receive letters such as yours, and to sustain the damage they do, and then to return to all that darkness, and the little pool of light within it where one works. As Hemingway's heroic gambler tells us in "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio," one can only "continue, slowly, and wait for luck to change."

But, sir, the pain was real. I still feel it, a little. But I've never forgotten, either, the wonderful letters I did receive—from Esther Yntema at Atlantic–Little, Brown or from Frank Brunotts at Hill & Wang. Robert Nye, the poet, novelist, and critic who now lives in Ireland, cabled me, about a year after I had your letter, from Scotland: CALDER ACCEPTS YOUR NOVEL. CONGRATULATIONS! Without telling me, he had recommended my novel, sent for his critique, to his publisher and so, for about \$480, I sold my novel to the English publishers of Samuel Beckett and Henry Miller. Robert had sustained me for years with his own horror stories, and with his unabated drive to write well in a world essentially inhospitable to prose that kicked and twisted on the page.

If there are always letters from people such as yourself, sir, there are, also, letters from people like Robert Nye. They arrive, in fact, from such people—do you believe it?—as Anton Chekhov, who, grumbling and scolding, nevertheless makes time to offer this advice to a new writer:

In my opinion, descriptions of nature should be extremely brief and offered by the way, as it were. Give up commonplaces, such as: "the setting sun, bathing in the waves of the darkening sea, flooded with purple gold," and so on. Or: "Swallows flying over the surface of the water chirped gaily." In descriptions of nature one should seize

upon minutiae, grouping them so that when, having read the passage, you close your eyes, a picture is formed. For example, you will evoke a moonlit night by writing that on the mill dam the glass fragments of a broken bottle flashed like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled along like a ball."

F. Scott Fitzgerald, perhaps even busier and more harried than yourself, sir, returned a short story to a sophomore at Radcliffe with these admonitions: "I'm afraid the price for doing professional work is a good deal higher than you are prepared to pay at present," he begins. And then he instructs:

It was necessary for Dickens to put into Oliver Twist the child's passionate resentment at being abused and starved that had haunted his whole childhood. Ernest Hemingway's first stories "In Our Time" went right down to the bottom of all that he had ever felt and known. In "This Side of Paradise" I wrote about a love affair that was still bleeding as fresh as the skin wound on a haemophile. . . . That . . . is the price of admission. Whether you are prepared to pay it or, whether it coincides or conflicts with your attitude on what is "nice" is something for you to decide. . . . You wouldn't be interested in a soldier who was only a LITTLE brave.<sup>2</sup>

William Faulkner, like Fitzgerald, suggests what it takes to write serious fiction; in addition, like Chekhov, he grapples with some of the inner workings of the endeavor:

Anton Chekhov to A. P. Chekhov, May 10, 1886, in *The Letters of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald to Frances Turnbull, November 9, 1938, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli, (New York: Scribner's, 1994).

You are learning. All you need is to agonise and sweat over it, never be quite satisfied even when you know it is about as right as it can be humanly made, never to linger over it when done because you dont have time, you must hurry hurry to write it again and better, the best this time. Not the same story over again, but Joan Williams, who has the capacity to suffer and anguish and would trade it for nothing under heaven. . . . The mss. is still too prolix. It needs to be condensed. There is more writing than subject; you see, I read it again last night. A child's loneliness is not enough for a subject. The loneliness should be a catalyst, which does something to the rage of the universal passions of the human heart, the adult world, of which it-the child—is only an observer yet. You dont want to write just "charming" things. Or at least I dont seem to intend to let you.3

The point, sir, is that these artists, these masters, address those who may be starting their apprenticeship with a certain concern for the new writer's dignity, and a respect for the art. John Steinbeck was clever enough (and generous enough) to offer a set of guidelines:

- 1. Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. . . . Write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.
- 2. Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow

William Faulkner to Joan Williams, 1952. Reprinted with the permission of Jill Faulkner Summers.

and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.

- 3. Forget your generalized audience. In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theatre, it doesn't exist. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person—and write to that one.
- 4. If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on. When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn't belong there.
- 5. Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest. . . .
- 6. If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.4

Or have a look, sir, at the chain of care and attention with which this book concludes but which is truly at its heart: Caroline Gordon teaches Flannery O'Connor about her own novel, *Wise Blood;* O'Connor is sisterly toward her colleague John Hawkes, who teaches Joanna Scott about clarity; Scott, thirteen years later, passes the favor along. I think of that chain of instruction and support as a complex molecule in the body of our literature, a living part of our literature, an example of caring *for* as well as caring *about*.

I love the work of Dickens, and I wanted him in this book,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>John Steinbeck to Robert Wallsten, February 13–14, 1962, in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine A. Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking, 1975).