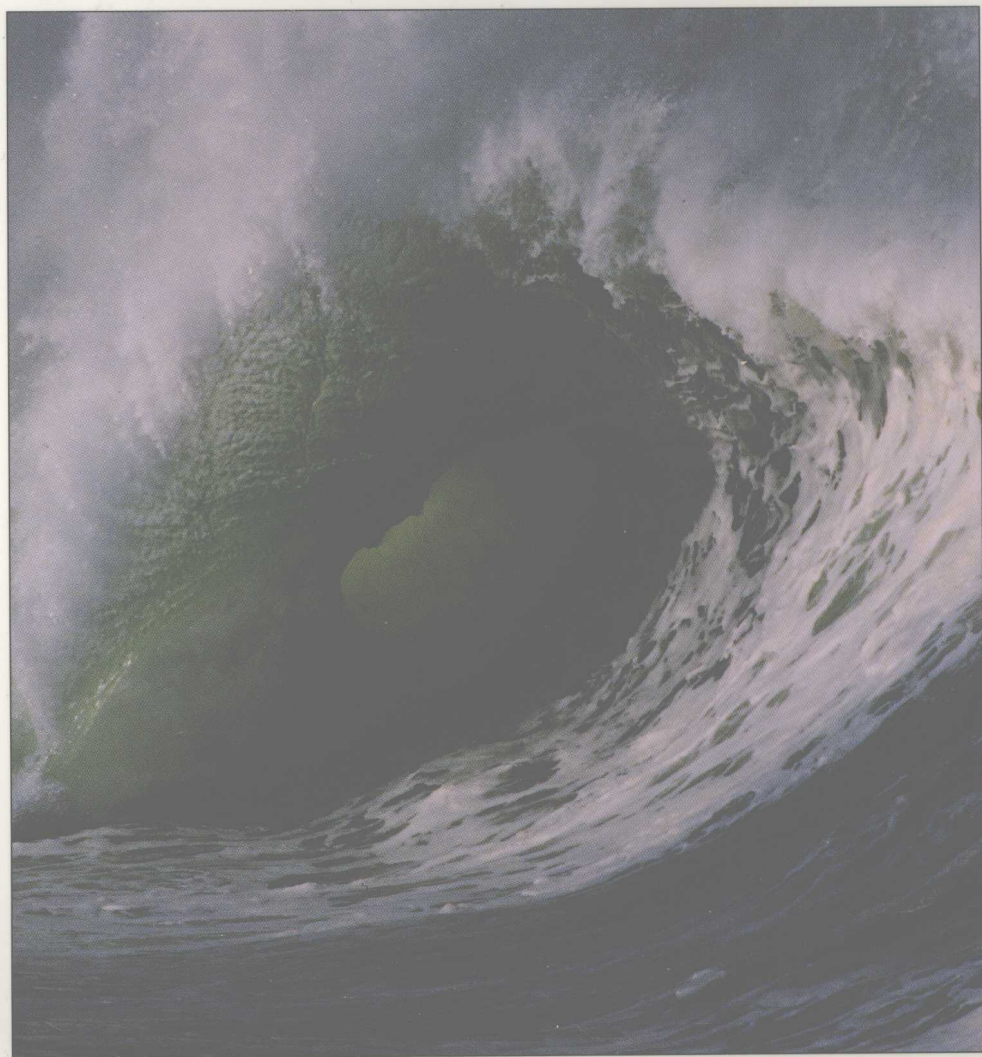

Writer's Mind

Crafting Fiction



Richard Cohen

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Writer's Mind



*for John and Christopher
and
for Leonard Fiddle*

Preface

A writer is someone who is always learning to write. For this fragile-looking but surprisingly tenacious creature, everything that happens is a writing lesson. When the love of your life betrays you, it is a course in characterization and dialogue. Surreally adaptable, writers spend their lives camouflaged as doctors and patients, priests and parishioners, soldiers, prisoners, executives, factory workers, secretaries, and spouses.

Grief, illness, failure, and loss don't become any less painful if you're a writer—perhaps they become more painful—but they acquire an added value: they are material. After they have subsided, after you have been changed by them, you can transmute pain and bewilderment into reason and form by writing them down. From life to paper, from paper to life again, writers move crabwise toward perfection.

If you think creative writing is just a subject to get a good grade in, I congratulate you: you will end up in some safer, more practical, probably more lucrative career. A writer is someone for whom creative writing is much more than just a class.

During a long self-education, I have thought about, talked about, and analyzed the efforts of thousands of people who wanted to be writers. In five years as a reader at a literary agency, I saw every kind of bad, mediocre, and almost-good writing imaginable, and even a few fine, acceptable manuscripts. Then there was teaching, and evaluating pub-

lished books for a book club. As a freelance educational writer, I've worked anonymously on books that taught the craft of writing—books that did not always say the things I would have said if I had been speaking my mind.

At times I've even glanced at creative writing manuals, in case the authors knew any secrets I had missed. There were always a few good tips in addition to the dreary formulas.

But there was always something lacking in those manuals. The writers *had* to know more than they were telling—because if what they were telling was all they knew, they wouldn't be creating anything, they would just be running in a rut. They proposed “rules” that I knew were only good suggestions. They preached, “Show, don't tell,” but had little to show. By following the manuals, a student could become a technically competent, unoriginal, soulless writing entity.

Other books suffered from the opposite problem. Taking a feel-good, therapeutic tone, they gave pep talks to the amateur. Believe me, you will not become a fiction writer by doing breathing exercises and keeping a journal. You might become a fiction writer by thinking, dreaming, obsessing, practicing, studying, sweating, groaning, needing—*breathing*—fiction.

I wanted to write a book that contained more technical knowledge than the manuals and went beyond the pep talks to nurture the serious inner development of writers. To say what I knew, without keeping anything back. Not just to describe good writing but to embody it. To practice what I preached.

There are no “don'ts” in this book—no “Don't write dream scenes” or “Don't write about writers” or “Don't have more than one protagonist” or “Don't begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.” A writer is someone whose first reflex, on being confronted with a taboo, is to break it.

You won't find any rigid formulas here either. I will not tell you to “write every day” or “keep a notebook” or even the most nearly universal dictum, which I personally follow, “Write what you know.” (Did Poe really know all that stuff, or did he invent it so well that he created the illusion of knowledge? Writers get credit for “knowing” whatever made a good story, and so the meaning of the word gets contaminated.) I've kept notebooks at times and at other times not kept notebooks, and I never noticed any difference in the quality of my fiction. Keep a notebook for its own sake if you want to, not because you think it's a duty. For writers who have to make livings, take courses, raise families, search for mates or keep the ones they've found, do the shopping and cooking and laundry, clutch the threads of a shrinking social life, and somehow steal an hour or two a night to try to write a little fiction, keeping a daily notebook may be an excessive burden.

What you'll find here is pieces of conventional and unconventional wisdom identified and discussed for whatever they may be worth to you. The attitude is not "Do it this way." The attitude is "Other writers have done it this way. Think about it, test it if you wish, then find your own way."

I am not trying to sell you my caring. If I were, you might justly suspect that I had nothing else to sell. *You* supply the caring—your writing will be better that way. I am not here to try to persuade you that writing will make you whole and happy. There is deep pleasure in writing, but it is the pleasure of struggle more than of ease.

How Writer's Mind Is Organized

The organization of this book is shockingly simple. Part One, "Craft," begins with some discussion of what writing is, why we do it, what a story is. From this overview we zoom down to the fundamentals of craftsmanship: plot, characterization, description, and so on. Each chapter explores a range of approaches, philosophies, and tactics within a topic, rather than presenting a single orthodox technique. There's analysis of skills and advice on how, as a writer sitting at your desk, you can free yourself to attain them.

Part Two, "Process," intensifies the focus on work habits, analyzing aspects of creativity from thinking to revision while emphasizing that the process is fluid and not a matter of compartmentalized stages.

Part Three, "Practicalities," lowers some of the hurdles of building a writing career: getting educated, getting published, handling the frustrations.

Each chapter ends with a set of exercises under the heading "Do It." In addition, exercises are sometimes recommended within the main text, at points where they arise naturally. Many of the exercises involve writing; others emphasize seeing, talking, cooperating, daydreaming. Following the instructions to the letter is not the point. If you twist an exercise around, using it as a springboard toward a different one of your own invention, you are using it as it's intended. And all the exercises can be treated as thought exercises. This book is written under the assumption that you have independent projects of your own to write and that an hour spent describing your room, for instance, is probably an hour lost from your true work. On the other hand, if you're having trouble thinking of ideas for a story or getting a grip on a technique, just about any exercise in the book might turn into a source of inspiration.

Each chapter concludes with a feature called "Writer's Bookshelf," which provides an annotated list of works that exemplify the skills taught in the chapter.

The Spirit of Writing

Technique is what can most efficiently be taught in classrooms, but technique is not the essence of writing. Writing is a matter of the spirit. It comes from sensing what's around you, remembering what used to be, feeling your own feelings, recognizing the various selves who inhabit your brain, believing that other people have inner selves, too, and using competently the language you have used every day since toddlerhood. That's all so basic that it's hard to understand why everyone doesn't do it.

Every taught technique is a product of the past, and we're living in times when it's uncertain whether anything produced in the past is a useful guide in any field. Person A might write nothing at all for twenty years but, by seeing with writer's eyes and thinking with writer's mind, learn something which she then, spontaneously, scribbles down, and it might be more valuable than the life's work of Person B, who diligently practiced the craft every day. Lots of technique is transmitted in this book, but I hope the other thing, the essence, is transmitted, too. A plain truth is worth more than a pretty lie—though prettiness has value and is at least a way of getting people to pay attention. Writing is a character trait, and this book is a character study.

Writing it is part of my learning process. I hope reading it is part of yours.

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Part One

CRAFT

Chapter 1

Why We Write

As I type this, I'm exhibiting all the symptoms. I'm fidgeting and stalling. Maybe I need more coffee. Maybe I drank too much coffee already and have to wait till I settle down. Maybe I should put in a load of laundry, or do a few arm curls, or call my travel agent, or all three at once. I've already stared out the window, reread a magazine article about the President, solved several international crises in a wide-ranging discussion between the left and right sides of my brain, and performed a dröll comic improvisation: "You're late!" I scolded myself as I straggled to the computer. "Sorry, boss, the buses weren't running," I wheedled.

Anything but write. Because when I finally flip the power switch and the bell rings and the screen lights up, I will be shot out of this pleasant apartment to a lonely, nonphysical place where everything I love, hate, hope, and fear is hovering, high-stepping toward me and away, teasing me into thinking I can capture it. I will be riding a roller coaster I have designed myself, where the dips and turns are not built until the moment I reach them, and where I can't get out until I'm dead. When I board this ride every morning, my breathing changes and my temperature rises; I literally get cold feet and have to put on socks. I don't hear things that are said to me; I don't even notice the pretty lake outside my window, where a brown duck is stepping through a puddle on the red slats of the dock—unless I want to describe it.