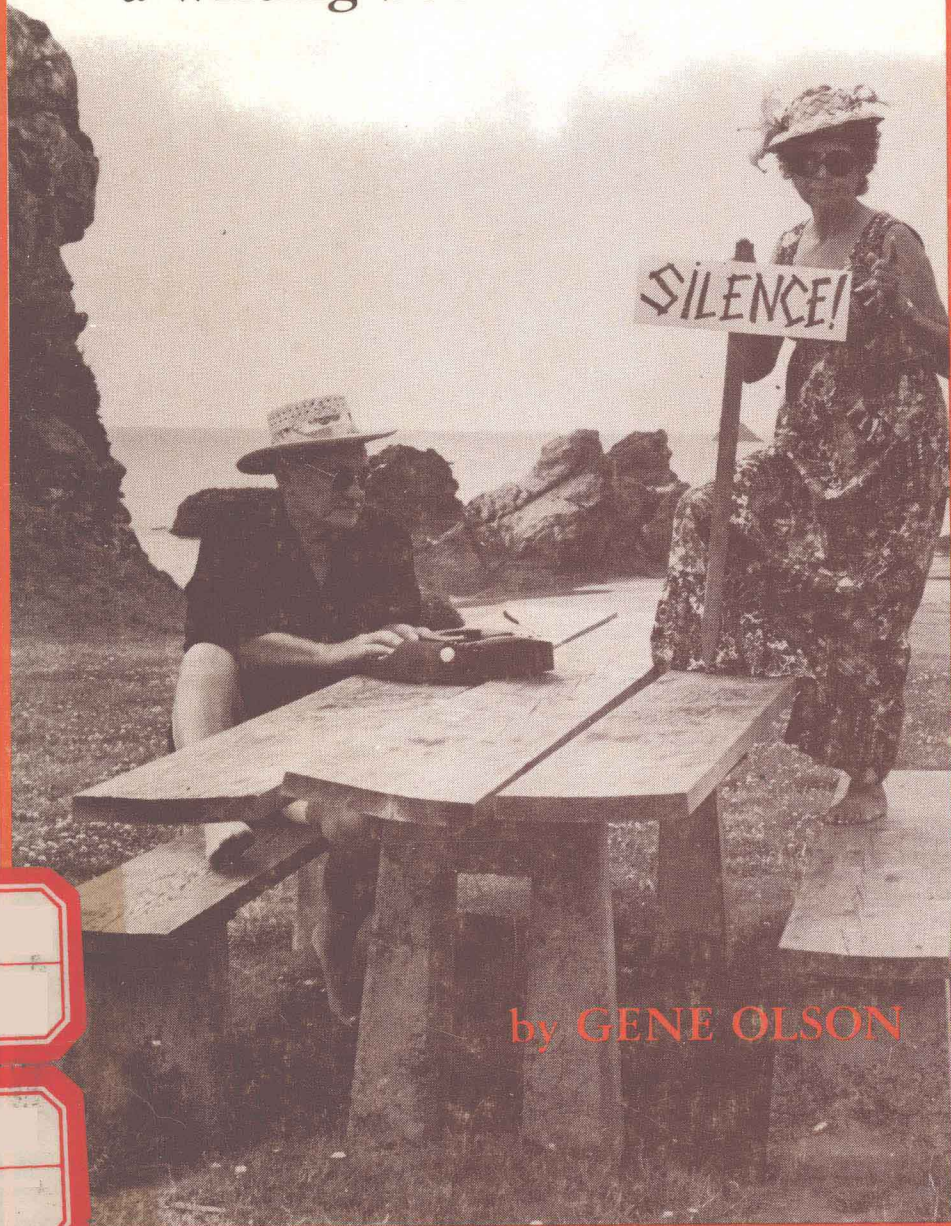


SWEET AGONY II:

a writing book of sorts



by GENE OLSON

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by Gene Olson

"... it is better to write a bad limerick than to
be able to recite 'Paradise Lost.' "

—A.S. Neill



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FOREWORD

In 1971, I wrote a little book called *Sweet Agony*.

Some said the book wasn't little enough.

On the off chance that those individuals were misguided, I made the book bigger.

Now I suppose they'll call me a slow learner.

Actually, I'm a low energy type and it's easier to write long than short. I say that in the book, too, which proves it.

Long or short, this is for Frenchy, with much love and *mahalo*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gene Olson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal tail on the "n".

MEET THE AUTHOR

GENE OLSON says: "Writing is hard work. Teaching writing is at least as hard. Writers and teachers of writing need all the help they can get. I think it's time we started helping each other."

GENE OLSON ought to be able to write about writing. *SWEET AGONY II* is his 28th published book in a professional writing career reaching back to 1945. His output includes both fiction and non-fiction.

He has written also for newspapers, magazines and television. At intervals along the way, he taught English, creative writing and journalism in Camarillo, California and Portland, Oregon. In *SWEET AGONY II*, he has tried to distill in a tightly-written book the pure residue of his experience in writing and teaching.

GENE OLSON'S primary intent in *SWEET AGONY II* is not to help student writers become professionals. He is content to let this happen as it will. His intent is to pass along those parts of his professional writing experience which can lead students toward a better understanding of the process and help them to cope more cheerfully with its enormous difficulties. And, not incidentally, he would like to make the job of teaching writing more productive and satisfying by making it less baffling.

That's what *SWEET AGONY II* is all about.

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" . . . arrangement and transition are arts which I value much, but which I do not flatter myself that I have attained . . . I worked hard at altering the arrangement of the first three chapters of the third volume. What labor it is to make a tolerable book, and how little readers know how much trouble the ordering of the parts has cost the writer!"

—Samuel Johnson

1. A Great Place to Begin

You sit there staring at the chilly whiteness of a piece of paper, 8½ by 11. That's how it all begins. Stare long enough and you hear the paper demand: "I want words. Lovely words. Immortal words. Destroy my whiteness. Do it!"

There, in a quivering capsule, is the writer's problem. And the writer's enormous satisfaction. That's what this book is all about.

WATCH FOR FALLING ROCKS

Warning No. 1: Don't believe everything I say in this book. I've written professionally and taught writing for more than 30 years but that doesn't make me an expert. In writing, there may be no experts, only survivors.

During those 30 years, I accumulated bits of informational flotsam and pieces of psychological jetsam which seemed to ease some of the struggles of the student writer. *This* student writer, who after 30 years is still learning as I write this page. My intention is to throw most of those bits and pieces into the mix and then stir mightily.

It would have been nice if I could have proceeded in tidy style from Point A to Point B and finally to Point Z, without detours, in the military manner of a dictionary or grammar textbook. But writing techniques and tricks and demands and urges are more than words and structure. So, in writing this book, I had to operate like Little Red Riding Hood wandering through the thick, dark woods of a writer's mind, coping with each new wolf as it leaped out of the underbrush. And why not? There ought to be more than one way to get to Grandmother's house.

BAD TASTE ONE MORE TIME

You will find the pronoun "I" used a great many times. When overdone, this is considered bad taste. I have overdone it.

Another much-used word in this book is "you." This is in better taste, I understand, but I suspect that I have run "you" into the ground as well. I have made an early decision not to be tasteful.

In this book, "I" am trying to talk to "you" almost as directly as if you were sitting in my parlor toasting your feet at my fire and enjoying my curds and whey. (Incidentally, next time please bring your own. Have you noticed what's happened to the price of curds and whey?)

I repeat: Don't believe everything I say. What has worked for me may not work for you. To write, a person must do his or her own thinking. Unless you do this, you may wind up just blowing bubbles.

Writing is like falling in love in that we know it happens but no one is quite sure how it happens or how many children will result. Writing can be learned but there is only one way, the hard way: by doing it. You must make your own mistakes, learn what you can from them, then plunge on to make more mistakes.

If you go about this properly, you won't make the same mistake more than three times and your new mistakes will be more magnificent than your old ones and you will learn more from them. (In time, you might even write a book about them.)

Plenty of advice is available to those who want to write or fall in love. Some of it will make sense to you; some of the rest of it won't seem worth the powder to blow it to Stratford-on-Avon. Some advice that doesn't work one year will work the next; you can learn when you are ready to learn and when you need to learn, not before.

When digging through this advice bin, don't look for detailed blueprints. You are no more likely to get a writing blueprint that works for you from somebody else than you are to get a plan for an ostrich house from the Home & Garden section of your local newspaper.

In this book, I inserted no blueprints. This book is not a grammar text; there are already too many of those. (Please, don't applaud in the middle of my act. You should know that I did manage to sneak in an outrageous grammar chapter. Skip it if you must but if you do, don't expect to collect your \$200 for passing GO.)

This book is also not a guide to writing forms — short story, essay, etc. I also swear on the stack of dictionaries that this book contains absolutely no instruction in use of a library card catalog, nor does it warn you against writing on both sides of the paper.

I'll tell you how to write and how not to write but I won't tell you *what* to write. (Well, maybe just a little.) I'll say a lot about what might be called the psychology of writing. How does one get one's creative juices flowing? How does one keep them flowing? How does one direct and discipline the mind for writing?

Those last three sentences may have said most of it. The rest is practice.

A wise college president once said: "Writing is a thinking process, and its study is a function of the psychologist. We have not made as much use of a psychologist in teaching English as we should have."

Say it again, Sam.

HOGWASH, A DOLLOP

If it hasn't happened already, it soon will. Somebody will tell you that writing is FUN.

Then, as you struggle with it, you'll begin to wonder when the fun part comes. I can tell you. Usually it comes after you're finished.

Face it right now, if you haven't: the act of writing requires great concentration and energy. Even for a seasoned professional, putting words on paper is close to torture at times. The writer often will go to great lengths to avoid writing. A resourceful writer can avoid the beginning of writing for hours without really trying, for days with just a little effort and if he or she is willing to strain a bit, for months. Occasionally a writer can avoid writing for several years. Anyone who achieves this goal is entitled to refer to the affliction as "writer's block."

The fun is not in writing; the fun is in having written. I insist that few acts give human beings more and deeper emotional satisfaction than the act of writing. Those words

appearing so haltingly on that blank expanse of white are YOURS. Enjoy, enjoy . . .

GLUE AND THE GOVERNMENT

Government writing usually has a high glue content. It seldom slides across the page; instead it sticks and holds and congeals. But a few government books about writing are great. One such was produced by the U.S. Government Printing Office with the inspiring title: *Effective Revenue Writing*. The author, Dr. Calvin T. Linton, is not a government employee but a college teacher serving as a writing consultant. He has some good words to say about communication:

“Regardless of the intellectual powers we may possess, if we did not have the ability to communicate — to get ideas out of our heads into the heads of others — our salaries would abruptly stop. For all of us who work above the level of manual labor, communication skill is not *one* of the reasons we are hired; it is *the* reason. True, if we had no ideas to express we would be viewed with some concern by our superiors; but the sad fact is that an undeterminable but vast number of people have far better ideas than anyone knows. Their thoughts either beat about in their heads, finding no communication package in which to emerge; or they come out distorted and in fragments, jammed into words and sentences which do not exhibit them as they really are.”

Then listen to Dr. Peter F. Drucker, expert in business and industrial management, expressing his view in *Fortune Magazine*:

“If you work on a machine your ability to express yourself will be of little importance. But as soon as you move one step up from the bottom, your effectiveness depends on your ability to reach others through the spoken or the written word. And the further away your job is from manual work, the larger the

organization of which you are an employee, the more important it will be that you know how to convey your thoughts in writing or speaking. In the very large organization, whether it is the government, the larger business corporation, or the Army, this ability to express oneself is perhaps the most important of all the skills a person can possess."

TOUCHING OF MINDS

Cave dwellers who drew simple figures on the stone walls of their shelters were among the first to demonstrate a primitive truth: one of the most basic urges driving human beings is the urge to communicate.

The need to touch perhaps has always been there — hand to hand, face to face, body to body. There is another touching need, the touching of minds; we have come to call it communication.

It would be interesting to know if there have always been two basic personality types, introvert and extrovert. If so, it's likely that the first cave drawing was done by a shy person, an introvert.

A primitive extrovert probably communicated readily by screaming and thumping a tree with a stick. (Or, I suppose, thumping another cave dweller.) The introvert would tend to draw back from such noisy demonstrations. But alone in a cave, with writing instrument in hand, he could quietly touch minds with other persons.

In prison, solitary confinement is considered one of the most terrible punishments. It is terrible mainly because a gnawing hunger is not being satisfied, the desperate urge of one human being to communicate with another. Block that urge long enough and you can drive a person to insanity. Prisoners of war, isolated from fellow humans, have devised elaborate new languages with codes based on

tapping and other sounds. The message is clear: *I am a human being! I must communicate with other human beings or go out of my mind!*

"But what about hermits?" someone asks. "They isolate themselves and survive."

They may be exceptions to the rule or they may spend much time talking to dogs or cats or, in extreme cases, to the birds in the trees. In more extreme cases, to themselves . . .

Poets, many of whom have trouble getting their work published, often solve the problem by reading their poetry to each other. Somehow the process is not complete until the connection is made with another human mind. Writing words and hiding them in a desk drawer doesn't make the all-important connection.

SUCH A GOOD FEELING!

Why should I give you reasons for writing? I have mine but those may not be right for you. It's important that students find their own reasons for writing and that teachers allow them to do so. (Well, up to a point. The cold fact that a paper is due at 2 p.m. on Tuesday can be the most powerful inspiration one can have.) In the event that no other reason for writing pops into mind, take heart; you are human and the urge to communicate was born in you. Cherish and channel that urge; you might be in for a surprise. You may think that you are only communicating what you know; you are actually *discovering* what you know.

And such a good feeling that is!

As students of writing, you may have noticed that suddenly what you are trying to do is considered important again. If you're in high school and want to go to college, you probably have been told that somewhere in your baggage

there should be some basic writing skills. If you're in college, you might have discovered by now that you learned little about writing in high school and there is small comfort in the knowledge that millions of other collegians are up the same creek and their paddles are missing, too.

Panic buttons are being punched in schools and colleges across the land. In Oregon, shock greeted the announcement that only 12 per cent of the state's high school juniors were able to write an acceptable job application letter. A California university tested its juniors in basic English skills and found that only 50 per cent passed. After three years of college, half of the students failed in basic English!

Educators, parents and journalists dash madly about looking for scapegoats.

"Too much television!" is one cry. "Kids at home and school spend too much time looking at pictures instead of reading and writing." There is some truth there . . .

"Even teachers can't write!" carps another critic. In some cases, this, too, is true . . .

"Lowered expectations! Too many frills! Parental neglect! Lazy kids! Drugs and sex!"

ANGRY NOISES

As this is written, angry noises fill the air from coast to coast and border to border. Amid the outcry, here and there anxious students are being urged to read and write again; some of those flickering video screens are being turned off. Soon there may be solid reason to hope that U.S. educational institutions have turned out their last generation of bewildered students, cheated out of a chance to learn to use their language birthright.

And what's at stake? Our civilization, possibly. Words express our thoughts, our hopes, our ambitions, our fears,