
The Writer's Handbook

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A. S. B.

FOREWORD

The articles appearing in this book were, for the most part, originally published in *The Writer* during the past few years. I have always felt that their brief appearance in the magazine was not sufficient reward, and that they justly belonged in book form where they could be conveniently studied, and available for permanent reference.

It has not been an easy task to make a selection from the hundreds of excellent pieces which have appeared in the magazine. In many cases it was a matter not of which we should select but rather which we must eliminate because of space limitations. Our reader reaction has given us a laboratory-tested method of determining which of our articles have been most helpful to aspiring writers, and what type of material has proven most effective in solving their writing problems. Then, too, the selection was influenced not merely by the merit of each article, but by my desire to broaden the scope of such a book and to maintain a balance which would appeal to writers of varied types of literary material.

It is my hope that careful study of the text and intelligent use of the manuscript market section will make this book a practical tool both for the beginner and the mature author. It should be read and reread not only as a source of instruction in writing technique, but as an inspiring and stimulating guide.

A. S. BURACK

Boston, Mass.

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PART I

BOOK I

GENERAL

Chapter I

PROFESSIONALISM IN WRITING

By NELIA GARDNER WHITE

PROFESSIONALISM as applied to writing is a word fallen into disrepute. Being a professional means one has learned his trade. No one admires a musician who has not learned the rudiments of music, nor a teacher unversed in pedagogy, nor even a day-laborer who does not know how to handle his pick and shovel. Professionalism in writing means only that a writer has mastered the tools of his trade well enough so that he can earn a living with them. There may be and, of course, often is a vast difference between a literary genius and a professional writer; there may be no difference at all, as witness Dickens and Maupassant, Dumas and Chekhov. But these men had one thing in common with all those who write and sell their wares: they had learned the technique of writing, which is a difficult and demanding technique. There is no such thing as writing "too well" to sell, however many countless small groups over the country testify to the contrary.

Writing is hard work. One does not just sit down and dash off a fine story when one has a spare three or four hours. It may be admitted that at the beginning of one's writing life, a story may be done in just that manner. For then inspiration is fresh, one is eager to spread one's convictions, one's imagery is not staled by repetition. But ten or twenty years later it is a different matter. Growth must then be evident; the same story cannot be repeated endlessly nor the same phrases used forever. The mind must continually enlarge to new ideas, new viewpoints. A genius is born knowing how to establish contact through his talent. He seems to know instinctively what form is. Nevertheless, even a genius has to put words down on paper, has to have his spirit free for its

plunge into the imagination. This freedom is hard come by. It is often said that one has to have periods of lying fallow, of taking in experience that may later come out in analysis. With the genius I think this is partly untrue. He is a creature born experienced; he knows without having lived. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he has the ability to create out of his inner life a myriad of experiences that seem to bear no counterpart to the experiences of his outer life. But for most writers who possess but a modicum of talent, I believe that these periods of lying fallow are essential. Many writers who write too much never seem to know this and after a little time their stories all take on a sameness. They are only living the same experiences over and over. That is why so often a new writer writes a very fine first novel and then peters out to nothing at all. His first novel is good because it is constructed out of his own youth and that youth he has had time to make his own. At once his publishers begin to hound him for a second. He hasn't had time, in terms of soul, to construct another. When this second novel appears it is either a repetition of his first or it is immature, without solid foundation. So, unless you are a genius, and few are, you should not fear taking time out. Not time out from writing, necessarily, but time out from making final irrevocable patterns of writing. For those who use the same patterns, the same symbols over and over and over are, truly, only hack writers, and deserve scorn.

One of the things that marks a professional writer is that he knows form. I am well aware of the scorn of the young for those who are slaves to form. As a matter of sober truth, it is not form the young deride — it is only that youth longs to create a *new* form. New forms do arise, but they seldom arise through the efforts of an individual. Neither T. S. Eliot nor James Joyce created a new form; they gave outstanding examples of a tendency that had been growing over some years in literature. It always interests me to note how often fine writers, who have early gone off on strange and irregular tangents, revert to the purest traditional forms in later years. They have learned that freedom grows inside law, not outside.

During the last twenty years I have read hundreds of short stories and have been alternately irritated, saddened and amused by the fact that only a handful of them show any recognition that writing even has any laws. I am ever amazed at the *unprofessionalism* of these stories. They show no knowledge of form, of rhythm, sentence structure or sense of drama. A very great many seem to consider an incident as a complete plot. Almost all forget that a theme and a plot have to be woven together inextricably, that the plot is the working out of the theme by cumulative incidents, and that every incident must be told, not because it is interesting in itself, but because it has its bearing on the theme.

Another thing that amateurs never seem to know is the fact that a singleness of viewpoint intensifies the unity of a story. This is a fundamental law that few professional writers ignore. Only a truly great writer can avoid confusion and diffusion of interest in a story wherein the viewpoint shifts from one character to another. Many stories that are told with a seemingly complete objectivity are held together by a viewpoint that is not too obvious, that of the author himself or that of the eye of Fate. But this calls for a larger sense of values, a more far-reaching vision than many amateurs possess.

Only the professional, too, seems to know the infinite value and necessity of immediacy, that creation of a scene so that it seems to be taking place before your very eyes. This is probably the hardest thing a writer has to learn. It is difficult to tell how this effect may be attained. It is achieved in part by a careful attention to detail, by a carefully attuned sense of time, by an intimate knowledge of the significance of small events, in part by the ability of the author to let himself sink into the moment he is describing. Katherine Mansfield had a genius for this thing called *Immediacy*. Many writers become so involved in the telling of the past, in small complexities that carry one away from the main theme, that the sense of immediacy is lost completely. The past, if it has to be explained, should be so much a part of the *now* that it never seems like the past. The reader should feel that he knows the past of the characters through their present. The device of the

"flashback," which every writer uses at some time or other, indicates immaturity and lack of discipline on the part of the author.

But it is discipline that makes a professional and discipline that makes him of value and proves to be its own reward. That discipline works into every department of his existence. If he earns a livelihood from writing, he writes, not a story every six months, but something every day, day after day, year after year. This has its tediousness and that tediousness proves the vanquishing point for most amateurs who later profess their work too good to sell. But out of that persistence, out of that rigorous discipline come compensations that the amateur will never know. One cannot create characters that live and breathe without a knowledge of human beings and one cannot know a great deal about humanity without attaining to that which gives all good writing its salt, pity, and, it may be, love. One cannot know a great deal about other people without knowing something of one's self. And to know one's self and to be able to live with that self is one of the greatest securities against old age, fear of death, and loneliness.

Chapter II

A LETTER TO A TALENTED YOUNG UNPUBLISHED WRITER

By WILLIAM SAROYAN

MANY thanks for sending me *The Day and the Night* which I enjoyed reading. It is the best story of yours I have seen, and one of the best stories I have ever read. I think you will be writing from now on. I mean really writing. There are a number of things you still have to learn about prose, the sound of words, the effect of them, the use of repetition, and so on. I will try to give you an idea in this letter of what I mean.

I took the liberty of making some corrections in the manuscript because I felt you would more easily understand how your prose could be improved by studying these corrections. The idea of prose is primarily this: clarity, lucidity. The reader must understand exactly what you mean, no matter how complex what you mean may be. If you yourself do not know exactly what you mean (and very often a writer will have a feeling that is very strong and yet very hard to express clearly) then you must tell the reader you yourself do not know *exactly* what you mean, or else you must not try to express *more* than it is possible to express in simple prose.

Now, this does not mean that you are to say over and over again in a story that you do not know what you mean: you simply *reveal* that this is so, in this particular case. You do this revealing by implication rather than by direct statement. It is not likely, however, that any feeling, or thought, is so complex or subtle that it cannot be clearly articulated: the way to articulate a complex feeling is to go about it slowly. Take it easy. Use all the words you need to use. *And leave out any words that do not express what you mean.* Just leave them out. If they do not express what you

mean, they are no good, and if they are not in the story at all, your story is consequently more effective.

I want to tell you a few things, so you will be able to go ahead with your work, writing as often as you must write, and doing so with the confidence a writer must have in order to write.

First, forget that you are an unpublished writer. Regard yourself, so far as you are concerned, as the only writer in the world. This is very important: it is not pride, not egotism, it is simply a necessary viewpoint for the serious writer. You must *believe* you alone of all the writers of the world are writing the story of the living.

Remember to be inwardly calm. Remember to look upon all living, evil and good, with a clean eye. Remember to be a part of the world with a pure heart. Remember to be good-humored. Remember to be generous. And remember that in the midst of that which is most tragic there is always the comic, and in the midst of that which is most evil, there is always much good. Remember to relate, in your work, the two extremes: one side and the other. And remember to smile.

I have already said you have much to learn, but do not be afraid. What you have to learn is what *can* be learned: you already have and know what cannot be learned.

I will talk about prose in general. I have already tried to tell you how important clarity is: remember each of the things I am saying. They are very important. First: clarity. Then ease, or grace: make your prose move along effortlessly, easily, and make the words fall in place naturally. Read your stuff aloud while you are writing and you will be able to know when a sentence or a paragraph isn't right. I am sure you mean something by your use of language that neither I nor any other writer means, but nevertheless you are on the spot when you use a word, or a phrase, or an idea which another writer has used in a special way.

I want you to write in a way that no one else in the world has written. Any writer who *is* a writer can do it. You have a new language within yourself: it may not be developed yet, but it *will*

develop if you make the right beginning. If you do not make the right beginning, you will never be able to write. They will put you down as one who has been influenced by another, and that will be the end. If they do that with your first stories, and your first book, there will never be any freedom from their judgment. The way not to write like anybody else is to go to the world itself, to life itself, to the senses of the living body itself, and to *translate* in your *own* way what you see, and hear, and smell, and taste, and feel, and imagine, and dream, and do: *translate* the thing or the act or the thought or the mood into your own language. If you make the right beginning, nothing can stop you, and all you will have to do is survive.

In writing this letter I am not being kind, and I do not want you to feel grateful to me. I don't want you to feel that I am encouraging you. I am selfish, and always will be. It is the kind of selfishness, I think, that God forgives. I want you to feel unindebted to anybody. I want you to feel whole. I can say these things to you now because you are not yet far along the way: and this is the time to tell you. You've got to be independent. You've got to believe in what you are doing and what you intend to do. You *cannot* feel indebted to anyone and be a great writer. You've got to be a little mean about the whole business, a little sore, and at the same time objectively generous and tolerant: not generous to anyone in particular, but to the idea: everything you do you do for yourself, not for another. For living. You've got to be selfish. This isn't pettiness: it has to do with what and how you will write.

And you've got to be alone. You can go among them and talk with them and laugh with them, but you've got to be alone. You've got to know that you've got to stay alone, even when you are with them. You've got to stay more watchful than any of the rest of them, and you've got to stay stronger. It is the only way you can begin to write great prose. And you've got to be humble. The three together: pride, strength, and humility, the knowing that you are nothing. Be wise: know the pure and the impure of

everything: know that one is inseparable from the other. And be fearless.

After you read this letter I want you to get up and yawn and go for a walk and say to yourself, To hell with Saroyan: because only then will you be able to begin. I want you to know it is no good to be encouraged. It's got to be a fight. Writing has got to be like defeating an enemy. (This is a long letter because I may not write to you again. I want to tell you now the important things I know. You yourself will find out the same things for yourself. You will *have* to find out for yourself. There is no other way out of it.)

I want you to know *The Day and the Night* is the work of a great writer.

I want you to go on being a great writer because this story is the beginning of yourself as a great writer. The other stuff is neither here nor there. Every writer, when young, writes the other stuff, and forgets it. You are lucky to have reached a great story in such a short time. Forget the other stuff. It's no good. That's nothing to worry about. It's lousy. Forget it. Remember this story and how it moves and what it does, and how it does it. Write another one. This same way. Don't write any more of the lousy ones. Don't write any more of the *lost* stuff. You have written one great story and one is all you need to write to stop writing the lousy ones. You're started. They're looking for new writers who can write, and you can write.

I think that's about all I know. I can't decide for you whether or not you *have got to write*, but if anything in the world, war, or pestilence, or famine, or private hunger, or anything, can stop you from writing, then don't write, don't *want* to write, forget it, be an honest clerk, go to the movies, be like everybody else, because if anything can even begin to keep you from writing, you aren't a writer and you'll be in a hell of a mess until you find out. If you *are* a writer, you'll still be in a mess, but you'll have better reasons. Good wishes and good luck.