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How to Write in 700 Easy Lessons

THE CASE AGAINST WRITING MANUALS

By Richard Bausch

IMAGE CREDIT: NICK CRAINE

I DECIDED YEARS AGO that I was no longer going to give readings dressed like a bum. That's the only way to put it: no more raggedy jeans and tennis shoes, no more flannel shirts with the long johns showing at the ends of the sleeves. I went and bought a couple of suits, some ties and white shirts, and a pair of dress shoes.

But on one trip I forgot to pack the damn shoes. So I asked the woman who was my host for my visit to a midwestern town if she could point me to a place where I could buy a pair. A Brooks Brothers, she said helpfully, was less than a block from the hotel. So I walked there, bought the shoes, and walked back wearing them. By the time I got to the hotel, they were already hurting. The woman—let's call her Delores—came to fetch me 20 minutes later. We had an hour to kill before the reading, and she asked if I would like to see the offices of the literary magazine she and her husband were running. It was within walking distance. Getting there took 10 minutes, and I was now in considerable pain from the new shoes; they seemed to be cutting into my ankles.

She took me to an office, where she showed me back copies of the magazine, going back several decades. It was an old magazine, and she was a good editor and a good person. I liked her. She showed me a room off the office, a warehouse, really, with metal shelves stacked with books. She and her husband were also running a press. All of the books, *all* of them, were books of instructions for constructing one's novel-story-play-poem—you name it (if you are reading this, you probably *can*)—the kinds of volumes advertised prominently in Writing magazines.

Now, I'm not speaking about books dealing with the aesthetics of the task, or with essays about the craft and critical analysis of examples of it—and we have several very fine volumes in that vein (Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House* and John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* come to mind)—no, I'm talking about straight how-to books, most of which claimed to offer shortcut advice, practical

instructions on “writing your *say the genre*,” and even in some cases “secrets” of the novelist’s or story writer’s or poet’s trade. That day, with Delores, I stood among the titles, amazed. Stack upon stack of them.

“These sell really well,” she told me. “You wouldn’t believe how many people want to be writers out there.”

I said, “Damn.” That was what came out of me. We were looking at 50 different titles—a lot. More than I would’ve believed existed. And in the next moment, she offered me \$10,000 to write one. “Really,” she said. “These kinds of books sell better than the fiction books.”

“Well,” I said. “Lordy.” I picked one up and put it down, picked up another and turned it in my hand and put it down. “Lordy.”

“Ten thousand dollars,” she said. “And I’ve heard you lecture. You could knock one of these off in a few days, I’ll bet.”

I was not—an not—in a position to take that amount of money lightly when it is offered to me, even for something I would never have thought of unless it came to me in this fashion. I have a family to support, children in college. So for an instant I was speechless. She stared, quietly waiting for my answer.

“You’re serious,” I got out at last.

“Absolutely.”

“Well,” I said, stalling for time. I was appalled. I’d forgotten the discomfort of the new shoes. “I’m—well, I’m working on this novel, you know. And I can’t imagine when I’d have the time to do it.”

“If you ever *get* some time—I mean it. Give me a call.”

“Um,” I said. And I felt myself deciding to go ahead and express something of my astonishment. “You know, I’m not really much in favor of this kind of thing. I had a conversation with a woman a year or so ago about her writing, and I asked what she was reading. Turns out that all her reading was in how-to books about writing her novel. She said she’d read them all, that they seemed to have been written for her, and her novel.”

“See?” Delores said. “And how was her writing?”

“It read as though it had been composed by one of those electronic calculators. An adding machine.”

Delores smiled. “Well, they do sell well, these books. And if you ever want to write one, let me know.”

I’d completely forgotten about the shoes.

Take a cursory look online. Amazon.com lists 4,470 titles under the heading of How to Write a Book. There, mixed with titles like *How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* and *How to Write and Sell Your Novel* are titles like *How to Manage Your Home Remodel*. Of course it’s the *how to* phrase that makes the listing what it is and where it is, but in fact, in terms of the expectations and the implied message, these books belong together, and according to the prevailing wisdom of our time, constructing a novel or a poem or a play is no different than building a back deck on your house.

The trouble of course is that a good book is not something you can put together like a model airplane. It does not lend itself to that kind of instruction. Every day books are published that contain no real artfulness in the lines, books made up of clichés and limp prose, stupid stories offering nothing but high concept and plot—or supra-literary books that shut out even a serious reader in the name of assertions about the right of an author to be dull for a good cause. (No matter how serious a book is, if it is not entertaining, it is a failure.) I'm not talking about the books we write or publish in the attempt to answer the need for entertainment at whatever level one chooses. And I have no quarrel with the genres, because to help people escape *from* life is harmless, and honorable enough, and in its way just as valuable as helping them escape *into* it. (Though I am a bit weary of the stream of stories from undergraduate students about the undead that I'm lately getting. I sometimes think *all* the zombie stories were written by one stupendously energetic fellow with a serious skin problem and not the slightest lick of talent—they are all so much alike, and so cloyingly adolescent.)

My quarrel is with the implication in the how-to books market that one can merely read *them* to find the magic secret for writing well enough to publish. Recently, at a college where I was lecturing, a student told me, with great pride, that he had “over a hundred books” in his library—I could see that I was meant to be impressed by the number, and that he considered himself a vastly well-read type of guy. He went on to say that many in his collection are how-to books. This person wants to *be* a writer, but he doesn't want to do the work. Being a writer is a stance he wants to take. He did not come to writing from reading books, good or bad. He came to it from deciding it might be cool to walk around in that role. I meet this kind of “writer” far too often now in my travels around the country—even, occasionally, in the writing programs.

I can hear the argument coming back: “Yeah, well, what *about* the writing programs? Don't they promise the same thing? Don't they encourage the same kind of thinking?” And the answer to that is quite simple: no, they do not. All of the writing programs, and most of the writers' conferences—I have taught at Bread Loaf and Sewanee, and elsewhere—read manuscripts in advance before accepting students. A person has to demonstrate talent to be accepted into a program of study. And while at times one wonders how this or that student got by the screening, in all instances the emphasis is on reading, and the workshops are not about writing as something like steam-fitting or the construction of an engine, but about the matters of craft that can be discussed as they come up, story by story.

Writing is not taught in these places; it is encouraged, given room to take place, and students in them always end up being better readers, whether they go on to produce books or not. I know an assumption exists in certain quarters that writing programs do damage, mostly by causing a so-called cookie-cutter effect, everyone sounding the same. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and you need only look at the work to know it. Allan Gurganus, Jane Smiley, T. C. Boyle, and I were all at the Iowa Writers' Workshop at roughly the same time. Allan and I had classes together. We hung out. I went horseback riding with Jane Smiley (her name was Jane Whiston then) and we talked about everything under the sun, including writing.

You would have trouble finding four writers who are more different.

If a cookie-cutter effect ever develops, it will come from people keeping to the manuals and how-to

books.

And writing that comes from those whose reading is confined to the how-to books is cramped and obvious. Here is a line from a how-to book: "Be daring. Don't be afraid to say it differently."

Here is a paragraph from someone, an avid reader of those manuals, who attempted to obey that advice:

Jane danced across the ballroom floor, her legs screaming. He came toward her, his hands big and red and hairy as lobsters. He tweaked her nipple and grabbed it as though it was the arm of a small child.

Daring! Different!

Unwittingly hilarious.

One can talk about being daring to a person whose ear and whose sensitivity to language has been given the benefit of wide reading. Otherwise, the exercise is one of utter futility, and when such talk is sold with the promise of making a writer out of someone who has not trained his or her ear, it borders on the same kind of remedy-hawking that snake-oil salesmen practiced in the 19th century.

A year after Delores asked if I wanted to write a how-to book, her husband asked me to donate a chapter on craft for a book of craft lectures that would be published to help make money for a writers' program. So I wrote something about strategies for making vivid characters in fiction, and donated it. When, after a period of months, I received the galley proofs from Delores's husband, I went over them, and saw that he had made some small cuts and suggested some other changes. I did my usual thing: agreed or disagreed, and usually found a third way. But coming to the end of it, I felt a strange sense that something was missing. Months had passed since I had written it, and I could not be sure. So I went looking for the original manuscript. Here is how the galley version of the last paragraph read:

Finally, one doesn't write out of some intellectual *plan* or strategy; one writes from a kind of beautiful necessity... It is not a stance.

Now, I knew I had said something in the piece about my feelings regarding how-to writing manuals. I was almost certain of it. When I located my original manuscript, here is what I found, everything in italics having been cut, with no indication that any cutting had taken place:

Finally, a word about this kind of instruction: it is always less effective than actually reading the books of the writers who precede you, and who are contemporary with you. There are too many "how-to" books on the market, and too many would-be writers are reading these books in the mistaken idea that this will teach them to write. I never read such a book in my life, and I never will. What I know about writing I know from having read the work of the great writers. If you really want to learn how to write, do that. Read Shakespeare, and all the others whose work has withstood time and circumstance and changing fashions and the assaults of the ignorant and the bigoted; read those writers and don't spend a lot of time analyzing them. Digest them, swallow them all, one after another, and try to sound like them for a time. Learn to be as faithful to the art and craft as they all were, and follow their example. That is, wide reading and hard work. One

doesn't write out of some intellectual plan or strategy; one writes from a kind of beautiful necessity *born of the reading of thousands of good stories poems plays... One is deeply involved in literature, and thinks more of writing than of being a writer.* It is not a stance.

So. The editor, feeling that the passages italicized here would damage sales, cut them, clearly in the hopes that I wouldn't notice the missing phrases. (I damn near didn't.)

I do not have to speculate about this. I have it from the editor himself, who went on in a phone conversation with me to argue that the passage could hurt sales. I said, "Sales of what? It's in a chapter of a book that would presumably be bought before anyone came upon it." And then I realized that he wasn't talking about sales of this particular book. I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but you can't print the piece with these phrases cut out of it. That does violence to my meaning. And if you do publish it this way, I'm going to make so much noise, oh, I can't even begin to tell you."

"Let me think about it," he said.

Two days later, he called and left a message on my office phone at George Mason University. "Um, I think we'll go ahead and cut the essay from the book. I wish we could see our way clear to use it, but we think we should leave it out."

That was 16 years ago. The industry of manuals on writing fiction has reached a point of saturation now, and it continues, even as the number of readers in the general populace declines. A nationwide poll recently showed that 25percent of all adults read no books at all in a given year.

With a frequency that is dismaying, I run into people who are widely versed in the manuals, and quasi-literate in all other ways. They have no sense of the love of the art they wish to practice, because they have very seldom or never been in the thrall of a work of fiction as practiced by the great artists in their own literary heritage, or even the good craftsmen in the genres. They may have had some exposure to the great writers, or some anthology-exposure to a fraction of someone, little pieces of the treasure that is there. Or their reading is so deficient that in fact the only books they've read that might be called fiction are the few best sellers that achieve some literary merit or cachet. Which is to say that these people, many of them college students, want to be considered serious writers; they seek literary excellence; but they have come to believe that they can accomplish this by means of the convenient shortcut. And the industry that produces the how-to manuals plays to them, makes money from their hope of finding a way to *be* a writer, rather than doing the work, rather than actually spending the time to absorb what is there in the vast riches of the world's literature, and then crafting one's own voice out of the myriad of voices.

My advice? Put the manuals and the how-to books away. Read the *writers themselves*, whose work and example are all you really need if you want to write. And wanting to write is so much more than a pose. To my mind, nothing is as important as good writing, because in literature, the walls between people and cultures are broken down, and the things that plague us most—suspicion and fear of the other, and the tendency to see whole groups of people as objects, as monoliths of one cultural stereotype or another—are defeated.

This work is not done as a job, ladies and gentlemen, it is done out of love for the art and the artists who brought it forth, and who still bring it forth to us, down the years and across ignorance and

chaos and borderlines. Riches. Nothing to be skipped over in the name of some misguided intellectual social-climbing. Well, let me paraphrase William Carlos Williams, American poet: literature has no practical function, but every day people die for lack of what is found there.

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