


On Learning How to Become a Writer of Fiction

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In his book *The Art of Fiction* (1985), John Gardner says that all that is required of the would-be writer is for him to understand clearly what it is that he wants to become and what he must do to become it. And if no matter how hard he tried he simply cannot do what he must do, then his book will help the would-be-writer understand why he was not sent into the world to be a writer but for some other noble purpose.

When we are yet still on the stage of wanting to become a writer of fiction, we seek to understand what this kind of writing is all about and we ask, too, what one must do to be able to do it. The search for answers is a long journey and will bring us to the likes of John Gardner and others like himself who are generous enough to write a guide for would-be-writers. Gardner's book is an in-depth study on the subject matter and reading him and his explanations what writing is all about will bring to mind Zen paradoxes. He tells us for one that writing is not only a kind of play, but it also a product of great deal of serious practice; that is not only intellectual but also intuitive; that it is not only a gift but it also a product of good education and good grasp of basic composition. It is no wonder that while reading him we may at first feel that indeed we can grasp the handle of the matter and yet on the next moment or page we go through a paroxysm of doubts and feeling of discomfiture, if indeed we can hack our way through the complexities. Nevertheless, one goes on reading him with these mixed feelings and with a hope that one could find a solid ground to stand on, something one can use to start with.

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And indeed we find a statement which is so simple and practical and logical and so easy to understand that one can hardly miss it. He says that writing comes from somebody who has a real love for sitting around and banging keys of a typewriter or keyboard. Eureka!

We have found the key. How can we indeed write if we do not sit and face a blank paper or screen? This is something we can implement, something which is easy to do. Easy? Let us hear what Anne Lamott, (1979) author of *Bird by Bird*, a book on instructions on life and writing. She has written the best description yet that I have come across of this magical creative moment.

You sit down, I say. You try to sit down at approximately the same time every day. This is how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively. So you sit down at, say nine every morning, or ten every night. You put a piece of paper in the typewriter, or you turn on your computer and bring the right file, and then you stare at it for an hour or so. You begin rocking, just a little at first, and then like a huge autistic child. You look at the ceiling, and over at the clock, yawn, and stare at the paper again. Then, with your fingers poised on the keyboard, you squint at an image that is forming in your mind—a scene, a locale, a character, whatever—and you try to quiet your mind so you can hear what that landscape or character has to say above the other voices in your mind. The other voices are banshees and drunken monkeys. They are the vices of anxiety, judgment, doom, guilt. also, sever hypochondria. There may be a Nurse Ratched—like listing of things that must be done right this moment: food that must come of the freezer, appointments that must be canceled or made; hairs that must be tweezed. But you hold an imaginary gun to your head and make yourself stay at the desk. There is a vague pain at the base of your neck. It crosses your mind that you have meningitis. Then the phone rings and you look up at the ceiling with fury, summon every ounce of noblesse oblige, and answer the call politely, with maybe just the merest hint of irritation. The caller asks if you're working, and you say yeah, because you are.

Writing fiction is difficult! This is the first understanding that will dawn on anyone who attempts to write. This difficulty is the content of many metaphoric descriptions one of which says that we bleed when we write. Anyway, we put this

aside, for we do not want to dampen our enthusiasm and scare ourselves witless before we can even start. We do the next best thing to do and this is to ask: Are there any set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction?

Now, it seems that the writers of guide books in the writing process know that this question will be asked and they take it head on early in their books. Say Anne Lamott,

"I wish I had a secret I could let you in on, some formula ... some code of word that has enabled me to sit at my desk and land flight of creative imagination like an air-traffic controller. But I don't."

Meanwhile, John Gardner has this to say:

"As we'll see, some general principles can be set down and some very general warnings can be offered; but on the whole the search for aesthetic absolutes is a misapplication of the writer's energy ... Trustworthy aesthetic universals do exist, but they exist at such a high level of abstraction as to offer almost no guidance to the writer.

And from Natalie Goldberg from her book *Writing Down the Bones* (1986) a book who promise to help free the writer within oneself:

"Learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer. One neat truth about writing cannot answer it all.

They are very clear on being unclear, precise on the unpreciseness of it all. Nevertheless, we should not lose heart for Gardner started his book saying that most of the people he knew who wanted to become writers, knowing what it meant, did become writers. Can we? We can always try. And perhaps in the act of doing so we discover what Anne Lamott has experienced:

"That thing you had to force yourself to do—the actual f writing—turns to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward."