

Creative urges

WRITE AWAY: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life

by Elizabeth George

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TERENCE BLACKER

When I worked in book publishing, we held a first-novel competition with Radio 4. It was for the best work of fiction by an unpublished writer, and it was a nightmare. A mighty avalanche of manuscripts, well over 200, descended upon our offices, occupying an entire room. I would have dreams in which that mountain of unpublished and mostly unpublishable fiction came to life and writhed, keened and moaned in frustrated creative agony.

And that was before the craze for novel-writing really took hold. Today it seems almost everyone is

at it. Some people, arguably the more sensible, write for therapeutic purposes but many, poor fools, are inspired by dreams of becoming famous and rich through their stories. A vast and rather profitable industry now exists to feed, and feed off, this fantasy.

Elizabeth George is peculiarly well qualified to provide a road map for the mighty army of would-be novelists. A bestselling writer of crime fiction, including the Inspector Lynley series, she is bright and well read enough to refer authoritatively not only to popular writers, such as Ken Follett, Dean Koontz and John le Carré, but also to the heavyweights — Steinbeck, Faulkner, Melville and Shakespeare. She has, too, unusually for a successful novelist, continued to teach creative writing over a number of years. In *Write Away*, she sets out to bring together the

fruits of the classroom and of her own authorial experience. The result is an impressively thorough and down-to-earth guide which any potential novelist would do well to read and study.

George takes a bracingly uncompromising approach towards writing. Talent and passion are nothing without cool, clear-eyed discipline, she believes. The art of writing will finally be up to the individual but its craft, much of which takes place before pen is put to paper, can be learnt in advance, thus liberating the novelist once the real writing begins.

There is nothing startling or revolutionary in the way she breaks down the component parts of fiction-writing and examines them forensically, one after another. Romantics might argue that to isolate and deconstruct research, setting, landscape, the creation of character, dialogue, the shaping of scenes and narrative, and the self-editing process is to take the mystery out of creativity but this nuts-and-bolts approach is exactly what

the inexperienced writer requires.

Even those parts of *Write Away* that seem to be pushing the schematic method to its limit end up justifying themselves. I was alarmed to discover that there are formal, established models for plotting a novel — the Seven-Step Storyline, the Hourglass Plot, Gustav Freitag's Pyramid and so on — but was then thrilled to discover that a current work-in-progress conformed precisely (and accidentally) to something called *The Hero's Progress*.

George backs up her argument that fiction is a rough and arduous business by opening each chapter with a quote, often full of anguish and self-doubt, from her own writer's journal — a brilliant idea, since there is nothing more encouraging to the unpublished writer than to read of the private agonies of those who have broken through to the big time. She is also not afraid of taking a sideswipe at those who have irritated her. The sloppiness of copy editors particularly annoys her: in future editions

it might be worth revising the almost identical quotes opening chapters 15 and 19, a slip that illustrates her point rather too well.

A rare additional virtue of *Write Away* is that its lessons are illustrated by the analysis of quite lengthy passages of fiction taken not only from the author's own work (which is less boastful than it may sound) but those of writers as various as John Irving, P D James, Toni Morrison and Stephen King. Here is a book that leaves the mystery and ecstasy of literary creation to other authors (notably, Annie Dillard with her brilliant, eccentric *The Writing Life*) and concentrates on its essential gritty details. The process George describes may daunt the half-hearted — nothing but a good thing — but it will provide a perfect DIY guide for the determined new novelist, and deserves to be in print for many years to come. □

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