



So You Want to Write: How to Master the Craft of Writing Fiction and the Personal Narrative

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The authors have distilled the essence of the workshops they've led for many years, shaping the core material into a book focused on the fundamentals of writing fiction and memoir, to help aspiring authors enrich their own writing. The husband-and-wife team writes from experience as owners of Leapfrog Press and as novelists whose work has won acclaim, such as Piercy's best sellers *The Longings of Women* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and the co-written novel *Storm Tide*.

Their paperback consists of thirteen chapters that cover the essentials, from "Beginnings" to "Characterization" to the chapter with the enticing title "A Scandal in the Family" to the businesslike section called "Work and Other Habits." At the end of each of the first nine chapters are exercises that the authors encourage readers to actually complete so they may benefit fully from the book.

"Beginnings" is Chapter 2, yet with its incisive rules (for example, "Do not confuse the Beginning of the Story with the beginning of the events in the story") and its instruction that writers not take themselves too seriously, this chapter seems to be the book's natural beginning. Another strong chapter is "Characterization," in which the authors describe three types of characters to avoid in a creative piece and the most important element about a protagonist: the thing he wishes for or fears.

The star of the book is Chapter 10, "A Scandal in the Family." This seamless and exceptionally engaging chapter belongs to Wood, as he describes how his novel *The Kitchen Man* was rejected by twenty-four mainstream publishers before he trimmed the manuscript and sent it to two small presses, one of which offered him a contract. Thanks to a passionate publicist, it was reviewed by major newspapers, but the deeper story lies in the fact that Wood's book contained the truth of the pain he felt growing up with parents who mistreated one another. "I wrote what I had to write. It was the truth of my side of the experience. It may have hurt my parents to read it, it may have embarrassed them, but it did not kill them." He wisely states, "In the way shared tragedy sometimes does, it brought us closer together."

With the exception of Chapter 10, it is not clear at the start of some chapters which author is narrating, a flaw some readers may forgive. Overall, the book is a valuable tool for the apprentice in search of practical advice on the craft of fiction and memoir writing from accomplished novelists.

DOROTHY GOEPEL (September / October 2001)

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