

The New Writer's Handbook 2007: A Practical Anthology of Best Advice for Craft and Career

Philip Martin

Philip Martin, Editor

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It's a truism that unsuccessful writers are more likely than successful ones to produce writer's handbooks. Although failure may be more instructive than success, a high percentage of books such as these reside in the broader category of potboilers. The best ones, on the other hand, are usually written or compiled by persons who are not primarily writers. It's not that successful writers think revealing their secrets might result in tougher competition for a slice of the marketplace, it's simply that the incentive to write a how-to book of this kind is relatively small.

This doesn't mean that young writers should steer clear of handbooks; it does mean that they ought to exercise good sense in selecting one. The most evident indication of the quality of Philip Martin's book is its wide and various array of authoritative contributors—59 of them. A highly experienced editor and producer of books, winner of the Benjamin Franklin and Banta awards, Martin might have elected to research and write the 59 articles himself; to his credit, he preferred to offer the specialized expertise of contributors. Their individual voices invigorate the work as a whole, making it a more appealing read than most how-to books.

Martin's opening section is "Creativity, Motivation & Discipline" (eleven articles), including the excellent "Where Do Ideas Come From?" Yes, sometimes from Poughkeepsie, as Martin quips before going on to report how other writers have responded to that question and what they have written about it themselves.

The heart of the book is, of course, the writing section ("The Craft of Writing" (eighteen articles). Among the pieces that young writers might find useful is "M-Factors: Qualities that Help You Break into Major Magazines." The title oversells the article, the truth being, of course, that few young writers break into major magazines. But the suggestions would work for lesser magazines as well—story angles that surprise or tantalize, or "high-concept" stories that try to say something (for example) about "the spirit of our era."

Young writers will find all the information they need as well as a good deal of information they won't yet know that they need—which is to say that Martin's collection also offers advice for those who are a little further along.

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