



Creating Fiction: Instruction and Insights from Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs

Julie Checkoway

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This guide contains 24 chapters on the craft of fiction writing from 24 well-known writers including Jane Smiley, Richard Russo, Charles Johnson and W.D. Wetherell.

Creating Fiction: Instruction and Insights from Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs Details

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Steven says

An Associated Writing Program publication that was a standard textbook back in my MFA days. A collection of 23 essays. Seemed quite good then, when I was immersed in elevating my writing chops, but looking at it again now, I think you'd need to be *serious*, MFA- serious, to survive working through this book as a writing text. The one essay in this collection that I do return to from time to time is Robin Hemley's "Sympathy for the Devil: What to Do About Difficult Characters."

Jennifer Spiegel says

Creating Fiction edited by Julie Checkoway

This isn't a blog-worthy review, since it's just my own personal notes on things to read or look into. This was, though, one of the best pedagogical books I've read on fiction-writing, and I'd definitely recommend it for anyone genuinely interested in, well, creating fiction.

The essays are written (on everything from plot to revision, from character to style) by all of these great writers you've probably heard of, and they often quote other great writers—so there's a wealth of insight from writers on writing. Plus, they include exercises at the end of their essays, and they're good ones. I've never used this book in the classroom, but I hope to do so.

Here's my own reading list derived from reading this book:

John Gregory Brown: DECORATIONS IN A RUINED CEMETARY (his essay was especially insightful about writing fiction which incorporates autobiographical emotional truths)

Truman Capote: "My Side of the Matter" (beginning "in medias res")

Raymond Carver: "The Train" (read it with Cheever story, as it picks up where he left off)

John Cheever: "The Enormous Radio" (magical realism)

John Cheever: "The Five-Forty-Eight" (read with Carver; consider unsympathetic characters)

J.M. Coetzee: THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG (uses third-person unified pov with the voice of Dostoyevsky)

Stuart Dybek: "Paper Lantern" (uses a frame story)

Alice Hoffman: PRACTICAL MAGIC (magical realism)

Shirley Jackson: "The Lottery" (I guess I should already)

Randall Kenan: "This Far" (written in the second person)

Steven Millhauser: MARTIN DRESSLER (magical realism)

Alice Munro: "Friend of My Youth" (uses a frame story, flashback)

Alice Munro: "Prue" (about a surprising character)

Tim O'Brien's "The Magic Show" (his nonfiction essay on fiction-writing)

Mary Ann Taylor-Hall: COME AND GO, MOLLY SNOW (has a strong narrative voice)

Some other thoughts:

- John Gregory Brown's essay seemed especially relevant to me—as he wrote about how he incorporated certain autobiographical truths into his fiction.
 - Philip Gerard wrote a great essay on structuring the novel and story collection. I found this one and the others on structure and plot helpful. I feel like my own study of these things has been slightly negligent.
 - Alberto Ríos wrote about the importance of punctuation and style manuals. He affirmed my punctuation protests, though I do selectively use some British spellings.
 - Stephen Dixon's essay on submitting work did strike me as slightly outdated. It was interesting nonetheless, but his success and the tactics he advocated seem unlikely to work for the likes of me.
-

Josh says

I picked this up for a measly dollar and lo, it turns out to be one of the best writing books of its kind (and I've read my share). Thoughtful essays, practical advice, and many worthwhile exercises. Highly recommended for beginning and intermediate writers.

Gail says

This book is DENSE. Full of essays from writers who are academics, it was a bit of a slog, but I took pages upon pages of notes from it, learned a lot, and have to say that I feel like it's as close to a mini-course in getting your MFA as you're gonna get if you're a serious writer who's interested.

Samir Rawas Sarayji says

It's been a while since I read a good book on writing! This collection of essays on creative writing, compiled and edited by Julie Checkoway, doesn't disappoint. There's much to like:

1. It's a very accessible and hands-on book. It should easily get the beginning and motivated writer to write.
2. From the simpler to the more complex topics of narrative fiction, writers like Joan Didion, Charles Baxter, Jane Smiley... discuss techniques of the craft.
3. Loads and loads of writing exercises for beginners (each contributor has exercises based on their topic).
4. Some topics covered like Tone and Pitch, or The Rules of Magical Realism don't often appear in other writing books and are well-handled here.
5. Especially nice to see how different authors approach the teaching of the craft in one book.

Beginners should definitely grab a copy and read it for insight and inspiration.

Andy Hickmott says

A great idea for a compilation: essays by leading teachers of creative writing on subjects of particular interest to them. John Barth's essay on plotting is the best explanation of 'beginning, middle and ending' I have ever

found.

DeMisty D. says

A collection of essays on why and how certain writing devices work, along with at least one prompt for the subject of each essay. There are also additional prompts in the last few pages of the book.

The essays are all written by prominent writers and writing teachers of fiction. Richard Russo's essay "Location, Location, Location: Depicting Character Through Place" gets a handle on what it means to have place as character and the importance of place in a story. "The Conjuror's Art: The Rules of Magical Realism and How to Break Them" by Carrie Brown shows how magic may work in the genre, noting that the magic in the story must have either an "emotional or psychological foundation" (221). She also offers examples of magic at work in magic-realism, including in classical texts.

This text is useful for teachers of fiction writing.

Tara Calaby says

I particularly liked the earlier essays in this collection, because they felt a lot like writers talking about their own processes (which is always interesting to me), instead of giving instructions about how it *should* be done. I found, however, that the book read more and more like your standard writing theory book as it went on.

missy jean says

This is the best craft book I've read yet. I keep going back to it over and over again.

J.I. says

Good advice for the novice writer, I suppose, but too many of the essays foolishly posit ideas as the only way to write, which can be misleading/disheartening for the novice writer and all of them, honestly, are too simplistic and lacking in sophisticated for the experienced writer. I honestly couldn't recommend this. It isn't bad so much that it isn't very good.

Bry Ann says

Helpful. You connect with some authors teachings, others not so much. I learned some really great things and some great exercises. Not life changing or anything, but worth reading for sure if you want to improve your fiction writing.

Chicklit says

This is one of my favorite writing books. It's a collection of essays by contemporary writers, most of whom also teach writing workshops. Instead of being a strict "how to" book, it presents several in-depth perspectives on the craft of fiction writing.

Jenny Maloney says

This book is excellent if you need writing exercises. Put it on your desk and when you're stuck, flip open to a chapter...same with Three AM Epiphany.

Michele says

This book was assigned for the first-ever creative writing class I took, and it's now pretty well dog-eared and worn. (And we didn't even go all the way through it in class!) It's chock-full of great essays: lessons, exercises, examples, and especially inspiration; it's written by teachers of the Associated Writing Programs and edited by Julie Checkoway. I absolutely loved working from this book and plan to go through it again and again and again!

Chitra Divakaruni says

A collection of articles by famous writers about the different aspects of writing fiction, including structuring stories in multiple ways, revealing and withholding information masterfully, creating sympathy for negative characters, and revising to understand the true heart of the story. Very specific, detailed, filled with good examples and useful exercises. My upper-level Creative Writing undergraduate students (4th year) at the University of Houston love this book.
