

Psychiatric First Aid for Fiction Writers



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PSYCHOLOGY'S the thing in short-story writing. If you want to learn to be a short-story writer, to vie with its masters in literary fame and with its present-day exponents in earning power, get at—or, rather, have an expert get at—your psychology. Get him to prescribe for your case. Then go back to your pencil or typewriter, and—presto!—maybe the established celebrities in the realm of short-story writing will have to look to their laurels!

At least that is the gist of the view held on this subject by a man who thinks it quite feasible to teach people how to write short stories, and has made practical application of his psychological theories. He is Professor Walter B. Pitkin, instructor in "feature" and short-story writing at the School of Journalism, Columbia University. Trained as a philosopher and psychologist by six years of study with the great scientists of Europe, he began by teaching those subjects at Columbia. While doing so he also wrote fiction to increase his income. Out of curiosity, he took his problems as a writer into his psychological laboratory and studied them.

From his studies he deduced this: The story writer's job is 90 per cent. psychology. If the writer understands himself and also the motives and eccentricities of other people, why they do what they do, he can write successfully, given a command of English.

Then he began to teach short-story writing, basing his methods on the above premises. His success at turning out writers at the School of Journalism he attributes to the fact that he confines his efforts almost altogether to doing exactly the opposite of what fiction teachers are commonly supposed to do, namely, to urge their students to imitate classical examples and strive to "cultivate style."

Professor Pitkin says that he simply helps the beginner to find himself, to know what he wants to do, and to show him how to carry out his own ambitions.

Many are the curious experiences Professor Pitkin has had in "psychologizing" his students. One young man, for instance, began by writing love stories as class exercises, and did them with such skill and lyric feeling that Professor Pitkin soon told him: "Young man, go your way in peace; I have nothing to teach you; you are a successful writer."

A year later this same student returned with a bunch of rejected manuscripts—all love stories. To all, he said, he had given the best he had in him. He was in despair. He had sold his first three stories readily, and then came a string of failures.

"What on earth is the matter with me?" he asked his former instructor.

Professor Pitkin soon discovered that, within the year, the young man had married! He was living love stories and so could not write them.

"Psychology," said Professor Pitkin, "explains that a certain type of person can express himself deeply only about those things he yearns for, not about what he understands or possesses."

The professor then turned to the young man and asked: "Now what would you like most to do?"

"Oh, sail the South Seas and live the life of a freebooting pirate!" was the prompt answer.

"Then write adventure stories!" advised Professor Pitkin. The young man took the advice. Soon he began to receive checks again instead of rejection slips.

Not all students accept advice with as much docility as this. One young woman, for instance, came from the West, stating that she wanted to write of high romance, staged with aristocratic European backgrounds.

Professor Pitkin cross-questioned her at great length. He discovered that she was well gifted with powers of observation and that she hadn't missed a single detail of life in the small Western town whence she had come.

"You should write stories about your own home town," prescribed the professor.

"That stuff!" exclaimed the seeker for guidance. "Good heavens, I came to New York to get away from it! I'm sick of it! I don't want anything more to do with it!"

"Now, see here," argued her instructor, "you're suffering from what psychologists call 'suppressed appetites.' You've been dreaming of gilded Courts, ravishing ladies with pearls and trains and Ducal husbands, but you can't write about such life without knowing a lot about it. You know nothing about it. Forget your castles in Spain and let's have the tragedies and comedies of the little town back home."

"Never!" insisted the ardent novice; "I can't write about things and people I hate!"

"All right," concluded the professor, "Have your own way, I'm through with you."

Instructor and pupil fought the matter out. Professor Pitkin declares that he had, literally, to "beat the truth" into that young woman. Ultimately, he won out. She consented to make a first attempt with her "small town stuff." She made a second—and sold it to a magazine.

This encouraged her. The little town back home began to seem more romantic. She became interested in it. She sold a story to a magazine for \$250, a second for \$350, and today she receives a handsome salary for writing scenarios for one of the largest motion-picture companies.

Usually, however, Professor Pitkin finds it necessary not so much to help the young writer to know what to write about as to show him or her how to make the most of what they do know and want to write about. A typical case was a young girl of 19 who came from Wisconsin and graduated this year.

The first stories written by this young lady were "promising," but they were almost hopelessly wanting in emotional strength. She "dodged" her big scenes. As a consequence her stories invariably fell flat.

"What is the matter with me?" she asked the professor. "You say my plots are good, but I can't make them go."

"You can't write emotionally," said the professor, "because you simply don't know what produces emotion. You continually solve emotional crises instead of producing them. Psychology tells us that emotion is produced when two impulses, mutually conflicting, struggle within the same person at the same time."

"Take a mother, for instance, who is waiting for news as to whether her child, who is undergoing a serious operation, is alive or dead. Give us a few pages of description of the two impulses in the mother's heart: one, the impulse to believe that the surgeon may save her child's life, the other that the surgeon's knife may kill her child. Never mind about your own emotions; just tell us about those two impulses."

The girl sat down and did, in a matter-of-fact way, what she had been told. Professor Pitkin glanced at the result.

"Read it to the class," he said. She read it aloud. When she had finished, her classmates were all wiping their eyes.

After this experience the young senior, in possession of a means of getting outside her own inhibiting impulses, wrote two stories and sold them both to a leading woman's magazine for \$250. She has now gone home to begin the career of a real author.

After a prolonged course of nursing literary inspirations into being in this manner, Professor Pitkin retires to his farm out in New Jersey, where he does writing of his own. His last volume, dealing with the Japanese question, was written, he confesses, in his overalls.

Here is Professor Pitkin's own story of how he teaches short-story writing:

By WALTER B. PITKIN,
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FOR some twelve years I have been training writers and have had the pleasure of seeing them succeed. But for fully five years I was completely fooled about my own methods. I fondly believed that I was doing one thing, and all the while I was doing something quite different!

When I took up the work at Columbia University, there were two and only two recognized systems of teaching the young genius how to wield his pen. One was the inspirational method, and the other was the editorial.

The inspirational method sets the aspirant at work reading the masterpieces of literature and working himself up into a fine frenzy over their beauties. When in this frenzy he is supposed to catch their fire and burn thereafter with his own light. It was, of course, Stevenson who set the mark of classic approval on this ancient academic art of esthetic arson. That it has certain possibilities of good cannot be denied, but they are much slighter than its practitioners suppose. The young writer who trusts overmuch the stimulus of the Great Dead, or even that of the Best Sellers, seldom has much in him to catch on fire. The very presence of that trustful-

ness is evidence of low creative power. The man who truly has something to say is self-reliant, stubborn and even exasperatingly pig-headed.

The other method was the one I thought I accepted. It is built on the idea that a story or an article is written primarily to be sold to some definite periodical, which appeals to some definite class of readers and hence must deliver goods of a certain flavor, put up in acceptable package form. Hence the young writer must be taught to spell correctly, turn off well-rounded sentences and paragraphs, to produce crisp conversational lines, to catch the spirit of the times in the selections of his characters and their vicissitudes, and generally to supply what the market demands. This demand, of course, is to be discovered by observing what editors are paying honest dollars for.

There is much more truth in this commercial method than in the literary one that preaches imitation and inspiration. And the instructor who belittles it is unjust to his students. For the first five years of my university work, it impressed me as the one thing that demanded persistent preaching. And, as my young people went out into the world in ever-growing numbers and became story writers, motion picture authors, editors and reporters, I fell into the belief that this trade information they got from me was turning the trick.

It was an easy mistake, considering their commercial success. I used to keep a rough record of their sales, and I found that in my first three years of teaching my students sold their class exercises for more than \$5,000. From 1912 to 1917 they sold about \$45,000 worth, of which about one-third went to the motion pictures. During the war there was a bad slump, of course; but since then things have been steadily picking up, in spite of a bad magazine market and the worst depression the motion picture world has ever experienced.

During the past year my university students have made a new low record, disposing of less than \$1,000 worth of fiction written for the classes and barely \$2,000 worth of articles and motion pictures; but my other students have brought the average up nicely by cashing in to the tune of more than \$8,500. Were I writing a circus poster for myself, I should be tempted to relate the earnings of all my students after leaving my classes. But that would be stretching matters.

The one point I wish to make here is that this market success misled me. And I did not see the thing straight until I canvassed several hundred of my former students and a score of colleges where my instruction book has been used. Their replies to my questionnaires opened my eyes.

I asked, of course, what they had derived from personal instruction and from no other source. With few exceptions, they declared something like this: "I found a queer little twist in my own ways of thinking that I couldn't sense without help from outside." Or "I had fallen

into a bad habit and had to be kicked out of it." Or "I thought I was wildly interested in writing a great philosophical novel, and when you got through with me, I knew that I was really interested in pictures of humble life back home."

All of a sudden it came home to me that, although I had gone into journalism and the writing game and had struggled to assume the ordinary editorial attitude and point of view, in reality I had never done it, but had gone on being the very thing that I first chose to be, a student of psychology and its applications. My own deepest interest lay not in correcting manuscripts and fixing them up for market, but in analyzing the minds of their authors and the minds of the people depicted in the stories.

For fifteen years prior to my taking up the educational work I am now engaged in, I spent nearly all of my days over psychology and philosophy. And you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I am merely adapting what I then learned to the problems of journalism and literature. In short, I give intelligence tests, make psychological diagnoses, and indulge in vocational guidance on the basis of them. My instruction is one per cent. literature, five per cent. strictly business and ninety-four per cent. psychological clinic.

The jobs this clinic has to handle are mainly two. One is the correction of bad habits. The other is discovering the real interests and impulses behind men's avowed wishes to write short stories.

To the student I leave the task of mastering the technique of writing. That technique is quite as definite and as objective as algebra, perspective or counterpoint, though of course infinitely more intricate and difficult. It is set down in books and can be mastered with patience in the solitude of one's study.

But no man can discover for himself the precise nature and influence of his own habits. Still less can he see through himself to the point of becoming fully aware of his profoundest and most lasting interests. Here, then, are services which a competent teacher and critic can positively render. They are far from easy. They cannot be broadcast wholesale by any correspondence-school method. They are as intimate as surgery. In fact, I suspect they are, more often than not, a branch of surgery. Let me give a case or two that indicate this.

One of the deepest differences between human minds is that one which we so often find between the complete reporter and the creative thinker. And one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a beginner is to misunderstand his own interest in reporting and creating.

Every year I witness several little tragedies of this sort. A young man comes to New York to break into Park Row. Somebody has persuaded him that the newspaper game is the greatest adventure on earth, and he loves adventure. He gets a job by some happy fluke, but soon finds the work a horrible grind and his own

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stories singularly dissatisfying to himself and perhaps more so to his editor.

He comes around to me for help. The first thing I do is to have him do a fairly easy job of reporting for me. Then I ask him to forget newspapers and editors, and to write anything he likes to about the same incident he has just reported, and to put it in exactly the form that most interests him. If he has been in the mill long, he cannot do this. The inner pressure of habit is too strong. Sooner or later, though, I get his copy. If it shows the slightest play of imagination, I suspect he is in the wrong pew.

Then I make a second experiment. I give him some hypothetical situations, usually fragments of plots or thrilling news episodes; and I request him to develop them off hand into a story. Seldom does this test fail to reveal something important. If he sits in a daze and twiddles a pencil, I hazard a guess that, whatever his trouble may be, it isn't that of being thwarted in a desire to do imaginative writing. If he gleams and leaps at the task as if it were a glorious game, I know he has been in the wrong pew.

Cases like this are usually easy to analyze. The hard ones are those in which the writer has somehow become wedded to a habit of work

or to an ideal which stands between him and his own vision of things. This is immeasurably worse than merely getting into the wrong pew. It assumes a myriad of forms, few of which can be understood until I have learned much about the personal history of the sufferers. Often the truth turns out to be high comedy.

Some years ago a young woman came with the declaration that she adored Meredith and intended to devote her whole life to writing about American life in the purest Meredithian manner. At first I supposed she was just another of those innumerable victims of the literary inspirational method. But I soon made a discovery. She adored Meredith quite wonderfully, but with a difference. She recurred with odd frequency to the portrayal of a mild villain who never sat in Meredith's gallery and, so far as I could see, never could. She said very mean things about this hapless scamp. And pretty soon I began to wonder about him. Who gave him an admission card to her pages anyhow?

Little by little, by dint of talking about him, I found the truth. He was her fiancé, and she detested him. They had discovered temperamental differences. He laughed at them. She took them tragically. There were reasons—I don't know what—for her dreading an open break, but she wanted him to weary of her and

let the affair "taper off" into nothingness. Among other things, he hated Meredith and he disapproved of her wasting so much time writing stories.

You can see all the rest, I trust. If not, see Freud.

Six months later, my authoress was at work on some very pretty Home-Town stories, Meredith and the villain quite forgotten.

A commoner and, I think, pathetic type is the writer who has caught the knack of turning out salable stories of a cheap sort and does it for a living, all the while despising the stuff and growing more and more cynical toward the social order that makes this misery profitable. I find such writers very difficult to help. But it

can be done, generally by discovering for them a type of story in which they are sincerely interested and at the same time salable.

And this brings me to the observation that nearly all writers who have a definite taste and bent instinctively shun in the magazines all stories that do not conform to their likings, with the result that they seldom realize the possibilities of such abhorred types as a vehicle for their own self-expression. To train a writer to read tales that he naturally shuns and to find in them no more than certain technical values for himself is to help him in a way he cannot help himself. I might name half a dozen cases in which, by doing little more than this, I have dragged weary hack writers out of their rut and given them a start toward the higher goal.

Petty habits of craftsmanship are astonishingly stubborn. I mean

such things as the habit of excessive brevity, which has been absurdly preached by many literary teachers and critics; the habit of overwriting, which usually crops up in a person who has read deeply in the field of realistic novels and then attempts short stories; the habit of injecting one's personal opinions into the picture too copiously; the habit of erudite allusion and flowery language; the habit of sticking too passionately to the very first form which a bright story idea assumes and failing to experiment with its many variations; all these and many more can be successfully treated, not by correcting the writer's manuscripts, but solely by watching him patiently for some months and "getting under his skin."

This is how and why the psychological clinic is useful in the literary world.