

Adapt your writing for the Internet

The Elements of Internet Style: The New Rules of Creating Valuable Content for Today's Readers by the editors of EEI Press. Allworth Press, 192 pages. Paper, \$24.95.

By Chuck Leddy

AS READERS GET more of their information from digital rather than print sources, writers need to be capable of adapting their work to this new media landscape. Writing for print is not the same as writing for the Web, and different style rules apply. While the authors say on the first page of this valuable guide that “[n]ew is the new normal” and urge writers to redefine their roles, they also admit that not much has changed at all in the brave new Internet world: “the point of publishing is to meet the needs of our audiences. New technology does not change that—though it has altered the traditional relationships between content creator, publisher, and audience.”

Among the many valuable insights the authors provide is a chapter on how readers read on a computer screen. They describe how online readers use their eyes to scan the material in front of them, and how writers can use this information when crafting content. Another chapter offers an in-depth profile of “millennials,” the demographic born roughly between 1980 and 2002, and suggests ways of reaching this new, multitasking generation that is presently defining the Internet (e.g., “give them only what they need to know”).

Millions of writers have turned to blogging to get their work noticed. The authors show you how to set up a blog and run it successfully. They stress the importance of writing a few “introductory posts explaining who you are and

what your goals are ... [and that] indicate which topics you hope to discuss.” And like many other style writers, the authors here stress brevity (“keep it short”) and the use of “strong verbs.” They also recommend ways of defusing so-called “flame wars”—bickering started by negative or personal attacks on a blog that can hamper open discussion.

Perhaps the book’s most helpful chapter describes how to structure and organize content (i.e., text and photos) on a Web site. There are different organizational choices to consider depending on the target audience and the goals of the Web site. How does a writer decide among the many design choices the authors carefully describe? “Testing. The only way to know whether the structure you have selected works is to watch as a flesh-and-blood reader ... tries to use it,” they explain.

Writing style on the Web is evolving, but the basic trend is in favor of strong organization and textual brevity, the authors say: “Use a lot of bulleted lists and subheads. Keep it short. Take advantage of the ability to link. Keep it short. Write using the ‘inverted pyramid’ of newspaper style. ... Make sure the writing integrates with the site design. Did we mention that you should keep it short?”

The book even offers lots of solid advice on writing e-mail messages that are short and precise. “Each [e-mail message] should address a single topic,” the authors note. E-mail senders should also “try to make your subject field as informative as possible, so a reader faced with a dozen e-mails first thing in the morning will have some idea which

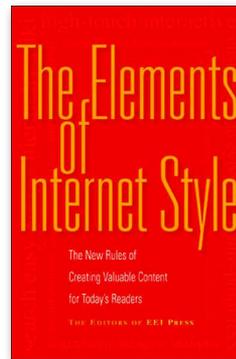
to open first.” Most critically, senders should reread their messages before they hit the send button: “Wait a second,” before sending, the authors urge; “once you hit ‘send,’ that e-mail is gone beyond recall” and may result in embarrassment later.

Near the book’s end, the authors provide a terrific glossary of new words you’ll need to know to write effectively online and to understand the Web environment. They explain, for example, the meaning of “viral marketing” (“a marketing technique in which people are encouraged to contact friends to recommend the product”), “webcast” (“a transmission of an event like a concert or conference over the Internet”), “click-through” (“a Web advertising term for when a person clicks on an Internet banner ad and triggers the associated hyperlink that leads to more information”), and dozens of other words.

Most of all, the authors stress the importance of being prepared for technological change. Writers in today’s fast-shifting, technology-driven world need to adapt in order to take advantage of emerging writing opportunities: “Accept with as much grace as possible the truth that being a content creator means a life of instability: learning, relearning, unlearning.” This manual on Internet style is a great place to begin that process of getting your writing online and hitting home with readers.

Chuck Leddy

Chuck Leddy, a contributing editor at *The Writer*, lives in Boston and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His book reviews appear regularly in *The Boston Globe*, and he has also contributed to *The Washington Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Chicago Tribune*.



A master critic writes on the art of fiction

How Fiction Works by James Wood. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 288 pages. Hardcover, \$24.

By Erika Dreifus

CONFESSION TIME: It's more than a bit intimidating to be writing a review of a book by James Wood. That's because Wood, professor of the practice of literary criticism at Harvard University, is perhaps best known for his own reviews, which appear frequently in the pages of *The New Yorker*, where he is now a staff writer (he previously spent 12 years as a literary critic for *The New Republic* and, at the age of 26, was appointed chief literary critic of *The Guardian* of London). He is accomplished and knowledgeable, and his book provides exactly the caliber of writing about writing—and the same disposition toward realist fiction—that his readers have come to expect.

Which is to say that *How Fiction Works* is a smart, demanding and rewarding read. It has certainly enriched my understanding of its subject and deepened my admiration for some of my most beloved authors. But as much as I enjoyed the book, I suspect that it's not for everyone.

Its focus is not necessarily on offering a guide to how you might begin to write your own story or novel. Rather, it's a careful study of, well, *how fiction works*, from the perspective of someone who has given a great deal of thought and time to the subject. Prospective readers might want to brush up on their Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Naipaul before plunging in, and might also

wish to keep a dictionary nearby (I had to look up the meaning of “quiddity,” as in “Since the novel has hardly begun, [John] Updike must work to establish the quiddity of his character”).

For the readers thus prepared, *How Fiction Works* provides a series of useful insights into the difficult and often mysterious elements that go into creating a novel or short story. Wood's goal in this book is to examine what he describes in the preface as “the essential questions about the art of fiction. Is realism real? How do we define a successful metaphor? What is a character? When do we recognize a brilliant use of detail in fiction? What is point of view, and how does it work? What is imaginative sympathy? Why does fiction move us?”

Wood has some experience on the other side of the critic's table, as a fiction writer, and in the end he seems eager for his readers to find this a book that “asks a critic's questions and offers a writer's answers.” As he works through all the questions, Wood sustains a larger, overarching point: “that fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude, and that there is nothing difficult in holding together these two possibilities.”

Such are the threads running through the 10 sections of *How Fiction Works*, sections focusing on staples such as detail, dialogue and language,

as well as sections less conventionally focused on “Flaubert and the Rise of the Flaneur” and “A Brief History of Consciousness.”

Throughout, Wood relies on close readings from novels and short stories, from single sentences to chunky block paragraphs, to illustrate his points.

He also invokes the work of other critics, including two of his self-declared “favorites”: Viktor Shklovsky and Roland Barthes. Much to the book's benefit, he also contributes his own decided opinions. Even if you don't always

agree with him—does David Foster Wallace *really* epitomize W.H. Auden's suggestion that the novelist must “‘become the whole of boredom’”?—you'll appreciate Wood's wit and his voice.

If literary fiction sometimes has a reputation for appealing to a relatively small readership, this very literary book about the art of fiction may similarly lack mass appeal. But just as literary fiction has the power to entrance and enthrall, so too does *How Fiction Works* possess the potential for illuminating the mysteries of our art and for instructing us on how to create it ourselves.

Erika Dreifus

Contributing editor Erika Dreifus always appreciates expert explanations on how fiction works. Her short stories have appeared in *Lilith*, *Mississippi Review Online*, *TriQuarterly* and many others. She lives in New York City and blogs about writing and publishing at www.practicing-writing.blogspot.com.

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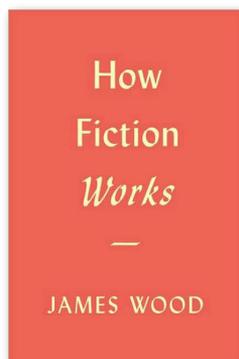
Take an inspiring look at language

The Soul of Creative Writing by Richard Goodman. Transaction Publishers, 141 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.

By Stephanie Dickison

RICHARD GOODMAN'S new book, *The Soul of Creative Writing*, begins with reassurance right away:

I think all creative writers realize at a certain point that language will be the friend and ally that will never desert them. There is a moment when writers know they won't be making the journey alone, that they will have a constant companion, and an astonishing one at that. Writers sit down at the desk with very little. It used to be a pen or pencil and some paper, or perhaps a typewriter. Now many of us sit down to word processors. But still, it's the



most meager of work stations when the writer sits down to face the humbling blank page. Except that each time he or she does, language is there, too. It's the other welcome, steadfast companion in that silent room.

Goodman knows the importance—and often the struggle—to find the right words. He not only teaches writing (in Spalding University's MFA program and Gotham Writers' Workshop), but he is a writer, with credits including *The New York Times*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Harvard Review* and *Saveur*.

"Each of these essays," he explains, "is an attempt to illuminate the depth and subtlety, the muscularity, the grace of our language. It is a homily to its qualities." Despite his belief that writers can never totally master words, right in that explanation I think he's come pretty darned close.

And so, in this slim collection, he first takes us on a journey through the music of language. "A great [writer] will almost have us humming the melody he or she makes on the page. Great writers are great composers," Goodman says. By the end of the chapter "The Music of Prose," you'll be reaching for pen and paper yourself.

Goodman quotes from a lot of historical works, and, though the subject could have been academic and dry, he allows us room to be inspired. He gives good examples but also throws himself into the story now and again: He is mesmerized by Marisa Tomei in a Broadway production; he tells us about phone calls to his mom.

He refrains from lecturing or chiding, instead choosing to gently guide the reader/writer and offer support through each chapter. His own language, honest and personal, is perfect for a book of this nature. At the end of Chapter 1, he describes a novelist who "got into a bit of a pickle" and later on he comments, "Boy, does that go straight to the groin."

The second chapter deals with the

search for the perfect word. This is why it takes some writers a decade to complete a manuscript and why my restaurant reviews can sometimes take as long as an Ang Lee movie.

Goodman inspired me to take some dictionaries and reference books out of the bookcases (searching online always seems so much easier) and keep them close to my desk. His list of words—*blow, run, dig, hurt, kill, eat, stink*—makes me want to write like Dorothy Parker, Nelson Algren, Cornell Woolrich, Richard Ford and Steve Martin: simply, but with great heft.

Goodman riffs on the composition of words:

A word is a seed. It's alive, like the seed of a plant or tree. Inside is its entire history. If you could cut it open like the seed of a plant, you'd see wonderful things. Or, better yet, if you could examine its DNA or its genetics, you'd find thousands of changes and contributions distinguishing the rocky, creative path from its beginnings to its present recognizable form.

So, in reading the following chapter, "The Secret Strength of Words," I am stunned by Goodman's use of "profounder" on page 30. Wouldn't someone have tried to change it to "more profound"? Then I think of all the times I have been writing and changed the words I've used. In fact, the "stunned" above was originally "shocked" and, well, the way one writes the first time is not often what ends up on the page.

Goodman reintroduces me to words like *sauntering, culled, stammer, triumphs*. They are not new, but oft forgotten when simpler, newer ones do the job. I start to compose sentences in the shower and stare at the white walls in my office searching for the right word to describe a texture or color.

Reading this book, I feel Goodman

making me a better writer—at the least, he makes me think more fully about the words I choose.

The rest of the book's first section—"Words"—covers English versus other languages and "The Nerve of Poetry."

In part 2, "Writing," he immediately delves into what needs to be brought to creative nonfiction, which I think some writers are reluctant to try, as if they don't know all the rules and parameters. Here's Goodman's soothing advice:

The fact that your story is true is a powerful weapon to have on your side. The idea, though, is not to take the writing of it for granted. And for that lesson, there is no better place to turn than to the world of fiction. The very best creative nonfiction writers always have,

and you feel that would reverberate through their stories like a bell.

For the first time, I feel like I could do something evocative and memorable in creative nonfiction, an area where I myself have been afraid to tread.

Goodman also includes a fantastic chapter on titles. Creating titles is difficult, whether for an article or a book. And finding subjects can be just as trying—thank goodness there's a whole chapter on this, as well. "The Eminent Domain of Punctuation" is a real hoot. Goodman cites David Sedaris' use of 12 exclamation marks in a story and Goodman's own love of brackets.

This book is not just for writers then, but for lovers of words and writing. For renewing my excitement about what I've chosen to do for a living, this book deserves 13 exclamation marks.

Stephanie Dickison

Toronto freelance journalist Stephanie Dickison's book about her career as a book, pop culture and restaurant critic will be released in February from ECW Press. Web: www.stephanie-dickison.com.

