Creating Short Fiction Study Guide

Creating Short Fiction by Damon Knight

Contents

Plot Summary

In the introduction of "Creating Short Fiction, The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction." Damon Knight discusses, rather tongue in cheek, why he should not have written this instructional tome. First, writing can only be learned and not taught. Secondly, one can't learn to write by reading a how-to book. Finally, reading a book on writing fiction might stifle the creativity of a budding writer. Although Knight believes that part of these statements are probably true, he learned that presenting the techniques of good writing would benefit most writing hopefuls.

Gifted writers who do the right things by instinct or are blessed enough to violate the rules and still create good writing, probably do not need his book. However, for the vast majority of writing students who are not gifted but want to write, Knight feels that the techniques contained in his book can be helpful. Since Knight is not only a writer but a professor as well, what better person to write an instructional book about the techniques necessary for successful writing.

Knight and his wife, Kate Wilhelm, taught at the Clarion Workshop for Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, teaching short story writing for over thirty years. Not only is Knight a teacher but he has walked the walk of writer. The many students he has taught in his classrooms over the years as well as the many readers of his book gain the benefit of what he learned himself by trial and error in his early career.

To Knight, his book is like a message in a bottle. Knight is confident in his career and knowledge of writing. He must assume that those who open the bottle and choose to read his book are people who have a serious desire to write—either as a career or avocation. He is sending his message out and hoping that it gets to those who want and need it. In Knight's experiences during his life and career, he finds writers to be different than most people. They are interested in a broader range of things than most people. They are individualists, skeptics, mockers and loners. They are not the most dependable types—sometimes behind in their bills. They keep irregular hours since it doesn't matter when they do their work. Like criminals, writers live outside regular society. Knight has designed and developed this book to help this segment of society, hoping his knowledge and experience can make their hopes and dreams a little easier to attain.

While Knight admits he cannot provide the needed determination within a person who wants to write, he can tell the writer what he's in for and help him acquire the skills he needs to take him from an amateur to a professional.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Damon Knight, author of "Creating Short Fiction," is a professor who teaches how to write fiction courses, specializing in short story writing. He struggles with the debate between whether it is possible to "teach" someone to write and if such teaching actually might inhibit, or in fact, destroy creativity. Many writers have not been taught "how to write." They just do so and break all the rules. However, Knight finally came to the conclusion some years back that it is possible, to a degree, to teach students how to write. While he cannot pump enthusiasm into his students, he can let them know what they are in for and can at least help them acquire the skills that turns an amateur writer into a professional.

Stories are not disconnected pieces of information. Stories are comprised of components, each one as important as the other in telling the story. Everything must fit together and flow together—that is the writer's job. The techniques Knight has learned are contained in his book.

Part 1, Developing Your Talent as A Writer

Part 1, Developing Your Talent as A Writer Summary and Analysis

You Are Extraordinary

Every successful writer has his own method in developing his story. One developed his story in a dark trailer with black-painted windows. Another took a four-hour bus ride to anywhere, turned around and rode back home. When he arrived, he had his story.

Four Stages of A Writer's Development

The four states of a developing writer are: Stage 1 - The writer is writing for himself—a narcissistic daydream that would not communicate logically to anyone else; Stage 2 - The story becomes "trivial" with half-formed ideas; Stage 3 - The writer begins creating a complete story but has serious weaknesses in structure or character; Stage 4 - The writer corrects his weaknesses and eventually evolves into a professional writer.

Getting Out of Stage 1

The writer needs to take his daydream and play all character parts. In that way, the thin one-dimensional hero he created who is all good and perfect will be seen by his oafish side-kick in a different way than the daydreaming writer sees him. The "perfect" hero is a way for the novice writer to conceal his own warts. By facing his own flaws, his not so perfect hero then becomes ever more interesting and believable than the perfect hero who has no dimension. The narcissistic daydream is a set-up. It's rigged so the hero (who is the writer) will save the day. The story lacks depth and tenseness and will be unappealing to everyone except the writer.

Learning to See

A writer must learn to "see" anew when writing a story. He must look beyond the obvious and superficial. A log scaler looks at a tree and sees how many board feet it has; a cabinet maker looks at its grain and beauty. A writer may take inspiration from the intricacies and structure of the tree, understanding that what makes the tree beautiful is the connectivity of one part to another—the branches to the twigs and the twigs to the leaves.

The short story has people in the foreground but they cannot exist in isolation as the story is understandable only in how it relates to something else. A good writer is not normally a specialist in any subject; rather, he has a broad knowledge of many things. It

is this general knowledge that allows the writer to effectively present his characters in a believable backdrop.

Learning to Hear

To learn to hear anew, a writer needs to turn down the volume—watch a favorite movie without sound. Another method is wearing a blindfold and listening to familiar sounds from a different perspective. .

Learning to Remember

One may have trouble remembering names and numbers, but some experiences are unusual or touching enough to stay in one's mind for decades. It is the ability of the writer to remember these unique "snap-shots" that helps him flesh out a character or situation and become a good storyteller.

Learning to Feel

Empathy is a characteristic that a good writer must have. Tolstoy was a writer possessing extreme empathy enabling him to convincingly create characters of both sexes and all ages. In order to have adequate empathy, a writer must accept his own feelings; carefully observe others; and, participate in role-playing. It may take some convincing for one to accept his own dark thoughts and feelings. Eventually one realizes even his most bizarre feelings are perfectly normal ones that were repressed years ago by well-meaning parents. Once these raw feelings are trusted, the writer can then observe others. Ultimately, he can do what Tolstoy did—put himself in the other person and feel and react as that person.

Collaborating with Fred

The conscious mind is located in one portion of the brain and the unconscious in another. The unconscious mind (which the author calls Fred) is the part of the brain that spawns dreams and ideas. A writer must depend on the production of ideas from his unconscious mind. In order for the unconscious mind to produce new ideas or solve gaps in a plot, it must be fed with information, data and scenarios. The conscious mind's job is to take the idea from the unconscious and manipulate it so that it will make sense to the reader. The one writing style that is the exception is surrealism, like the writing of Kafka—it doesn't have to make sense. Dreaming is good for creativity; sleeping, of course, is good for dreaming. If one ponders a question about his story right before he falls asleep, the subconscious will probably supply the answer in the morning.

Part 2, Idea into Story

Part 2, Idea into Story Summary and Analysis

Getting Ideas

The dialog between the conscious and subconscious is was sparks an idea for a story. Although ideas seem to be spontaneous, often they have been growing and developing for some time. A concept or a question to oneself is enough to begin the process but the unconscious does not operate on a specific timetable. If a writer is tuned into this process, he will get a sense when a good idea has been churned out from his subconscious.

Anything can be used for inspiration. A child can take a twig and pretend it's a tree or a mound of dirt and declare it a mountain. Take the different scenarios one could come up with for the human foot. What does an alien's foot look like? How does a detective pursue a suspect based on a footprint? What kind of erotic story could be based on a foot-fetishist? An idea can be spurred by randomly selecting two unrelated words in a dictionary. The title of Vonda McIntyre's award-winning novel "Dreamsnake" came from such an exercise.

Some Confessions

Knight confesses to some bad habits when he first started writing as a teenager. He would start a story out with a good sentence but had no idea where it would go from there. He started several stories but did not figure out for some time why he couldn't finish them. The reason, of course, was that the stories had no where to go since they did not have ideas driving them. Once the writer establishes a relationship between his conscious and unconscious minds, he can trust the unconscious side's suggestions to bring a story alive—even if the ideas don't seem relevant at first.

Manipulating Ideas

A writer must create a particular character in a particular setting—generalities do not work. After the character is established, the writer must create tension through a complication of the story, i.e., introduce another character or some event or circumstance that makes the outcome more uncertain and thus more interesting. A third character takes the story to yet another dimension. Improving one's work through self-criticism as it develops precludes someone else from poking wholes in it later.

Experience: "Write what you know"

A good writer will write about what he knows and learn whatever else he needs to know to write a good story. A seasoned writer, one who has lived outside of the classroom, is the most successful.

Research

When a writer writes about subject of which he is mainly ignorant, he needs to research the subject but not extensively—only as much as he needs to make a credible story. He does not need to become an expert on the subject.

Using Constraints

Constraints are useful in developing characters. A "good person" will not do certain things, like lie, rob, or murder. A rancher in Arizona will not dress like a Park Avenue businessman. The more a writer knows about his character and his environment, the more believable and interesting the character is.

The Quadrangle - Character, Setting, Situation, Emotion

All four of these elements have to be part of the story. They can be introduced in the story in any order. When developing a story, the writer should steer away from choosing an obvious solution as to what action a character may take in a situation. If the ending of an episode does not evoke emotion, then it's the wrong solution. The characters must fit with their setting and emotions and act accordingly and consistently. H. G. Wells wrote a story about a potentate whose wife died. He kept adding more and more elaborate decorations to the tomb to the point that one day he looked at the small, dark corpse of his wife and ordered, "Take that thing away." The corpse no longer fit her setting.

Theme

A good story does not begin with a theme. Often a theme emerges once the story evolves. Sometimes the theme that develops is not one the writer intended. An author may repeat the same theme in multiple works. Readers of serious fiction want to learn more about what the real world is like, which is often the theme that emerges.

Meaning

A theme can be extracted from a story and summarized in a sentence. Meaning, on the other hand, is entrenched in the story and cannot be separated. Young writers may not have a sense of the "meaning" of writing until they grow older.

What Is A Story?

Writing is a way to transfer one's thoughts to text so that another person can read it and transfer it to his thoughts. Nonfiction is expected to be true and fiction is not. However, fiction is a not believable unless it has a measure of truth. The reader expects some kind of resolution—an ending, completion. A story is empty without an emotional relationship.

The Implied Contract

The reader has purchased the writer's book. The implication is that the reader will get something out of the book. It is an expectation game that the writer wins if he delivers.

Building Blocks

A story is supported by the impetus (what compels the writer to write the story), the idea, materials (characters, setting) chosen form (short story, novel), and the overlying story.

Form

The form of a story is what it would look like as a simple line sketch. Picture a story where the hero is confronted with one obstacle after the other—the line would go up and down and up and down.

Story as Mechanism

Every story is designed to evoke a series of responses from the reader. A sloppy story evokes disappointment. A successful mechanism will engage the reader, tug at his emotions and maintain his interest through to the conclusion. The story mechanism breaks down once it stops evoking a response from the reader.

Structure

Structure is how a story is set up and how its parts connect to one another. First there may be a mystery, the next part conflict and the final part conclusion. Good structure maintains a high degree of tension. If tension falls before the conclusion, the story is probably a failure. In a well-constructed story, every part fits and the ending is fixed in the beginning.

The Natural Series and the Dramatic Series

In writing a true story, no embellishments are needed. All it needs is the truth. A fiction story is an invention that needs to be accomplished artfully enough that it seems like the truth.

Situation

The opening situation of a story should always contain the germ of a conflict. The character has some sort of on-going problem perhaps. The progression from one situation to another is what makes the story strong.

Conflict

Conflict in a story creates interest and energy. If a character needs to get from point A to point B, the situation or second character stopping him is the conflict. Then the reader is engaged, rooting for the character to solve the problem and reach his destination.

Don't Make It Easy

A story without conflict has no appeal. Even though a writer may love his character and wants life to be easy for him, without conflict there is no interesting story.

Plot

A plotted story makes the reader wait for the next twist or turn of the plot—waiting for the mystery to be solved or the situation to be resolved. A plot is a series of imaginary events designed to create anticipation in the reader. It is a method to keep the reader engaged in the story.

Plots can be concluded by various methods. "Resolution" is the end of a conflict by the victory of a character. "Revelation" is when something previously unknown comes to light. A "decision" ending is when the hero takes a stand against a character or situation. The "explanation" provides an answer to a mystery and a "solution" provides the ending to a puzzle. "Trick endings" or surprise endings are common in mystery stories.

Unplotted Stories

An unplotted story is one of illumination and inner meaning. They are inspirational as opposed to intriguing and exciting as in a plotted story.

Part 3, Beginning a Story

Part 3, Beginning a Story Summary and Analysis

When Is a Story Ready to Begin?

Writers begin stories in various ways. Some have extensive notes beforehand, other start with a situation and a character. Some writers know the beginning and the end but not much in between. If a writer is not having good results with one method, he should try another.

The Invisible Reader

The writer always needs to be aware of his guest, the reader. He needs to be polite to his guest and let him know what's going on in the story. The writer does not need to reveal everything along the way, but he needs to make the path to the conclusion clear to the reader so that he does not lose him. By providing details and descriptions, the story comes to life and allows the reader to visualize the characters and their backdrop. The reader is thus engaged.

Five Questions

The writer needs to ask himself these five questions and be able to answer four out of five of them before beginning his story. Who is the story about? Why are they doing what they're doing? What is the story about? Where does the story take place? When does the story take place?

The Characters - Who Is the Story About?

There are two elements that are crucial in creating an interesting character: The writer must make it clear that he knows the character intimately; secondly, the writer must make the reader feel something about the character—curiosity, sympathy, etc. Writers sometimes base their characters on people they know. The danger is that the writer may know the person so well that he may skip important elements of the character forgetting that not everyone knows him that well. It is best to take bits and pieces from real people and fill in the gaps with one's imagination.

Each time the writer does a scene involving a character, he must imagine himself in that character's head. The character must have consistent characteristics throughout the story—readers will catch character inconsistencies and will lose interest in the story. Minor characters are important in telling the story. The writer needs to give them a biography as well so he knows who they are—even if that biography doesn't play overtly into the story. Writers need to resist the impulse to stereotype characters—a police sergeant doesn't have to like wrestling and drinking beer.

Naming Your Characters

Characters should be given believable names but avoid naming them all Smith, Jones or Jackson. Care should be taken that the characters are always referred to in the same way—not suddenly by a nickname that the reader doesn't know. To avoid reader confusion, writers should make sure that characters don't have similar sounding names.

Motivation: Why Are These People Doing What They're Doing?

This element refers to why the character is doing what he's doing—it has nothing to do with the author's motivation. The motivation has to be plausible and has to fit with the character. In a story of conflict, the character must be given something important to win or lose. In a mystery story, the character is pushed along by circumstances which becomes the motivation—the character has no choice put to move forward.

What Is the Story About?

The reader has to be able to answer that question in simple terms at the beginning of the story. If not, the reader will lose interest.

The Setting: Where Does the Story Take Place?

Many times the story is one that could only spring from the setting the author provides. Setting is not limited to a room or house—it can mean a locale.

Background Minus Setting

A writer can say a whole lot about background by simply indicating that the story is taking place in Manhattan. There are all kinds of visuals that will come to the reader's mind. However, to be believable, the writer needs to offer specific details about Manhattan to show that he knows the place he's writing about. Background can mean culture, architecture, climate, past lives of characters. These are all further details that layered onto the story supply reality and plausibility.

The Expository Lump and How to Avoid It

A writer should not over-describe a scene. Providing enough pertinent points of interest or description will suffice to give the reader a flavor of the scene. The writer needs to avoid indicating that the character is looking left or right or south or north. Directions are usually not relevant to the story and can confuse the reader and the writer! Although the writer does not need to describe a scene in detail, he needs to know the details as indirect references to the setting can add depth and credibility to the story. A mass of over-description in a story is called an "expository lump," an obstacle that most readers will not want to climb over. The writer needs to avoid a narrow view of a scene—know what's outside the window, in the next room, etc. If the backdrop is a fictional town or building, surrounding it with real places adds to the integrity of the fictional locale.

The Period: When Does the Story Take Place?

If the story takes place 40 years ago in New York, the writer must be sure not to include a skyscraper that was built 25 years later. If a story takes place in the future, there must be differences in the culture and background of the locale to achieve plausibility.

Four Choices

In the opening of every story, the writer will have to choose the place to begin, the viewpoint, the person(s) and the tense. The beginning is different than any other part of the story in that it stands alone—other sections have preceding episodes to lean upon. The beginning must spur curiosity and interest and set the mood and tone of the story. The best beginning for a character is not with his childhood nor with a horrific situation. It is best to show the character under normal conditions—showing him in his daily routine. The reader finds a story most rewarding that starts off gradually, gently leading into the conflicts and problems that follow.

Viewpoint

For thousands of years, the only viewpoint that was acceptable was that of the narrator. However, in modern times, there are many viewpoints from which a story can be written. There is the omniscient viewpoint in which the writer can enter any character's mind and thoughts; the limited omniscient in which the writer enters only one character's mind; the detached viewpoint in which the writer does not enter any character's mind; and the single-character viewpoint in which the story is told by just one character—therefore providing only a one-dimensional account.

The omniscient viewpoint allows flexibility and movement between characters. It also provides crucial information to the reader about the situation and characters and their motivations. The limited omniscient while sounding like an oxymoron, provides "limited" information—that which one character knows or thinks or feels. The single-character viewpoint can draw the reader into an intimate relationship with that one character. The multiple-character differs from the omniscient viewpoint in that each single character episode is in-depth and lengthy and the viewpoint doesn't jump back and forth rapidly between characters.

Using the omniscient narrative must be established in the beginning—showing both the inside and outside of a character. Switches to other viewpoints must be relevant. What a minor character thinks is not important to the story. Writers can use a subtle mix to transition from one viewpoint to another.

Person

A story can be written in first (I), second (you) or third (he, she) person narratives. A writer must be careful to maintain throughout the story the person choice he makes in the story's beginning. First person is the most difficult to cope with as it assumes the role of the author and it is difficult to let the reader know what the character looks like or what his real nature is. Second person presents another set of issues most predominantly it proves to be an awkward way to tell a story. The choice of third person narrative provides the most flexibility and best opportunity to tell a complete story.

Tense

Most fiction is written in past-tense. The writer must be careful to maintain the same tense throughout the narration portion of the story. It is perfectly acceptable when writing in simple past tense, to switch to past perfect when appropriate.

Part 4, Controlling A Story

Part 4, Controlling A Story Summary and Analysis

"If I May Have Your Attention, Please"

A stage magician works his magic by illusion and sleight-of-hand. The magician brings the audience into his act and controls their reaction by his ability to build anticipation. The writer, in his own way, also uses illusions and tricks to engage his audience, the readers. The magician takes control of his audience in four ways: By taking advantage of their expectation to be controlled; by exhibiting a commanding presence; by his imagery—words and movements; and, by providing the audience with a focal point.

A known writer presents the gravitas of his body of work. The reader knows he will become engaged, dominated by the writer. However, even a first-time writer will have the heft of having been published behind him indicating to the reader that he must be a writer with a good story. The commanding presence of a writer is his ability to inspire trust and credibility in the reader. The focal point changes from one scene to another but engages the reader's interest and curiosity. Finally, the flow of language from one scene to another, one character to another establishes a connected story that appeals to the reader. Like a member of the magician's audience, an engaged reader is in a sort of trance when reading a good story. He says, "I just couldn't put it down." That mentality shows that the writer is successful in spinning his magic and controlling the reader.

The reader is a part of the story in that the story only exists in the reader's head. Each reader has a different interpretation of a story based on his background and experience. With every element of a story the writer engages some readers and loses others. If the main character gets a new puppy, dog lovers will be engaged. On the other hand, the mailman who had been bitten by a dog may want to skip that part of the story.

On Being Interesting

A new writer sometimes relies on the profession or persona of a character for his interest level. For example, just writing that a character is a spy, a movie star or a sea captain doesn't make him interesting. It is the level of detail, his background and his uniqueness that makes the character engaging. The best way to make a story or a character interesting is for the writer to be interested himself. This interest flows from the knowledge the writer has of the subject.

Information, Focus and Compression

The writer should avoid providing trite information. If the reader already knows the information, it is just noise. The writer should also avoid repeating information over and again. Interjecting factual information into fiction is a way to create the illusion that one's story is taking place in the real world. To achieve focus, a writer paradoxically must widen his sights. It is not enough to just describe a character's problem. Rather, when

the writer provides background, physical descriptions, unusual habits, time of day, year the character comes alive and truly engages the reader. Compression simply means that any writing that is not relevant should be eliminated. A writer needs to include only scenes, narrative and dialog that moves the story along. Overwriting will produce a cumbersome and uninteresting piece of work.

The Advantage of Surprise

Surprise endings have known value to a writer. However, surprises can appear in small and unexpected ways throughout the story.

Pleasures Like Beads on a String

Every story, even a grim one, needs an influx of pleasurable elements: vivid images, exciting incidents, surprises, and humor. If a story strikes just one note, it becomes monotonous to the reader.

Voice and Persona

A writer will often develop different personae to tell parts of a story or different characters. The writer becomes someone else to develop a new element or character.

Tone and Mood

Tone in fiction is the storyteller's voice or attitude: playful, serious, melancholy or scary. Mood is the emotions that the author intends to evoke from the reader in an indirect way—word choice, length of dialog or narrative, images described. Sometimes a mismatch of mood and tone can be effective—the tone is serious and the mood is comical or vice versa.

Style

Good fiction writing is a balance between a straightforward, no-nonsense prose and the emotional sensitivity of poetry. While it is essential to read fiction to be a good writer of fiction, it is just as important to read good poetry. The elements of style include: Variety of sentence structure; fluency—the story is not bogged down by overly complex sentences; consecutiveness in that one sentence leads to another—the scene is written in a logical order; precision—the accurate uses of words; economy—say the most with the least amount of words; and, clarity—use the simplest words to tell the story.

Awkward Repetitions

A writer must avoid the use of too many same sounding words placed too closely together. Rhyme, alliteration and consonance (the repetition of the final consonantal sounds) is prose that approaches being too poetic. Also to be avoided are too many "ings." For example, "Opening the door, he was fleetingly climbing the stairs."

Dialogue

Good dialogue needs to be realistic and plausible for the character. If it is not, the writer does not know enough about the character. Dialogue needs to be somewhere between wooden and too casual. It needs to be engaging and interesting because it is one of the tools the writer has to tell the story and provide information to the reader. A writer needs to steer clear of too many "he saids" and "she saids." He can substitute "he pointed out" or "he protested" or "she muttered." Mixing it up maintains interest. Writing in a dialect should be avoided unless the writer has intimate knowledge of that specific speech pattern.

A Cautionary Note

While it is true that some bad writing gets published, a writer has to decide what side of the writing spectrum he wants to come down on.

Part 5, Finishing A Story

Part 5, Finishing A Story Summary and Analysis

What to Do When You're Stuck

Every writer goes through a rough patch when he cannot work out how to proceed in a story. Very often it is the end or near the end of a story that it becomes most troublesome. Perhaps the writer does not know enough about his own character to finish the story. The writer might be attempting to build a bridge from a weak thread of the story to its conclusion. The writer may not be consulting his creative side. If the writer feels the story is becoming boring, it is probably a call for drastic cuts. If the writer has the idea and it is wording or phrasing that is escaping him, he should proceed with his idea—which is the most important element—the words and phrasing will come later.

The Ending

The lives of the characters live on past the book. At the ending, the writer may want to give a hint of what trajectory the characters' lives are on post book. The most important element that the ending offers the reader is the satisfaction of a resolution. The writer needs to draw on the momentum of the whole story for the ending.

Revision

After going through the grueling process of writing and completing a book, the writer needs to step away from it and leave it for a week or two. When the writer reviews it again, errors and areas needing rewrite will jump out. The writer needs to ask if his ending is a satisfying resolution or a fade-out. He also needs to verify that the beginning contained all the necessary elements of who, what, when and where. The writer needs to determine if the manuscript needs a revision or when there is just too much wrong with the story, if it should be abandoned.

Writing for A Market

A writer must be aware of his market. If a magazine only prints happy articles about the successes of women, it's a waste of time for the writer and the magazine editor for a writer to submit articles about some diverse subject. Commercial fiction markets are subject to cycles and fads. The western short story, which in yesteryear was the preeminent genre, in current day is almost extinct. The Literary Market Place and various writers' magazines provide good information about publishers and their requirements.

Dealing with Editors

Writers need to listen to their editors. Whether it's the ending that needs revamping or the size of the manuscript that needs to be reduced, the writer needs to heed the editor's advice if he wants to be published.

Part 6, Being A Writer

Part 6, Being A Writer Summary and Analysis

Work Habits and Pleasures and Pains

A writer needs to be disciplined and plan a writing schedule that works for himself and then stick to it. Some writers need to invent sticks or carrots to get their writing done. The process of becoming a good writer is at times painful but in the end worthwhile. Writing gives one a freedom that a regular job does not. However, writers face many ups and downs in their careers and many times with only meager earnings.

Other Tips

A well-written story has a good chance of being published. An editor will look for three key things in considering a work: Whether the writer is writing for the reader; whether the story has a solid form; and, whether the writer has a good command of language. Every writer will experience writer's block. Most are short-lived and temporary but sometimes they are due to serious problems—depression or illness. A writer can help prevent blocks by maintaining a disciplined schedule. It is difficult for non-writers to understand writers—writers do much of their creative work while not at the keyboard and while they are seemingly doing nothing.

To write well, writers should refrain from drinking or taking drugs. Fundamental references and resource books needed are the dictionary, Bartlett's Quotations, encyclopedias, atlases, style books and almanacs among others. Writers should read everything they have the time for. Finally, and most importantly, writers should never copy or plagiarize another's work.

Characters

Damon Knight

Damon Knight is the author of "Creating Short Fiction, The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction." Knight is an author and professor. He and his wife, Kate Wilhelm, taught at the Clarion Workshop teaching short story writing for over thirty years. According to Algis Budrys, "What Knight doesn't know about writing the short story cannot be put into expository prose. . . ."

Another endorsement comes from Lucius Shepard who says that "Damon Knight is one of the preeminent teachers of writing in this country. 'Creating Short Fiction' should be considered essential for all beginning writers. . . ."

On the writing side, Knight has written over eighty short stories, fourteen novels and three nonfiction books. Knight has also taken on the role of editor of many anthologies and magazines. However, he is best known as an outstanding writer of the short-story. Many of his stories fall in the science fiction genre. Knight has won wide recognition and many awards for his writing. His awards include: The Jupiter Award for best short story and the Pilgrim Award for his contributions to science fiction writing. He also is the recipient of the C. E. S. Wood Award for contributions to Oregon letters and the Hugh Award for his critiques of science fiction writing. Knight is the co-founder and former director of the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference, lecturer at Michigan State University, and founder and first president of Science Fiction Writers of America.

Damon's Writing Students

In his book, "Creating Short Fiction," Damon Knight makes many references to his students in his creative writing classes at the Clarion Workshop for Creative Writing at the University of Michigan. In his introduction, he refers to beginning writers as bright-eyed, healthy and alert. One of the first and most difficult things that Knight had to learn about his students was what they didn't know about writing. Many writing hopefuls did not know what a story's "viewpoint" was. Other students had to learn was a "plot" was. One student thought a story was just an account of a bunch of interesting events. After cutting through the preliminaries, Knight knew what his challenges were. He designed multiple exercises to enable the students to gain better understanding of the basic fundamentals of writing.

Knight has had to remind these budding writers that to become expert in anything, one has to learn and do many hours of research. One aspect of research a writer must undertake is to read. Many of Damon's students have admitted that they read very little fiction, relying on television and the movies instead. One student turned in a short story about the Victorian era. The student's story was full of Victorian cliches—proof that the

student did not take Knight's advice and do his research by reading about Victorian times or reading Victorian era novels.

If a student turns in a writing piece that is muddled and lacking necessary elements, Professor Knight tells him, "You picked this one too green." He bases that on L. Frank Baum's "Tik-Tok of Oz" where there is a garden with a book tree—a tree that grows books. Some are ripe and ready to read—others are too green to pick.

Kate Wilhelm

Along with her husband, Kate Wilhelm taught short-story writing at the Clarion Workshop for almost thirty years.

Ernest Hemingway

Knight references Ernest Hemingway's "Death in the Afternoon" when making the point that a writer must "see" things anew when writing a story.

Freud, Jung and Adler

The psychology of Freud, Jung and Adler is helpful to a writer because it deals with unconscious parts of the psyche.

Tolstoy

Knight references Tolstoy as a writer who possesses extreme empathy for others which enables him to convincingly create characters of both sexes and all ages.

Edward Albee

The famous author, Edward Albee, would reply to the oft-asked question, "Where do you get your ideas?" by saying "From Schenectady."

Kafka

Kafka's style of writing is surreal and therefore does not have to undergo the rigors of normal editing in order to make it make sense.

Mark Twain

Mark Twain is referenced as a writer who was most successful when he wrote about people—a subject he knew very well. Other subjects he wrote about, like the Civil War, were not as successful.

William Sydney Porter

William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) wrote hundreds of short stories. He was known for using the "trick ending" in many of these stories.

Objects/Places

Clarion Workshop

Damon Knight and his wife Kate Wilhelm taught short-story writing at the Clarion Workshop for over thirty years.

Eugene, Oregon

Eugene, Oregon, is where Damon Knight and his wife, Kate, make their home.

Who, What, When and Where

Who, what, when, why and where and five essential elements that must be included at the beginning of a successful story.

Four Stages of a Writer's Development

Four stages that a successful writer must traverse are: Learning to See; learning to hear, learning to remember and learning to feel.

The Quadrangle

The quadrangle of elements necessary in a story idea are: Character, setting, situation and emotion.

Theme of Story

The theme of a story is the over-all message of the story.

Plot

A plot is a series of imaginary events designed to create interest and anticipation in the reader.

Story

A story is a device that captures the writer's thoughts into a medium that can be decoded by a reader and turned back into (his) thoughts again.

Publisher

A publisher purchases a writer's book and prints and distributes it for sale.

Editor

A publisher's editor prior to its publication reads, correct and revises a book bought by the editor from a writer.

Themes

Relationship with Creative Side

In Knight's section entitled, "Developing Your Talent As a Writer" he addresses the importance of a writer tapping his creative side. Knight has lovingly dubbed the creative segment of the brain as "Fred." The sub-category covering this subject is thus entitled, "Collaborating with Fred." Knight goes on to explain that the conscious mind is located in one portion of the brain and the unconscious in another. The unconscious mind, or Fred, is the portion of the brain that generates new ideas and dreams. Of course, in writing fiction, a writer develops a story based on unique and fresh ideas and therefore depends on the unconscious side of his brain to produce them.

However, this creative, unconscious force needs help. A key word in Knight's sub-category title is "Collaborating." Knight means exactly that. In order for the unconscious mind to produce new ideas or solve gaps in a plot, seeds must be planted. In other words, a dialogue must be established between the conscious mind and the creative side. When a writer asks himself, "How can I make the man know it's his best friend who is trying to kill him?" he is actually planting a seed, asking for creative input from his alter-ego, the creative one.

Once the conscious mind receives the idea or solution the writer is seeking, the conscious mind's job is to take that idea from the unconscious and manipulate it so that it will make sense to the reader. Dreaming is good for the creativity; sleeping, of course, is good for dreaming. If one ponders a question about his story right before he falls asleep, the subconscious will probably provide the answer in the morning.

Preparation

When writing a story, it is essential that the writer has as much preparation as possible before he begins his work. Writers have different methods of preparation. There are probably just as many methods in doing this as there are writers. For example, Knight recalls knowing one writer who developed his stories in a dark trailer with black-painted windows. Another writer always took a four hour bus ride to anywhere, turned around and rode back home. When he arrived home, he had his story.

Nothing prepares a writer more than to write fiction on something from his own background or experiences. Therefore, Knight strongly advocates that a writer write what he knows. A good writer will write about what he knows first and then do the necessary leg work to fill in the gaps of his story that he does not know. A seasoned writer, one who has lived outside of the classroom and has many real life experiences, is the most successful writer.

When a writer is creating a story that involves a subject about which he is ignorant, he needs to learn about it but does not need to become an expert. He certainly needs to

research the subject but not extensively—only as much as he needs to make a credible story.

Essential Elements of Fiction

There are elements that must be part of a fiction story. They are character, setting, situation and emotion. These elements can be introduced into the story in any order. If developed properly and thoroughly, the characters will fit with their setting and emotions and act accordingly and consistently. If they do not, the story will not be successful. Readers will spot the inconsistencies and the story will lose its credibility. Readers will abandon a book with such writer mistakes.

Who, what, when and where and why and five essential elements that must be included at the beginning of a successful story. A writer who wants to create a successful work of fiction will ask himself: "Who is the story about? Why are they doing what they are doing? What is the story about? Where does the story take place? When does the story take place?" If the writer does not have an answer to at least four of five of these key questions, the story is not ready to be written. A story lacking these fundamental elements at the threshold of a story, will fail in giving the reader a coherent image to focus upon. Missing these crucial ingredients will prove to be a fatal mistake.

Style

Perspective

Damon Knight, author of "Creating Short Fiction," is a renowned author and respected professor. He had taught at the University of Michigan's Clarion Workshop on Creative Writing for over thirty years. He has provided guidance to many young writing students on the necessary techniques of writing good fiction, especially the short-story genre. "Creating Short Fiction" has a subtitle, "The Classic Guide to Writing Short Fiction" indicating that the work is a teaching book. Damon Knight has the requisite qualifications to author such a book to budding writers around the world. His book has been used extensively in classrooms and workshops everywhere.

Knight not only can write about writing, he brings to the table a plethora of his own successful ventures in writing. He has written over 80 short stories, fourteen novels and three nonfiction books, including "Creating Short Fiction." What better person than a famous and successful writer to tell hopeful writers exactly how it's done! Knight is best known for his writing in the science fiction genre. Knight also boasts a number of prestigious writing awards. Among them are: The Jupiter Award for best short story; the Pilgrim Award for his contribution to science fiction; the C. E. S. Wood Award for his contributions to Oregon letters; and the Hugo Award for his work in critiquing science fiction writing.

Knight has written "Creating Short Fiction" in the first person viewpoint as professor and writer.

Tone

Damon Knight has written "Creating Short Fiction" in a straightforward manner, traversing the many elements of writing good fiction in a clear and logical order. Knight interjects some humor and shows his vulnerability by drawing from some of his own early failed attempts at writing. Knight has written his book with the authority of the professor and writer that he is. His thirty years as a professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan is evident in this guide to creative writing. Blending his credentials in writing with his abilities as a professor provides a dynamic combination that enlightens the budding writer from both perspectives.

While Professor Knight speaks in absolutes relative to successfully writing fiction, his alter-ego, the Writer Knight, knows that all rules were meant to be broken. There are many gifted writers who do the right things instinctively or create fiction that breaks some of the rules. Knight recognizes that these gifted artists probably do not need to read his book but the gifted writer is the rare bird. The majority of people who want to be writers, need the rules and discipline that Knight presents in his book.

Knight draws from anecdotes about many famous writers in illustrating the successful use of the many techniques he teaches and advocates. Knight also informs his reader how tough the road to publication is. He cautions new writers that the journey from writing to publication is a long one. Again, since Knight has lived the life of a writer he is the perfect source for this insight.

Structure

The structure of Damon Knight's "Creating Short Fiction" is quite complex. First, there is an introduction in which Knight provides an overview of his theories on writing and some of his experiences as a writer and professor. Next, there are six major parts: Part 1, Developing Your Talent As a Writer; Part 2, Idea into Story; Part 3, Beginning a Story; Part 4, Controlling a Story; Part 5, Finishing a Story; and, Part 6, Being a Writer. Following these major sections are sections entitled, "Suggested Reading," "Index" and "About the Author."

These six major sections contain numerous sub-categories which separate the text by bold headers. For example, in Part 2, Idea into Story, some of the categories are "Experience," "Research," "Theme," "Meaning," and "Plot," just to name a few. This structure effectively delineates the many techniques so that a student can easily re-review sections that are of particular interest to him.

Knight also includes an annotated version of one of his stories, "Semper Fi." In this segment, Knight uses his own writing to point out and illustrate the use of some of the techniques he is teaching. Also throughout many of the sections, Knight has provided exercises that will support and enhance the techniques he provides in this instructive book.

Quotes

"This book, like all books, is a message in a bottle. I know who I am, but I can only guess who you are—the persons who open the bottle, read the message." (2)

"Curiously enough, the formal study of psychology is of less use to a writer than most other studies. Since we ourselves are the objects of investigation, common sense and common knowledge overlap formal psychology almost completely; the behavioral psychologists have taught us something about rats, but not much about people. (The psychologists would probably reply that they are not allowed to experiment on people.) Depth psychology, the psychology of Freud, Jung, and Adler, is an exception to this because it deals with the parts of our psyches that are unconscious." (17)

"'Where do you get your ideas?' It was not a social question; he really, intensely, wanted to know. Most writers have been asked this question often enough to have worked out a standard answer. Edward Albee says, 'From Schenectady.' My answer is, 'Ideas are everywhere. If you're looking for something all the time, no matter what it is, you'll find it.'" (23)

"Nonfiction is expected to be true rather than entertaining, and fiction is expected to be entertaining rather than true. The difference is that in fiction, truth is presented in the form of an invention. All fiction, by definition, is a lie, but if it does not contain some truth it is shoddy." (51)

"Parts of a story that are not structurally connected to other parts are like dangling bits of a piece of furniture; they just get in the way. This is what C. S. Lewis meant when he said, "Whatever in a work of art is not used, is doing harm." (86)

"A man in a rooming house was in the habit of taking off his shoes at night and dropping them on the floor one at a time, with a pause for rumination in between. The lodger below had complained about this many times, one night, after dropping the first shoe, the man suddenly remembered the complaints and put the second show down gently. After twenty minutes had passed, an agonized wail came up from the room below: "For god's sake, drop the other shoe!" (95)

"Here are some other questions to ask yourself as you think about a story. You will have to know the answers to these questions at some point, and you can save yourself a lot of grief if you know them before you start to write. . . Who is the story about? Why are they doing what they're doing? What is the story about? Where does the story take place? When does the story take place?
You should answer at least four of these questions as early as possible in the story—preferably within the first two hundred words. ('Why' can often come a little later.) Otherwise you will probably fail to give the reader a coherent image to focus his attention on, and that's fatal." (107-108)

"Other writers may capture your attention by a sudden violent sentence. 'Put down that wrench!' And that's hypnotic too. (One of the earliest mesmerists, the Abbe Faria, used to put his subjects into trance by shouting, 'Sleep!')." (145)

"If you leave out the technical detail and archaic language, you may make the story accessible to a larger number of readers, but at the same time you will disappoint the small group. You must decide what audience you want to write fore. If you choose the small group, don't complain because so few people read your stories." (147)

"Madame de Stael once wrote, 'If I had more time, I should have written you a shorter letter.' She meant, of course, that she was working out what she wanted to say as she went along, instead of thinking it through and then saying it briefly." (151)

"Joseph Conrad made himself sit at his desk for a certain number of hours every day, even if he couldn't write a word; John Steinbeck believed that if he couldn't put his theme into one sentence, he wasn't ready to write." (184)

"It is very difficult for a nonwriter to understand that writing doesn't take place only at the keyboard; it goes on in the writer's head, sometimes eighteen hours a day or more. There is a story about Renoir that illustrates this. The painter was sitting in his garden one morning when a neighbor passed, raised his hat and said, 'Ah, Monsieur Renoir—are you resting?' 'No,' said Renoir, 'working.' Later the same neighbor passed and found the painter daubing at a canvas. 'Ah, Monsieur Renoir, now you are working?' 'No, resting," said Renoir." (191)

Topics for Discussion

What is the style of writing that is not required to be logical or easily understandable by the reader?

What crucial elements must be included at the beginning of a story?

What are the four stages a new writer must go through to become a success?

Describe the various viewpoints from which a story can be told.

What is the differences between plot, theme, story and meaning?

What is a story's mechanism? How does it function and what is its purpose?

What are the various elements that are important in a writer's style?