On Becoming a Novelist Study Guide

On Becoming a Novelist by John Gardner

BOOKRAGS

Contents

On Becoming a Novelist Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 1-34....4

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 34-72....5

Chapter 2, The Writer's Training and Education....8

Chapter 3, Publication and Survival....10

Chapter 4, Faith....12

Characters....14

Objects/Places....20

Themes....22

Style....25

Quotes....28

Topics for Discussion....31

Plot Summary

On Becoming a Novelist by John Gardner seeks "to deal with, and if possible get rid of, the beginning novelist's worries." It shows this narrow audience the highs and lows of a career that in the end provides spiritual joys that no non-novelist can imagine.

On Becoming a Novelist by John Gardner devotes half its pages to describing "The Writer's Nature." An aspiring novelist should measure himself or herself against five criteria and work on developing those talents. The marks of a promising novelist are: verbal sensitivity and facility, accuracy and freshness of eye and ear; a storyteller's special intelligence (related to childishness); and "daemonic compulsiveness" to stay the difficult course. None is exclusive to novelists and not all successful novelists have and make full use of all of these traits, but they provide a useful way of measuring oneself—and alleviating natural worries.

Three of these natural worries is developed at length in a separate chapter. Gardner first looks at "The Writer's Training and Education." He debates the value and risk to one's talent of studying writing in college or graduate school, and concludes that a broad-based liberal undergraduate program heavy in literature, philosophy, psychology, with touch of science, helps open vistas for a novelist. The self-educated get stuck in their own time and space, having no larger perspective of human existence. Gardner also critiques writers' conferences, describing how to distinguish harmful from useful ones.

"Publication and Survival," seems written almost apologetically, as a necessary evil because young writers are obsessed with seeing their words in print. Throughout, Gardner emphasizes that it is more important to develop good skills and let publication take care of itself, but he demystifies the editorial process and the necessary work of agents.

Finally, "Faith" discusses dreaded "Writer's Block" and various ways of getting out of it, including having and following a sound plan for writing. This final chapter comes closest to being a book of craft by providing specific suggestions, but within the inspiring context of how a novelist stands to experience a spiritual reward unknown to non-novelists if they are, in fact, non-quitters.

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 1-34

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 1-34 Summary and Analysis

All starting out to be a "dedicated, uncompromising artist" wants to know if they have what it takes. Most often the answer is "God only knows." Anyone stubborn enough can get published and success breeds success, but building one's skills is more important than getting into print. No indicator of success is foolproof, but a few suggestions are useful.

First, a novelist must have "verbal sensitivity," understanding how language works. Writing with a "tin ear" is hard, and teachers often miss this talent by insisting on "good English." Clichés, careless, and showy language all break the "vivid and continuous dream state" that a novelist must create and sustain in a reader, removing the reader from his environment. Readers are jerked out of this state by authors who feel no attachment to the ordinary world, who refuses to tell a story or advance an argument, but simply revel in their own words. Contrast Shakespeare, whose language is always subservient to character and plot, with Dylan Thomas and Updike. Hack writers, optimistic and cynical alike, can succeed but offer little value to society. Writers who have acquired bad taste can cure themselves. Unexamined language carries accidental values. Exercises involving reading and writing can help one "catch on" to necessary skills. Gardner studies writing in college and at the Iowa Workshop, but it is not until he co-edits an anthology of fiction with perfectionist Lennis Dunlap that he learns to take "infinite pains" with everything he writes.

A second indicator of talent is the accuracy and originality of one's "eye," and the ability to get details down on paper without forcing characters to act unnaturally. Dennis Rhodes has an excellent eye for visual detail, using details and metaphors to suggest more than he writes. Gardner recalls a writing class in which students see only the clichéd elements of television and miss a unique, telling gesture. Aping television or any writer's style in lieu of presenting what one has heard, thought, and felt personally is folly. Misanthropes like Nabokov must exhibit idiosyncrasies to gain a following, risk undermining any serious moral vision they might portray, and must hone their act as carefully as a stand-up comedian. The best novelists (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Mann, and Faulkner) step outside themselves to portray the world convincingly and impartially in their characters' diverse perspectives. Studying astrology, Tarot, etc., can help writers deal with traits unlike their own, but some people are too self-centered ever to empathize, much less celebrate a world of differences, conflicts, and oppositions. Writers must never tell about characters' feelings, but portray them vividly in context. "Detail is the lifeblood of fiction."

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 34-72

Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, Pages 34-72 Summary and Analysis

A second indicator of talent is intelligence manifest, natural and trained that in other people are signs of immaturity or incivility. Writers are too complex to be mad, but are addicted to stories and are offended when mindless, tasteless critics celebrate fake writing. It seems like malpractice. Because of how intently they observe, writers are unnerving at parties. Above all, true novelists despise false writers manipulating characters and thus cheating readers.

Good fiction creates a "vivid and continuous dream state" in the reader, generously, leaving nothing hanging and refraining from games and tests. It pleases, is intellectually and emotionally significant, and gives a taste of "life's strangeness." Accomplishing this requires regaining innocence lost through education. Theme, heavily emphasized in classrooms, is not what takes the reader's breath away; it is like structural supports in architecture. Not all stories "mean" something. Good novelists "show" nothing. Young novelists out to teach the world lack the experience to create the kind of honest characters needed to drive stories. A good young writer stubbornly refuses to be miseducated about the value of the entertainment factor, plot, and character, and to be turned into a literary elitist.

Technique must not break the reader's dream nor manipulate characters. Young writers must read others' writing not as English majors but to see how effects are achieved. They must guard against those who do not perceive the magic found in writing. It is the most time-consuming profession, and fame and fortune come much later (if ever) than friends in business. A young writer must believe that writing is worth doing and understand how difficult it is to tell a story generously, without cheap manipulation or tricks. Plot should be a series of recognitions or moments of understanding. It is ungenerous to withhold vital information to achieve a surprise ending. Gardner analyzes various approaches to a story about Frank moving next door to his teenage daughter Wanda who does not know his identity and develops sexual feelings for him. Having him say "Surprise!" at the end is not an option unless the story is told from Wanda's point of view. In this case all suspense is gone and she is a victim. If Frank is lifelike, readers will empathize with him and the choices he makes. That Frank and Wanda behave as authentic human beings is what informs the story's morality, whether they break the incest taboo or not. The writer must use only those techniques that serve the story, opening himself to the reader. Generous writing requires many revisions to achieve beauty without tricks.

Gardner proposes a "moronic setup": a young reporter learns that the mayor, his father, is a vile criminal; should paternal loyalty or professional integrity prevail? Even such a

melodramatic plot can be redeemed by complex characters. Setting is where characters exist. Plot lets characters discover themselves, forcing them to choose and act as lifelike human beings. Theme is how the character stands up to his main problem. The Frank/Wanda story requires no theme, just a persuasive reason for why they live next door to one another, she not knowing who he is, and he not telling her. Many directions are possible, but whichever is taken, every detail must influence their suffering and ultimate choice and be explored for all "significant implications." Frank/Wanda differs from reporter/mayor in that Frank has an inner conflict that inevitably provokes an external conflict, can be dramatized.

Nearly all good fiction has a central character going after something she or he wants, meeting opposition, and reaching a win, lose, or draw. Victim stories fail because the character lacks knowledge on which to act. Joyce's "epiphany" stories put the reader in the place of the conventional central character, experiencing in the end a shift in vision. Reporter/mayor could work by turning them, Kafka fashion, into lovable dolts. This suspends all aesthetic rules.

The young writer must have the common sense to tell foolish ideas and emotions from trivial, foolish ones. Stories that begin in character and conflict are intrinsically more interesting than those that do not. The capacity for "recognizing the significant" is a gift and slow, deep thinkers have an advantage over facile ones. Art largely depends on strangeness—the moment when "ordinary and extraordinary briefly interpenetrate"—which is something that cannot be faked. Authors summon from nothing characters and scenes and make them vivid for the reader. The imaginary becomes real. Working on the last chapter of Grendel, Gardner experiences an altered sense, fusing together early life experiences, established themes, and a recent nightmare, to write without conscious thought an "inspired" passage. It is like a key opening a lock, a harnessing of dream power, the lightning strike that animates Frankenstein's monster. Under stress, Gardner goes outside himself into the character's imaginary experience.

Finally, the novelist needs almost demonic compulsiveness, and some sort of psychological wound, partially controlled, keeps him driven. He must look inward for support and approval, avoiding dependency. Compared with short story writers and poets, novelists are marathon runners, strong peasants, looking for a big win. Success gives the novelist confidence to take bigger risks, but in the early years, successes are few. Serious novels are too complex to write straight through. Many characters, scenes, and moments must be imagined and rendered carefully. Getting lost and bogged down is inevitable, and then it is best to step away to see it fresh. Write and shelve over months and years is common as a novel is slowly baked.

Novelists have a hard time achieving the "authority" that makes readers trust their work, when nothing is wasted, labored, or tentative. This happens best in the trance state. Gardner compares, using musical notations, the cadences in Melville's early Omoo and his mature Moby Dick to show how the ear finds rhythm, alliteration, and energy in language. Few novelists have the time to reach authority through successes and must be specially driven to avoid being sidetracked or giving up. He must be indifferent to lack of market success and driven to do the one thing that matters to him: write. He has

to decide, based on criteria in this chapter if he has what it takes. He must be able to bring out what he sees, get it down originally, without falsifying or cheapening it, and revise until it is as firm as Gibraltar. Everything else discussed in Chapter 1 can be learned or worked around.

Chapter 2, The Writer's Training and Education

Chapter 2, The Writer's Training and Education Summary and Analysis

Studying writing and literature in college and graduate school can help one become a better writer and gain a leg up in getting a teaching position, but not in terms of earning a living by writing. The U.S. does not know what to do with artists and does not support them. Novelists have a better chance than other artists, but few can support themselves by writing. Most writers' workshops have faults but can be useful even in the absence of a good teacher. Associating with serious writers at the same early stage helps psychologically. The decision to become a professional emphasizes how little one knows. Undergraduates whose egos are inflated by local faculties get a taste of reality in institutions like the Iowa Writers' Workshop. They adjust or give up.

Gatherings of young innocents, maniacs, born writers, snobs, and romantics provide praise and criticism from people who care as much about writing as oneself. The young writer feels "not abnormal but virtuous." The greatest writers have all been associate with a "literary dynasty" (including Hemingway and Conrad). One must know that workshops change from year-to-year and their orientations are not equally useful for all students. One learns more from fellow students than from teachers. Famous writers often make poor teachers, dedicating themselves to their own writing and doting on the best students, but they can inspire and provide examples. Non-writers can have the gift of teaching writing. The grapevine knows them.

There is no standard theory on how to teach creative writing, because it is so identified with genius and inspiration. Historically, music and painting are taught to meet the needs of the church and state, but poetry and fiction are not found so necessary. A pedagogy has begun to emerge in the U.S. and the level of teaching technical aspects is improving. At the same time, it undermines individuality and willingness to take risks. Bad workshops are marked by features that, if the student notices several, should make him drop out. The first is a teacher who allows or encourages attack when stories are read and discussed. The object is not to insist on an alternative approach, but to draw out explanations of why the author has chosen as he has and perhaps help him clarify purpose and methods. Bad teachers coerce students into writing as they themselves do rather than helping them find their own way. This is natural but not excusable. Also bad are classes that lack standards of good writing, as earlier described. Without these, everything is opinion, preference, and prejudice. It is difficult for teachers to see a student's writing in its own terms.

Aesthetic standards project one's personality and how one views the world. Lasting fiction is "moral," that is, it does not manipulate cynically and affirms rather than opposes life. A teacher must not take the place of a student's critical imagination. He

should not too readily solve narrative and stylistic problems without helping the student understand what is involved. The teacher must give meticulous care to each student's work and tutor each as a violin teacher would. The teacher must show what is right and wrong in terms of the work's inherent logic and such basic concerns as showing dramatically anything necessary to the development of action. Telling the reader about something is annoying. The student must be helped to think like a novelist by a process different from one-track algebra.

Bad fiction workshops are "workshoppy," emphasizing theme and design over feeling and narrative. The bad teacher relies on simpleminded design habits that editors recognize and reject. There is also the danger of thinking like a literature student rather than as a storyteller and getting caught up on themes and symbols. Teachers who delight in analyzing allegory waste class time, particularly for developing novelists. The pace of novels and short stories is different, and often the novelist's aesthetic challenges are undervalued. When Gardner offers novel workshops they are demanding, requiring an outline and a new chapter each week, along with a revision of the previous chapter to reflect the most recent learning. Eight out of ten publish the results and have the stamina and patience needed to succeed. They would find a workshop paced for poets and story writers boring. Bad teachers are mean and snobbish about "little magazines." It is best to quit the class. By comparison, one is in a good writers' workshop if nearly all of the students are happy to be there and the excitement about writing grows continually.

One can be a writer without college education, provided one is a sensitive and intelligent human being. This sometimes helps avoid the "subtle social distancing" that education instills. The self-educated must read, watch, and listen to develop his ability, but probably is doomed to remain a primitive rather than become a virtuoso, locked in his own time and place, not knowing about "cunning tools of other times and places." Young writers benefit from studying philosophy to know what questions are important, and psychology to get a sense of what makes the modern age so troubled. Aesthetics is useless, as it has the highest "bullshit quotient" of any discipline. One who wants to write science fiction (some of which has value) needs hard sciences, and symbolism from the sciences is increasingly prominent in general fiction.

Few novelists including the very good ones can support themselves by writing, so an education can put them into a profession that does not eat up all of their time and energy. Literature majors observe the "emotional and intellectual heights" that a writer can attain as well as a variety of techniques. The young writer should learn how to read texts closely. Survey courses are worth little. Students should not study anything that they can figure out on their own. A balanced college education helps open new worlds and directs a budding writer to areas of interest.

Chapter 3, Publication and Survival

Chapter 3, Publication and Survival Summary and Analysis

The young writer should focus on learning to write well enough to justify publication but, being naturally unsure, needs tangible reassurance by "real" people like editors and readers. Most letters of rejection are perfunctory and often off-the-mark but show the editor's interest, and making suggested changes can lead to acceptance. The ego is less damaged if one understands the editing process. Most rejected writing is simply not good enough to make it past the "slush-pile reader." Sometimes good writing gets rejected by a good editor on a bad day or one who has grown jaded. Some pieces do not fit a given publishing house's niche.

Editors are limited people, but not the enemy. Often they want to discover a new talent and helping them overcome doubt by listing accomplishments is useful. Publishing short pieces in good magazines increases the chances of having a novel accepted. Once convinced that a young writer is a sound investment, the editor sticks by him through everything. The editor reads the manuscript, considering how it will sell and what prestige it will bring his publishing house. If an editor bothers to explain what he likes and dislikes, it is a sign of interest, and revising—after getting past one's anger and depression—and resubmitting is wise. Gardner describes early experiences with editors Bob Gottlieb and David Segal. The latter, because of his respectful attitude, succeeds in convincing Gardner to make changes rather than wisecrack. Once accepted, a manuscript goes through copy editing by a literary editor, a maniac for details, who marks up the manuscript with questions. The writer accepts or rejects corrections, the manuscript is typeset, and he checks the galleys. Changes at this point are expensive and are best minimized. Few writers are satisfied with promotion of their works, but arguing is of little value and can cut into one's advance.

It pays writers to seek out other writers, and summer conferences are valuable for learning, moral support, and ongoing friendship. The writer's most valuable support is his agent, and is nearly indispensable for novelists. They know the going rates, individual editors, and can keep a client from being eaten alive by a contract. They work hard for their authors and can impartially evaluate a work's saleability. Editors trust established agents' judgment. Rejection by an agent is more significant than rejection by an editor, because it says that one's writing cannot be peddled.

Only one in a thousand serious novelists can live off his writing. Extremely good young writers with good connections to established writers can stand a chance of gaining foundation grants, but givers can be fickle or crooked. Most often, the writer must find a job that allows him to devote large blocks of time to writing. A favorite is teaching college. Unfortunately, MFA and PhD programs are turning out more teachers than the market can absorb, and having to deal with literature analytically can interfere with creating the fictional dream. Living abroad for a lower cost of living cuts one off from

one's roots, although some find the cultural shock beneficial. The best way to survive is by living off one's spouse, although such dependence is difficult psychologically. Often the spouse finds helping a source of satisfaction, and the writer should make the generosity worthwhile.

Chapter 4, Faith

Chapter 4, Faith Summary and Analysis

The most common question that would-be writers ask Gardner is whether he writes with pen, typewriter, or what. The question is deeper than it appears, for it addresses magical considerations, writer's block, vision, revision, and whether the young writer has any hope. When a writer is "hot," the words flow, but when uninspired all becomes mechanical: words and pages, not living dreams. Inspired, a writer sees his characters moving as vividly as in dreams, and the task is to get it down on paper without distraction. It is all too easy for words to get in the way. In student fiction, moments of inspiration are obvious, when he serves not as a creator but an instrument or conjurer. It is both a poison and an ointment, which usually first comes during revision of a lifeless first draft. As instances become more frequent, it is addictive and some writers become able to call it up at will.

However one writes, there are distractions from the dream. Language itself resists, stalling the smooth flow to debate word choices. Few writers follow Faulkner in writing in dialect, so differences from the "king's English" crop up. Secondary meanings distract and impede. Struggling can make one seem prissy and self-conscious. The fact that any words get written down means that the fictive dream is present, and self-doubt can be swept away only by a "spirit." Language is not passive and often drives the writer to meanings that he does not know are coming. Gardner illustrates this by describing how he composes a poem about a gentian flower, showing how his mind stumbles around looking for words and rhythms, sets a Romantic mood, makes felicitous observations, and associates the trumpet shape with uncomfortable religious memories from childhood. He makes his invented angel vivid and involved in the drama and chooses words for their evocative sound. He realizes that he has created an unanticipated "Moralizing Verse."

Poems "write themselves" more obviously than short stories or novels, but the process does apply. Gardner analyzes how he comes up with a passage in October Light. He mentally weaves together Greek epics, medieval heaven imagery, and local American history, slowing and speeding the flow to match the emotions of a haughty old man who suddenly feels ordinary and doomed. Critics would never guess what goes into the writing, where one word influences the choice of the next to express what Gardner wants the reader to feel.

Writers must have faith. They must recognize the complexity of their task, break down processes into workable segments, make sure that the words say precisely what they want them to say, and looking for where else the words might lead. It is a process, like learning to ride a bicycle. Faith comes partly from the support of friends, partly from the writer's "selfless love of his art," and partly from reading favorite writers to see how they have played with words. Anything that helps break down inhibitions is useful, including self-hypnosis. When inhibitions end in writer's block, it is a failure of will: he cannot

believe that his ideas are worth developing. Everything has been done before. Sometimes friends contribute by praising things that he knows are mediocre. Sometimes his desire to be original gets in the way or the need to be superhuman or to overcome an old psychological wound. In these cases, the root problem must be solved. While some writer's block can be incurable, it generally helps to understand what is going on psychologically and see that he is not unique. Writers after the apprentice stage must realize that writing does not get easier, because one takes on harder projects.

Fiction must begin with a rough sketch of characters and behaviors and gradually refined. Fiction does not spring full-grown. The ending does not exist at the start. Sometimes when stuck, one should work on something else, such as a journal. If the block is external, one must deal with the problem, which could mean finding new friends. It is best to avoid ever getting writer's block. Theoretically, there is no need for it, for children build sand castles and ministers pray over the sick without blockages. Hypersensitivity, stubbornness, and insatiability—traits that make one want to be a writer—can also get in the way. In this case. There is no wrong reason to write and almost no wrong way to do it. Some pour out words on paper, and then sift, edit, rearrange, and rewrite. Others plan carefully and stick to the plan. Some write mornings and some at night. Young novelists who are blocked should write short stories to get practice in the basic forms of storytelling. As when learning to bicycle, they should take one thing at a time: perfect a passage of description, then a passage of dialog, then move to the larger units of scenes—much as a stand-up comic polishes every detail. Finally, write and rewrite until everything blends together and flows like a river. One must always start with a careful plan outline of characters, events, settings. Some also prepare a short narrative treatment, skipping detail, and some create a detailed critical explication.

The last step before writing for everyone should be a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the plot, figuring out what must be introduced immediately and what can wait a bit. Gardner describes the despair that comes while writing the first three long chapters of Mickelsson's Ghosts, and how he makes his decisions. He writes countless versions during a year of steady work. Each early chapter is a sprawling scene that ends in a climax. Dialog, action, and flashbacks make clear how Mickelsson has reached the situation in which he finds himself. The original plan is revised and discarded, several scrapped approaches are brought together, overhauls are extensive, and yet the plan keeps bringing Gardner back on course, as stars do a sailor.

The true novelist never quits. It is less a profession than a yoga, a "way," an alternative to "ordinary life-in-the-world." Non-novelists cannot understand the spiritual profits it brings.

Characters

John Gardner

The author of this meditation on the art of novel writing, Gardner consistently describes his own experiences of writing and teaching about writing, inevitably backing off to say that an element may not be typical of all writers, but useful nonetheless. Gardner's student, author Raymond Carver in his foreword describes his teacher's generous spirit, an element in writing that Gardner himself emphasizes.

Gardner's writings include The Forms of Fiction (with Lennis Dunlap), Grendel, Mickelsson's Ghosts, Nickel Mountain, The Resurrection, The Sunlight Dialogues, and The Wreckage of Agathon. He discusses several of them in the book to illustrate the process of writing. Gardner says that he has been writing happily since the age of eight, continues writing poems, stories, novels, and plays in high school, takes courses in college and graduate school, and works toward a Ph.D., but is dissatisfied that nothing he writes seems worth the trouble. Teachers and editors offer bits of advice that are more often wrong than right (as he also does in those roles). Attending the Iowa Workshop does not help figure out what is wrong, but he then collaborates for two years with a colleague at the California State University, Chico, Lennis Dunlap, on preparing an anthology of fiction and learns to take "infinite pains" with his work. Gardner confesses to being impatient but learns to render his sentences completely unambiguous.

Among Gardner's childhood experiences that surface in his writing are Christian hymns about the bloody cross (which do not, however, lead him to forsake the church like many intellectuals) and the tragic death of his younger brother, for which he forever blames himself. He becomes a medievalist, filled with Chaucer, Beowulf, Druids, and the mysticism of William Blake.

Gardner declares himself a serious novelist in 1952, when he begins Nickel Mountain, and publishes his first novel only in 1966, having regularly worked 18-hour days in that period on several novels. He supports himself by teaching at Chico State, SUNY Binghamton, and various writers' workshops around the country. Protégé Raymond Carver describes the generous one-on-one attention that Gardner gives to student writers and how his line-by-line criticism helps Carver develop as a writer. He declares that every writer needs Gardner's "common sense, magnanimity, and a set of values that is not negotiable." They also need his strong encouragement. Gardner founds and edits MSS magazine until his tragic death weeks before the publication of On Becoming a Novelist.

Lennis Dunlap

John Gardner's slightly older colleague at the California State University, Chico. Dunlap for two years is Gardner's collaborator on an anthology of fiction, The Forms of Fiction. They include in the book forms usually omitted from anthologies: fables, tales, yarns, and sketches, and add close analysis to the narratives.

Dunlap is an "infuriatingly stubborn perfectionist," who spares neither himself nor Gardner grueling five- to seven-hour sessions nightly aiming to hone their language until it is utterly unambiguous. This discipline helps the impatient young Gardner but gives Dunlap histamine headaches. Looking back at the long out-of-print volume, Gardner calls it "overly cautious" and "too tight," but the experience helps him understand what had been wrong with his fiction.

Dunlap examines Gardner's current writing and offers comments, but coming from Tennessee does not speak or write the same English as Gardner or know the same kinds of people, or interpret life in the same ways. As a result, whenever Gardner incorporates suggestions, he finds the story goes wrong. This teaches Gardner that the writer must take pains with his writing entirely on his own.

Raymond Carver

Affectionately chided in the text as the kind of fiction writer whom inept teachers try to force students to emulate (along with Jane Austen and Grace Paley), Carver is one of John Gardner's most successful protégées. A short-story writer, Carver provides the Foreword to On Becoming a Novelist.

Carver recalls leaving Yakima, Washington, with his wife and two babies in the summer of 1958 for Chico, California, "stone broke" but determined to study at Chico State University and gain "a slice of the American pie" by becoming a writer. The first in his family to go beyond the eighth grade, Carver knows that he knows nothing. He enrolls in Creative Writing 101, taught by a "practicing writer," "already surrounded by a bit of mystery and romance," John Gardner. Carver is disappointed that none of Gardner's works have been published, but he carries the manuscripts around in boxes, waiting.

Knowing of Carver's cramped quarters at home, Gardner generously offers him the key to his office. This gives Carver a "mandate" to make good. Sitting in the presence of the boxed novels, Carver begins writing seriously, Saturdays and Sundays.

In class, Gardner insists on constant, thorough revision until the writer sees clearly what he is trying to say. During class discussions, Gardner asks what the author has in mind, his or her strategy, and helps the students see why some choices are better from the reader's standpoint than others. Gardner introduces Carver to the names of writers of whom he has never heard. When Carver dislikes a piece, Gardner does not explain why he should like it, but suggests he try reading it again—or once simply takes it away from him. Gardner recommends that Carver read all the Faulkner that he can get his hands

on and then read Hemingway to clean the Faulkner out of his system. Carver receives plenty of one-on-one attention to his writing and is unprepared for suggestions to remove some words and passages outright and consider modifying others. He praises the things that he likes. Such line-by-line criticism helps Carver develop as a writer and he writes the Foreword because every writer needs Gardner's "common sense, magnanimity, and a set of values that is not negotiable." They also need his strong encouragement.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

The author of Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky numbers in John Gardner's estimation among those novelists who can step outside their own being to see the world convincingly and impartially from their characters' diverse perspectives. Gardner mentions the sudden appearance of Sridligailov as "perfectly fitting and unexpected" and observes that the "slow baked" novel is forced into publication too early.

Theodore Dreiser

The author of Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy, Dreiser is used by John Gardner as an example of succeeding despite a penchant for "cacophonous and dull" language.

William Faulkner

John Gardner notes that Faulkner succeeds in writing good fiction in spite of such techniques as using sentence fragments and dropping commas to heighten emotion. Gardner quotes the opening of The Hamlet to demonstrate how the elements appropriate to capturing life in Frenchman's Bend in the South would not work when applied to Putnam Settlement in western New York. Both the words and the literary devices are foreign. Faulkner is also among those novelists who can step outside their own being to see the world convincingly and impartially from their characters' diverse perspectives. Still, Faulkner suffers the bad habit of introducing outpourings of rhetoric that interrupt the narrative flow.

Robert Gottlieb

The first editor, at Alfred A. Knopf, who takes a serious interest in John Gardner's work, Gottlieb is puzzled by Grendel and writes a letter "full of reserved admiration and doubts." Being young, Gardner assumes that it is a brush-off and looks elsewhere. Later, Gardner sends Gottlieb The Sunlight Dialogues and is told to shorten it by a third. Gottlieb does not respond to Gardner's factitious reply.

Ernest Hemingway

John Gardner sees Hemingway, an unfortunately influential figure in college literature courses, as a "tough-guy whining sentimentality." Hemingway talks about "built-in shock-resistant shit detector," which teachers of writing often lack. Hemingway declares that "the best way to become a writer is to go off and write," but himself goes to Paris, where all the great writers of his day are working.

James Joyce

The author of Dubliners, "The Dead," and Finnegans Wake, Joyce is to John Gardner a "word fanatic," and numbers among the few highly intelligent novelists who succeed, for the "secondary qualities" of his work, Finnegans Wake in particular. Joyce employs annoying mannerisms. His "epiphany" stories (Dubliners) put the reader in the place of the conventional central character, allowing them to experience in the end the win of a shift in vision.

Franz Kafka

John Gardner cites Kafka as an exception to the normal rule in creating characters. Kafka creates unsuccessful clown-heroes that set aside aesthetic rules.

Jack London

John Gardner uses London as a lucky exception to the need of young writers for a supportive community. Living in an age when writers are folk heroes, London believes he can become a writer best by experiencing the world as a seaman and lumberjack. Gardner rates him, however, as tragic, noble, and relatively bad as a writer, albeit very influential in college literature courses.

Thomas Mann

The author of Death in Venice, Mann is numbered by John Gardner among novelists able to step outside their own being to see the world convincingly and impartially from their characters' diverse perspectives.

Herman Melville

An American author whom John Gardner numbers among novelists strong in "the hurly-burly of vividly imitated reality." Melville is shown as an example of growth to true writing "authority," as the opening of his early Omoo is compared with that of the mature Moby Dick. The musical quality of writing is demonstrated through these passages.

Walter A. Miller Jr.

The author of a science fiction classic, A Canticle for Leibowitz, Miller is to John Gardner "immensely interesting, though not entertaining in the common sense." He shows both "intelligence and emotional power," and helps prove that the often-discredited genre can have exceptions.

Vladimir Nabokov

John Gardner deems Nabokov a "word fanatic" and numbers him among the few highly-intelligent novelists who succeed, for the "secondary qualities" of his work. Hating large groups of people, Nabokov must convince the reader that his "crackpot" characters are interesting enough to follow around. Nabokov portrays himself successfully in writing and in interviews as a comic snob. His presentation of moral visions by means of irony and nastiness undermines the effect by removing all softness and piety. Nabokov displays annoying frigidity. He writes in the morning on cards that can be rearranged, not a method that Gardner finds generally effective.

David Rhodes

John Gardner considers that Rhodes has an excellent eye. Gardner analyzes at length a passage from Rhodes' Rock Island Line to bring out the visual detail. Rhodes helps the reader picture far more about Della and Wilson Montgomery's appearance, character, and feelings than what he says literally, and allows the reader to accept odd assertions about and to identify with them.

David Segal

An editor at New American Library, Segal, who is then editing William Gass' Omensetter's Luck, is surprised when John Gardner in motorcycle leathers appears in his office with a shopping bag full of manuscripts and demands that he read them immediately. Segal says he cannot read with the author hovering over him, but buys three, publishing one at New American Library and is working on the other two at Knopf when he suddenly dies. It is a great loss to the world. Segal accepts the books on the basis of perceived merit and writes long letters about problems. His respectful manner helps Gardner accept the criticism.

William Shakespeare

John Gardner declares that Shakespeare always fits his profound language to the given speaker and the occasion, citing the differences between Hamlet and Mercutio. Language for Shakespeare is always and rightly subservient to plot and character, no

matter how brilliant. Gardner specifically contrasts Shakespeare to Dylan Thomas and John Updike.

Dylan Thomas

John Gardner notes that Thomas' "fundamental impulse is to capture real life, "but that his metaphors and "slam-cram poetry" overwhelm his characters.

Leo Tolstoy

The great 19th-century Russian novelist, Tolstoy garnishes much praise from John Gardner as a man strong in "the hurly-burly of vividly imitated reality." Tolstoy numbers among novelists able to step outside their own being to see the world convincingly and impartially from their characters' diverse perspectives, entering even the minds of animals. Concentrating on Anna Karenina, Gardner notes that character Levin proposes to Kitty in in the same way as Tolstoy proposes to his wife. Gardener notes wryly that "workshoppy" writing classes waste time on analyzing allegory and would probably find little of interest to discuss in the brilliant opening chapter of Anna Karenina.

John Updike

John Gardner uses novelist John Updike as an example of how brilliant language used in describing how words can overshadow minor characters. Updike is an author who succeeds despite breaking the cardinal rule of restraining one's own brilliance.

Robert Penn Warren

The author of All the King's Men, "Blackberry Winter," and Understanding Fiction, Warren is used by John Gardner as an example of a writer whose "streak of sentimentality" impairs the novel, with rhetoric and Gothic delays. Nevertheless, he succeeds by creating strong characters.

Objects/Places

Binghamton (State University of New York)

SUNY Binghamton offers a good program in fiction writing. John Gardner teaches there because of its fine reputation.

California State University, Chico

"Chico State" in Northern California is one of John Gardner's earliest academic posts as a professor of English. His student, the noted author Raymond Carver, in his Foreword to On Becoming a Novelist, describes Gardner as a generous mentor there, offering him use of his office and sharing stories of his own struggle to get published. With Lennis Dunlap, a slightly older colleague, Gardner spends two years preparing an anthology of fiction, The Forms of Fiction.

Independent Literary Agents Association (ILAA)

The ILAA is a New York-based organization providing information on reliable agents for writers.

Iowa Writers' Workshop

John Gardner considers the Iowa Writers' Workshop, one of the oldest in America, the best young writer's "hothouse." He attends it after college, graduate school, and work towards a Ph.D. Gardner at the time still cannot figure out what is wrong with his fiction. Iowa regularly attracts good students and sometimes has fine teachers.

Johns Hopkins

Johns Hopkins is home to an excellent writing program, headed by John Barth, who gathers writers of like mind, favoring the "new and strange."

Alfred A. Knopf

The first publisher to whom John Gardner brings a novel, Knopf is a highly respected house resistant to "profoundly pessimistic" books. When editor Robert Gottlieb suggests that Gardner cut The Sunlight Dialogues by a third, Gardner facetiously replies "which third?" and turns to David Segal at New American Library and has three titles bought because they show promise. For Segal, Gardner cuts a third. Segal later moves to Knopf and is in the process of editing a Gardner novel when he dies.

National Endowment for the Arts

One of the few sources of public money for writers, poets, and other artists, the National Endowment for the Arts annually hands out less than the cost of a single frigate. Extremely good novice writers who know well-known writers who are willing to testify to their worth stand a chance of receiving funding from the organization.

New American Library

New American Library becomes John Gardner's first publisher when editor David Segal accepts three manuscripts unorthodoxly thrust upon him by the would-be author, already turned down, he brashly believes, at Alfred A. Knopf.

The New Yorker

One of the best publishers, the New Yorker seeks elegant writing and is timid about anything that might not fit its advertising. It ducks strong emotions and stories with "strong, masculine characters" in favor of "refined and tentative" ones.

Poets & Writers

A good source of advice for young writers on teachers, fellowships, and other resources, Poets & Writers is based in New York. It publishes the magazine Coda.

Society of Authors' Representatives

The Society of Author's Representatives is a New York-based organization providing information on reliable agents for writers.

Themes

Education

With an earned doctorate and decades of experience teaching at the college level and in writers' workshops, John Gardner is ambivalent about the good and harm that education brings to aspiring novelists. His protégé, Raymond Carver, also a writer and teacher of writing, says even more strongly that his enthusiasm about getting an education had been stronger before he received one.

The cons of education are that it can stifle creativity. English teachers expend so much energy enforcing "proper English" and making students ferret out symbolism that they engender writing that is overblown and fails to realize the more important matters: vivid characters engaged in realistic situations making decisions and taking actions. Instructors in writers' workshops, if famous, are preoccupied with their own writing and give an inordinate amount of attention to the most outstanding students. Many writers are bad teachers, but their writing reputations help the institution and observing their work habits can be useful. Students learn most from one another, critiquing one another's writing with enthusiasm as peers. A bad teacher, however, can allow the criticism to become vicious. Workshops require a firm set of criteria for critiquing.

The pros of education are in the widening of the student's horizons beyond the here-and-now. Studying literature carefully for how a good writer writes (not for the supposed symbolism) is enriching. Language courses, philosophy (to learn what human beings consider important), psychology (to learn how human beings act and react) courses all find uses in later writing. An introduction to the sciences has application in the modern age to more than future science fiction writers. Without an education, writers have little more than what they know to write about—and "write what you know," Gardner maintains, is a foolish aphorism. Young aspiring writers often have nothing better to do with their formative years than to go to school.

Language

The skillful, focused use of language lies at the heart of On Becoming a Novelist by John Gardner, a noted writer and teacher of creative writing. He emphasizes throughout the writer's sacred obligation to create in and for the prospective reader a "vivid and continuous dream state" that removes one from one's own environment into the one that the novelist creates. This requires "verbal sensitivity," largely innate but also trainable, a profound understanding of how language works. Writing with a "tin ear" is hard, and teachers often miss this talent by insisting on "good English." Clichés, careless, and showy language all break the dream state, jerking readers out. It happens when an author feels no attachment to the ordinary world, refuses to tell a story or advance an argument, but simply revel in their own words.

Gardner deals with the dreaded "writer's block," when words become merely marks on a page or, worse, a totally blank page. He offers tricks, including self-hypnosis, that can help break the block, but often doing something unrelated is the best solution. On the other hand, words can become the springboard to additional words by connotations, imagery, cadence, and the musicality of language. It happens most often in creating poetry, but applies as well to short stories and novels. The whole of an authors' past experience contributes to the process of letting language take free rein.

The height of this experience of language exercising free rein comes in the kind of trance that most writers experience and which a few can summon at will. It shows in the quality of writing. Gardner describes the factors that contribute to his first such experience, when being steeped in the Beowulf traditions, the imagery of Blake, memories of childhood hymns about the bloodied cross of Christ, and fear of ski jumping combine in a dreamlike state and produce a passage he had not expected.

More often, language has to be gone over continually, the novelist making sure that every word and phrase says precisely what he intends. Early drafts often contain ambiguities to anyone but the author, and these must be systematically removed. A sharp eye and ear for telling detail—and the ability to render these in words—is essential. Good narrative and dialog helps the reader envision characters and situations in more detail than the author puts down on paper.

Support

All human beings require a support system, people to lean on in hard times. Novelists, John Gardner contents in On Becoming a Novelist, have a particular need for support because their uphill climb to success is so much slower than their contemporaries in business that it is easy to become discouraged. No longer are artists publicly supported by church and state as in the Renaissance, and only one in ten thousand can hope to make an adequate living on writing alone. Few people appreciate the value of what a novelist does unless and until he or she is one of the select few who hit big.

Writers need family and friends who voice support for their efforts, do not intimate that they would be far better providers for their family doing something (almost anything) else, and do not offer false praise of writing that the author knows is inferior. Often this support is best found in the company of other novelists at writers' workshops and summer programs, where they mingle with their struggling peers as well as with established authors, editors, and other professionals. Such a community has an uplifting effect and offer results in long-term friendships.

Writers need professional support from agents and editors. Agents earn a living by selling manuscripts and are able to be objective about the quality of a writer's work. They know the ropes, can get manuscripts into the appropriate hands, and prevent novices from being taken advantage of in contracts. Editors, often viewed as the enemy, have a vested interest in finding new talent that will make their publishing house money

and enhance its reputation. When they find a new talent, they become the loyalist of friends. Their broad experience can help a writer hone his or her craft.

Ultimately, the novelist must be his or her own best support. The novelist, says, Gardner, is someone who never quits. He or she knows of nothing else as challenging, appealing, or spiritually rewarding as writing. Therefore, the novelist finds a full- or part-time job that still leaves large blocks of time for writing, and does, however best fits his or her inclinations to draft and then edit and re-edit to perfection. In the end, as a yoga, the novelist experiences something no non-novelist can imagine.

Style

Perspective

John Gardner packs into On Becoming a Novelist the wisdom and experience aimed at keeping the young would-be novelist inspired to stay on his or her chosen path. As he says in the final paragraph, the true novelist does not quit and in the end reaps spiritual benefits that no non-novelist can understand. His purpose is to gather together the most pressing questions that he has encountered in years of teaching and lay fears to rest. He consistently describes his own experiences of writing and teaching about writing, but backs off from claiming any element might be typical of all writers. He settles for usefulness—and provides plenty.

Gardner is no Pollyanna. He admits that there are people who cannot learn to write fiction that any publishing house would want to print. He admits that one in ten thousand novelists earn enough by writing to survive on it alone. He insists that solid writing skills can be mastered by understanding their nature and by emulation. He acknowledges all of the flaws in his chosen profession along with the profound benefits. He gives the young novelist enough to keep moving forward.

Gardner reveals remarkably little about himself. He hints at psychological wounds that keep him motivated, particularly guilt over a "fatal childhood accident" (his brother). He finishes college and graduate school and begins a Ph.D. program. He declares himself a serious novelist in 1952, when he begins Nickel Mountain and publishes his first novel in 1966, having regularly worked 18-hour days in that period on several titles. He mentions teaching at the California State University, Chico, and the State University of New York, Binghamton. Gardner's student, author Raymond Carver, describes in his foreword his teacher's generous spirit, an element in writing that Gardner himself emphasizes and effectively demonstrates in this book. Even for those who conclude after reading it that they will not be novelists, it is an entertaining and enlightening book.

Tone

The tone of John Gardner's On Becoming a Novelist is lighthearted and upbeat. He writes specifically for young people intent on becoming serious novelists, answering the questions he is typically asked after lectures and during writers' workshops. He consistently describes his own experiences of writing and teaching about writing, but backs off from claiming any element might be typical of all writers. He is, thus, as objective as wide experience allows, but necessarily subjective, because he has limited primary experience.

Gardner is no Pollyanna—one of his favorite terms—but talks honestly of the pitfalls of a novelist's career, both emotional and financial. He admits that there are people who cannot write (but allows that even some of them get published). He concentrates on

defining and describing what a serious novelist needs in his or her toolkit to produce good fiction and how individual novelists have successfully flaunted his norms. He admits that almost anything is possible in the profession, but presents cogent reasons for having a plan and an ideal. He generously—another favorite term—guides the reader through a number of passages of his and others' writing to show the evolution of text by association of words, sounds, and evocations.

Gardner also provides a broad survey of novelists whom he likes and dislikes. His characterizations are deliciously sharp. He does not linger long enough to bore someone unfamiliar with a given writer or group of writers. Admitting, for instance, that some science fiction has literary merit, he runs through a checklist of names and titles with the briefest of tags (Heinlein, "when he holds in the fascism"), delighting aficionados and perhaps intriguing others. At any rate, he moves too quickly on to bore. Gardner writes this book with assurance and authority, knowing that he is demonstrating to readers how to write well.

Structure

On Becoming a Novelist by John Gardner consists of a Foreword by Raymond Carver, a Preface by the author, which states his intentions in writing the book ("to deal with, and if possible get rid of, the beginning novelist's worries"), and four numbered and titled chapters. An alphabetic subject index completes the slim volume.

Chapter 1, "The Writer's Nature," takes up nearly the first half the book. In it, Gardner lays down the marks of a promising novelist: verbal facility, accuracy and freshness of eye and ear, special intelligence, and "daemonic compulsiveness." None is exclusive to novelists and not all successful novelists have and make full use of all of these traits, but they provide a useful way of measuring oneself—and alleviating worries. Each theme is developed at length and is well-illustrated with examples. Many are touched upon or further developed in the final three chapters, each of which looks at a specific kind of professional fear.

Chapter 2, "The Writer's Training and Education," debates the value and risk to ones talent of studying writing in college or graduate school. Gardner concludes that a broad-based liberal undergraduate program heavy in literature, philosophy, psychology, with touch of science, helps open vistas for a novelist. He also critiques writers' conferences, describing how to tell harmful ones from useful ones.

Chapter 3, "Publication and Survival," seems written almost apologetically, as a necessary evil because young writers are obsessed with publication. Throughout he emphasizes that it is more important to develop good skills (see Chapter 1) and let publication take care of itself. Nevertheless, he demystifies the editorial process and the necessary work of agents.

Chapter 4, "Faith," deals primarily with "Writer's Block," and various ways of getting out of it, including having and following a sound plan for writing. In his Preface, Gardner

declares he dislike books of craft, but in Chapter 4 comes the closest to providing specific suggestions. He does it, however, in the inspiring context of how a novelist stands to experience a spiritual reward unknown to non-novelists, urging the reader onward.

Quotes

"Nearly every beginning writer sooner or later asks (or wishes he dared ask) his creative writing teacher, or someone else he thinks might know, whether or not he really has what it takes to be a writer. The honest answer is almost always, 'God only knows.' Occasionally the answer is 'Definitely yes, if you don't get sidetracked,' and now and then the answer is, or should be, 'I don't think so.' No one who's taught writing for very long, or has known many beginning writers, is likely to offer an answer more definite than one of these, though the question becomes easier to answer if the would-be writer means not just 'someone who can get published' but 'a serious novelist,' that is, a dedicated, uncompromising artist, and not just someone who can publish a story now and then—in other words, if the beginning writer is the kind of person this book is mainly written for." (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 1)

"Now the images become much sharper: on the porch swing, Wilson rocks slowly and conscientiously—a startling word that makes the scene spring to life (adverbs are either the dullest tools or the sharpest in the novelist's toolbox)—and then, better yet: 'Della smiling, her small feet only touching the floor on the back swing, both of them looking like careful, quiet children.' Only the keenest novelistic eye would notice where it is that the feet touch; only a fine novelistic mind would understand how much that detail tells us of how Della sits, how she feels; and yet Rhodes treats it as a passing detail, moving on to his climatic image, 'like careful, quiet children.'" (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 22).

"To be psychologically suited for membership in what I have called the highest class of novelists, the writer must be not only capable of understanding people different from himself but fascinated by such people. He must have sufficient self-esteem that he is not threatened by difference, and sufficient warmth and sympathy, and a sufficient concern with fairness, that he wants to value people different from himself, and finally he must have, I think, sufficient faith in the goodness of life that he can not only tolerate but celebrate a world of differences, conflicts, oppositions." (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 32)

"Another indicator of the novelist's talent is intelligence—a certain kind of intelligence, not the mathematician's or the philosopher's but the storyteller's—an intelligence no less subtle than the mathematician's or the philosopher's but not so easily recognized. "Like other kinds of intelligence, the storyteller's is partly natural, partly trained. It is composed of several qualities, most of which, in normal people, are signs of either immaturity or incivility: wit (a tendency to make irreverent connections); obstinacy and a tendency toward churlishness (a refusal to believe what all sensible people know is true); childishness (an apparent lack of mental focus and serious life purpose; a fondness for daydreaming and telling pointless lies, a lack of proper respect, mischievousness, an unseemly propensity for crying over nothing); a marked tendency toward oral and anal fixation or both (the oral manifested by excessive eating, drinking, smoking, and chattering; the anal by nervous cleanliness and neatness coupled with a weird fascination with dirty jokes); remarkable powers of eidetic recall, or visual memory

(a usual feature of early adolescence and mental retardation); a strange admixture of shameless playfulness and embarrassing earnestness, the later often heightened by irrationally intense feelings for or against religion; patience like a cat's; a criminal streak of cunning; psychological instability; recklessness, impulsiveness, and improvidence; and finally, an inexplicable and incurable addiction to stories, written or oral, bad or good. Not all writers have exactly these same virtues, of course. Occasionally one finds one who is not abnormally improvident." (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 34)

"Character is the very life of fiction. Setting exists so that the character has someplace to stand, something that can help define him, something he can pick up and throw, if necessary, or eat, or give to his girlfriend. Plot exists so the character can discover for himself (and in the process reveal to the reader) what he, the character, is really like: plot forces the character to choice and action, transforms him from a static construct to a lifelike human being making choices and paying for them or reaping the rewards. The theme exists only to make the character stand up and be somebody: theme is elevated critical language for what the character's main problem is." (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 52)

"All the elements to be fused in the trance moment were in place, like the assembled components of the Frankenstein monster's body before the lightning strikes. What I can't really explain is the lightning. It may have to do with entering as fully as possible into the imaginary experience of the character, getting 'outside' oneself (a paradox, since the character to be entered is a projection of the writer's self). It may have to do with the sense of mental strain one experiences at such moments: the whole mind seems tightened like a muscle, fierce with concentration. Anyway, if one is lucky the lightning strikes, and the madness at the core of the fictional idea for a moment glows on the page." (Chapter 1, The Writer's Nature, 61)

"A common fault poor teachers inculcate in students is the habit of too quickly deciding that what they have failed to understand makes no sense. It takes confidence and good will to say, 'I didn't understand so-and-so,' rather than, belligerency, 'So-and-so makes no sense.' It is the nature of stupid people to hide their perplexity and attack what they cannot grasp. The wise admit their puzzlement (no prizes are given in heaven for fake infallibility), and when the problem material is explained they either laugh at themselves for failing to see it or they explain why they couldn't reasonably be expected to understand, thus enabling the author to see why he didn't get his point across." (Chapter 2, The Writer's Training and Education, 81)

"Short fiction in the symbolic or allegorical mode can no more compete in the arena of well-constructed full-length novels than a bantamweight can hope to compete in the ring with a skillful heavyweight. (It goes without saying that each has its/his place.) But in the writers' workshop the heavyweight may not fare well. For practical reasons (the fact that young novelists try out their wings on the short story, for one thing), most creative writing workshops are oriented toward short fiction. For the young novelist, this can be troublesome. His talent may go unnoticed: his marathon-runner pace does not stir the same interest as the story writer's sprinter's pace; and the kinds of mistakes workshops

focus on are not as important in the novel as in a short story." (Chapter 2, The Writer's Training and Education, 89-90)

"In my experience, the single question most often asked during question-and-answer periods in university auditoriums and classrooms is: 'Do you write with a pen, a typewriter, or what?' I suspect the question is more important than it seems on the surface. It brings up magical considerations—the kinds of things compulsive gamblers are said to worry about: When one plays roulette, should one wear a hat or not, and if one should, should one cock it to the left or to the right? What color hat is luckiest? The question about writing equipment also implies questions about the ancient daemon Writer's Block, about vision and revision, and, at its deepest level, asks whether or not there is really, for the young writer, any hope." (Chapter 4, Faith, 119)

"The magic moment, notice, has nothing to do with theme or, in the usual sense, symbolism. It has nothing to do, in fact, with the normal subject matter of literature courses. It is simply a psychological hot spot, a pulsation on an otherwise dead planet, a 'real toad in an imaginary garden.' These queer moments, sometimes thrilling, sometimes just strange, moments setting off an altered state, a brief sense of escape from ordinary time and space—moments no doubt similar to those sought by religious mystics, or those experienced by people near death—are the soul of art, the reason people pursue it. And young writers sufficiently worried about achieving this state to know when they've done it and feel dissatisfied when they haven't, are already on the way to calling it up at will. The more one finds the magic key, whatever it is, the more easily the soul's groping fingers come to land on it. In magic as in other things, success brings success." (Chapter 4, Faith, 121-122)

"When you write a novel, start with a plan—a careful plot outline, some notes to yourself of characters and settings, particular important events, and implications of meaning. In my experience, many young writers hate this step; they'd rather just plunge in. That's O.K., up to a point, but sooner or later the writer has no choice but to figure out what he's doing. Consider doing for yourself what movie people call a 'treatment,' a short narrative telling the whole story, introducing all the characters and events but skipping most of the particulars, including dialogue. Carefully studying and revising the treatment until the story has a clear inevitability, you will find yourself understanding the story's implications more fully than you did with just an outline, and you will save yourself time later." (Chapter 4, Faith, 140)

"Finally, the true novelist is the one who doesn't quit. Novel-writing is not so much a profession as a yoga, or 'way,' an alternative to ordinary life-in-the-world. Its benefits are quasi-religious—a changed quality of mind and heart, satisfactions no non-novelist can understand—and its rigors generally bring no profit except to the spirit. For those who are authentically called to the profession, spiritual profits are enough." (Chapter 4, Faith, 145)

Topics for Discussion

How does Gardner conceive the "morality of fiction"? How does it coincide with and contrast with specific codes of conduct?

What are the traits of childishness that Gardner maintains serves a novelist well?

What risks does a young novelist face working without an agent? How is the risk lower for poets and short story writers?

What dangers are posed for the writer by studying literary criticism? How specifically do they affect one's fiction writing?

What benefits does a liberal education offer a novelist that the self-educated usually miss.

Gardner describes ways in which typewriters and pen and ink can distract the novelist. What might he say about modern word processors? Do its benefits outweigh its risks?

How is writing a spiritual activity?