



Letters to a Fiction Writer

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Contributors include Lee K. Abbott, Charles Baxter, Ray Bradbury, Raymond Carver, Shelby Foote, John Gardner, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Tobias Wolff, and Flannery O'Connor, among others.

Letters to a Fiction Writer Details

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Esther Bradley-detally says

This is a generous book. Writers share strategies, courage, kindness and encouragement; we've all been inside the process, and as writers, other writers can spur us on. A lot of writers encourage each other. Caroline Gordon taught Flannery O'Connor about her own novel *Wise Blood*; her colleague John Hawkes taught Joanna Scott about clarity, John Gardner was fantastic in helping other writers; one of whom, Raymond Carver, studied with him, and then there is Tobias Wolff who had real concerns re the success of his students. So it goes on today; this particular book seems to have more male writers; but women writers also encourage; we learn from one another.

Julene says

Letters from an assortment of writers to new writers. A short list of letters from the book: Raymond Carver, Ann Beatti, Charles Baxter, Ray Bradbury, John Gardner, John Updike, Tobias Wolff, James Welch. It covers the gamut from process, personal stories, to the sharp comments to those who presume writing is easy yet have never attempted it.

Pam Durhan writes: "Good writers cultivate the habit of, to use Toni Morrison's word, unblinkingness." She goes on to explain this. There are lots of tips in this book, lots of lessons too.

Theresa says

This book lived in my desk drawer at my job for many months. Every so often, when the drudgery threatened to overwhelm me, I would take it out and read a page or a paragraph or even an entire letter. It was the perfect antidote to an office environment. Much appreciated, though perhaps I got lucky -- perhaps this is one best read in little snips.

Rose says

"Letters to a Fiction Writer" is a compilation of letters that renowned writers have sent to each other in correspondence about the art of writing, encouraging words over manuscripts, the profession, among other aspects. I found it interesting to come across this book just before National Novel Writing Month. The various letters varied in quality, from those that drew me in (Rosellen Brown's piece "You Are Not Here Long" is a beautiful example) while others were well written and advisory but didn't hit as hard as others. Nonetheless, I did take comfort in reading quite a few of these passages, and I found something to take with me for each of them, even if in a small amount.

I would recommend this book for writers (or those who love writers) that want a bit of an inspiring read into the profession and some of the things that help those within the field push through barriers of many sorts. I think it not only reflects a bit about writing, but also about life as well.

Eric says

I love this book. When I feel lost or out of touch with my own writing--usually as I'm easing back into the habit after a period of being too busy with other things to write--I open this up and reread a letter. Most often I go to the one by Charles Baxter, in which he writes, among many other things:

"The trouble is that the first stage—of pretending to be a writer—never quite disappears. And there is, in this art, no ultimate validation, again because it's not a rule-governed activity. The ultimate verdict never comes in. God tends to be silent in matters of art and literary criticism."

I don't believe in God, but I do need this reminder from time to time. Baxter also writes:

"Women and men who have decided to be fiction writers have a certain fanaticism. Sometimes this fanaticism is well concealed, but more often it isn't. They—you—need it, to get you through the bad times and the long apprenticeship. Learning any craft alters the conditions of your being. Poets, like mathematicians, ripen early, but fiction writers tend to take longer to get their world on paper because that world has to be observed in predatory detail and because the subtleties of plot, setting, tone and dialogue are, like the mechanics of brain surgery, so difficult to master. Fanaticism ignores current conditions (i.e., you are living in a garage, surviving on peanut butter sandwiches, and writing a Great Novel that no one, so far, has read, or wants to) in the hope of some condition that may arrive at a distant point in the future. Fanaticism and dedication and doggedness and stubbornness are your angels. They keep the demon of discouragement at bay. But, given the demands of the craft, it is no wonder that so many of its practitioners—women and men—come out the other end of the process as drunks, bullies, windbags, bespoke-suited merchants of smarm, and assholes. The wonder is that any of them come out as decent human beings. But some do.

"A writer's life is tricky to sustain. The debased romanticism that is sometimes associated with it—the sordid glamour of living in an attic, being a drunken oaf or a bully, getting into fistfights à la Bukowski—needs to be discarded, and fast."

Amen.

Lina says

I particularly like the essay by Rosellen Brown, "You Are Not Here Long."

"When people say 'Whoo, you've published nine books; you've raised children; you've taught. Wow, how'd you manage to do that' I can only reply, with whatever misgivings, 'I said no a lot.'" p.95

I took this as my mantra for about a year, and it really helped.

Other fine essays by Charles Baxter, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, Tobias Wolff, Melanie Rae Thon, John Updike. And a letter from Flannery O'Connor. One of the best collections of good advice to writers from writers.

Kat Rohr says

This book offers a multitude of contemporary writers, who offer they ideas on writing, on being a writer, and being a person who writes.

Zora says

Possibly as high as two stars, but only for the essays by Rosellen Brown and Richard Bausch. The rest was useless to offensive.

I'm not sure quite what this book was trying to be. There are letters in here to specific writers, or to imaginary writers, or to all young writers in general, but they are not very useful letters, in most cases. A number of the authors of the essays are part of a academic cabal of people who were once important in a limited way, or perhaps thought themselves so, in the 1980's. At least a few of these people fell off the face of the writing world long ago. Others have that nasty elitism that academics hold for genre or popular fiction that makes me never again want to crack a novel that is said to be literary and that makes me advise everyone considering an MFA to run away, as far and as fast as they can. It's just possible that some fiction is popular because it is better written than your self-indulgent, deservedly minor stories, you know, like Dickens'. And for those of them that were minor in the first place and are totally forgotten now, the elitism is only embarrassing. Some of the essays are prettily worded that lit-magazine way, like Baxter's, but at the end of each, I said "and so what?" One essay was almost touching, Janette Turner Hospital's, but it was so specific to that recipient (a writer blocked after bad reviews and some jealousy aimed her way over a prize won) that reading it was like reading a diary entry of a stranger. A couple historical letters were revision suggestions on particular works, which held no interest for me. Thankfully I only read a library copy so I wasted no money.

Stewart says

"Letters to a Fiction Writer," edited by Frederick Busch, gathers advice from 33 published authors offered to aspiring writers. The "letters" are sometimes to specific people and other times to writers in general.

The well-known writers include Ray Bradbury, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, and Ann Beattie. Lesser-known writers (at least to me) include Melanie Rae Thon, James Welch, and Janet Burroway.

Some of the advice is fairly obvious, like the importance of writing every day – and reading aloud what you write, especially dialogue.

Paying attention to life should be axiomatic to anyone who wants to write in any genre, including a journal.

This way of living leads to a more fruitful existence even if one doesn't write. Rosellen Brown says,

"Nothing is irrelevant, there is nothing that is not worth learning. Imagine, curiosity as part of your job description!"

Seemingly obvious but still worth reiterating is the importance of wide reading, a lifelong habit emphasized by many of the writers in this book.

"You must try to know everything that has ever been written that is worth remembering, and you must keep up with what your contemporaries are doing," Richard Bausch writes. "You do not stop to analyze or think much; you just take them into yourself, and you go on to the next one. And you read obsessively, too. If you really like something, you read it over and over through the years. You come to know the world's literature

by heart.”

A few less obvious writing insights can be found in the book’s 285 pages.

Putting telling details in fiction or nonfiction is emphasized by George Garrett: “The principal business of the writer is always in the details, with specific things. Generalizations and abstraction are the enemies of our art and the process of creating it.”

Stanley W. Lindberg says that while people should write about what they know, what they know can be expanded by reading, travel, talking with people, and other research. Writing merely about yourself and what you think and feel is limiting and often boring to read.

“Learn to look outside yourself – and learn to imagine yourself inside someone else’s life and problems.”

A beginning writer can find much of value in the pages of 1999’s “Letters to a Fiction Writer.” But even a veteran writer can learn from the experiences of this wide array of writers, mostly American (one Australian). The advice is offered in a generous spirit, much of it is specific, and it is full of insight into writers’ (not-so-glamorous) lives.

Mandy says

I’m not a big fan of books on how to write or how to be a writer, but this one is really moving and at times breath-taking. Inspirational, sage, funny, some of these letters have stayed with me, years later.

Pamela says

This is a big cut above many books of this ilk--many of the entries (“letters,” real or invented, written by established authors to less-established or unpublished or even imaginary recipients) are excellent, and there is a lively variety.

Neil says

I found a copy of this book at a used bookstore for one dollar, and bought it on a whim. This decision proved to be one of the best impulse buys that I’ve ever had. The letters are thoughtful and encouraging, but still incredibly instructive. They address concerns far ranging from discouragement to basic (or not so basic) craft issues. For those desiring to grow in their craft or just curious for a new outlook on writing and publishing this book is a fantastic purchase.

Natalie says

This was a library book, like most of the books I read these days, but I think I will keep my eyes open for it at Strand. Each essay, written by a different sort of writer, offers its own valuable advice to new or struggling writers, and I ended up dropping it several times to take notes or jot down sudden ideas for my current work-in-project. Definitely a valuable book to keep near the writing desk.

Alana Voth says

Sad to finish this book a second time but grateful for every letter.

I feel sad because I am leaving my "brothers and sisters in writing" to brave the real world, of which they have much to say, how reality is both friend and foe, a drain but also a well.

I am grateful because every writer here offers a gem of insight in the way he or she does best, by writing. Part cautionary tale, part pep talk, part practical manual, part romanticism, this book is full of love. I should keep Letters to a Fiction Writer closer than a shelf in my living room.

How bout here at my desk?

Recommended to all writers.

XO.

Ayelet Waldman says

Some of these are interesting, especially the ones not meant for the collection. I liked Janet Burroway's and Tobias Wolfe's. Most were pretty tiresome, though.
