



The Half-Known World: On Writing Fiction

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A rigorous examination of the workings of fiction by the novelist Robert Boswell, "one of America's finest writers" (Tom Perrotta)

Robert Boswell has been writing, reading, and teaching literature for more than twenty years. In this sparkling collection of essays, he brings this vast experience and a keen critical eye to bear on craft issues facing literary writers. Examples from masters such as Leo Tolstoy, Flannery O'Connor, and Alice Munro illustrate this engaging discussion of what makes great writing.

At the same time, Boswell moves readers beyond the classroom, candidly sharing the experiences that have shaped his own writing life. A chance encounter in a hotel bar leads to a fascinating glimpse into his imaginative process. And through the story of a boyhood adventure, Boswell details how important it is for writers to give themselves over to what he calls the "half-known world" of fiction, where surprise and meaning converge.

The Half-Known World: On Writing Fiction Details

Date : Published July 22nd 2008 by Graywolf Press

ISBN : 9781555975043

Author : Robert Boswell

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Reference, Art, Crafts

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elka says

I read one essay the day I processed this book at the library and liked it so much that I ordered the book from my local bookstore. I cited the essay in my own essay, too. Fucking fantastic orientation -- very clear cut yet sparse, beautiful prose. Yeah, I have yet to pick up the book, because I have no money. But I will. Sorry, Walden Pond. I know it's been there for weeks.

Stacy says

Some of the best and most thought-provoking craft essays available, period. Boswell deftly weaves personal narrative with lessons on the mysteries of literary fiction in a way that asks me to return to this book again and again, for inspiration and direction, but also because, as I grow and change as a writer, so the essays and what they mean to me change as well. There are three that are essential reading, in my humble opinion: "The Half-Known World", "Process & Paradigm" and "Narrative Spandrels". One of my very favorite books on writing, despite its decided bias for mainstream psychological realism.

Mike Mullin says

Exactly the book I needed to read now. Rereading it confirmed the decision I made over the weekend to step back from my 300 page first draft of ASHFALL #4 and try a different approach. If the final book is any good, Boswell gets some of the credit.

Zach VandeZande says

This is a really fine book on craft, up there with Charles Baxter's *Burning Down The House* but geared more toward practical application. A couple of the essays are too specific to be helpful to everyone (there's one on detective fiction and one on political fiction), but overall I found the book to be thought-provoking, warm, and full of good advice.

Jocelyn Paige says

One of the best books on writing fiction that I've ever read. Boswell's essays approaches each topic with self-deprecating wisdom, and gives practical and accessible advice for any level writer. I found his essay "Politics and Art in the Novel" especially enlightening.

Highly recommended.

John Sundman says

One of the best books I've read on technique in writing fiction.

Boswell specifically addresses himself to those of us trying to create literature: "a slippery term, but for the moment let's call it 'fiction that aspires to be art.'" Thus this book is at the opposite end of the spectrum from how-to-write-a-blockbuster-novel type books, the tomes filled with story-plotting algorithms and character-trait spreadsheets. Literature, Boswell says, in words echoing those of Flannery O'Connor in her introduction to *Wise Blood*, must heighten our sense of mystery and wonder. Other books explain how to spell everything out so that the reader "gets it." Boswell explains how to *not* spell everything out. When you finish reading a great work of literature, Boswell says, you feel like you only half-know the fictional world it has created. And you are perforce brought to the realization that you know only a fraction of your own "real life" world.

So how do you, as a writer, write a book that will create in your readers that experience of the half-known world? The answer, Boswell says, is to only half-know that world yourself. As to the specific techniques for doing this I have nothing to say here, because if you're interested in this subject you should just read Boswell's book. It's short and a good use of your time, and any synopsis by me would not add much value.

The Half-Known World does assume a certain degree of sophistication in its readers. It's not a cookbook and it doesn't spoon-feed [gah! sound the mixed-metaphor alarm! Sorry!]. So I think some of its subtler points may be lost on writers just starting out. Had I read it before I attempted to write my first novel it probably would have helped me somewhat, but maybe not all that much. Because I had not yet wrestled with the thorny problems of voice and point of view and contradiction and omission to which Boswell gives much of his attention. But as someone who has now written a few novels and novellas (that do, in fact, "aspire to be art"), I found this book to be insightful, and very very helpful. In fact, it helped me with two specific problems that had been blocking real progress on a short novel on which I've been working for two years. I've had the plot of this novel laid out in pretty complete detail for quite a while now. I have the characters, I have the story, I have the settings and many of the scenes. But I knew I was lacking *something*.

Boswell's book has helped me see what I was over-defining and what I was under-defining; I've taken from it some insights into how to fix some problems having to do with narrative voice and so forth. Now, I haven't finished writing my book yet and furthermore once I have finished it I will not be qualified to determine whether it's any good or not, so it's very premature to credit Boswell with having made me a better novelist.

But I can say that I found this book deeply satisfying, subtle and wise. I've extensively marked up my copy and I expect that I'll read it several times again. I may buy a second copy just to have one without my comments scribbled on the pages.

I'm giving it 4 of 5 stars because I found a few chapters that had some weak points, a few paragraphs that just seemed wrong and out of place. But overall I really liked this book and I highly recommend it to serious readers, and especially to serious writers of fiction.

Lynn says

I read most of this in 2009, so I guess it's legit.

The best book on writing I have read in a long time. Maybe ever? I love his discussions of published works. Everything he says is very straight forward and insightful. It made me think differently about many elements of fiction.

Highly recommended.

Thomas says

Robert Boswell's *The Half Known World* is a great read for anyone interested in writing "literary" fiction and the first two chapters are a great read for anyone period. Chapter one is the book's cornerstone. Here Boswell inveighs against creative writing classes that have students making character lists, about birthdays, jobs, etc. This reminds me very much of Flannery O'Connor who insisted on the "mystery of personality" as the core of good stories. Anything that kills mystery for readers and writers is bad practice. Boswell describes wandering an unknown, forbidden territory as a boy, a destination he and his friend never successfully reach. To really write well and make evocative characters "the writer must suggest a dimension to fictional reality that escapes comprehension. The writer wishes to make his characters and their world known to the reader, and he simultaneously wishes to make them resonate with the unknown." It's this territory of the unknown, the mysterious, that is our true aim. I loved every moment of this first chapter.

Likewise, the second chapter captivated me. By telling a story of an encounter with a troubled woman at the bar, Robert Boswell describes his writing practice. I heard him read this aloud at the AWP convention a few years ago and was enthralled. It's something I could share with my undergraduate students. I also really liked his chapter on the "Alternate Universe" and his thoughts on omniscience are brilliant.

Other chapters were intriguing, but a little troubling for me. Boswell's repeated use of the term "literary" is meant to establish a hierarchy in the fictional world and to make his points he sometimes dismisses the work of popular authors like Barbara Kingsolver or Sue Miller. He speaks of his own loves, for baseball and film noir, as "soft spots" that he wouldn't be able to write about in his fiction. This feels like bad advice to me. I think our core material often grows out of our obsessions, what we love. However, these are small quibbles. This one of the best books I've read recently on writing, one that has me longing for the free time to get writing again this coming month when school lets out, to once more set out to explore that mysterious terrain, the woods and iced over streams leading down to that unreachable river beyond.

Audrey says

I would recommend this book to anyone who thinks they ever want to write anything. Seriously. Non fiction, fiction, short stories, memoirs, novels, anything that has something resembling a plot. And also people who feel like they have no idea what they're doing in their lives. And at the end of the day, isn't that kind of all of us?

missy jean says

This is a really, really good craft book. The basic premise--that in writing fiction, we should start by writing a half-known world, giving the story time to teach us what it wants us to say before we start imposing our ideas onto it--really resonated with me. Boswell de-emphasizes "practical" suggestions (like lists and writing exercises) and encourages the writer to let the story take the lead.

Anna says

Charming, straightforward and good-humored like Boswell himself. Keeps his ideas about writing fiction grounded in the texts of stories and novels he loves, resulting in my to-read and to-re-read lists growing. "Politics and Art in the Novel" and "You Must Change Your Life" were my favorite essays. "On Omniscience" seemed to lack the power (and not just emotional power) that I remembered from when Boswell's delivered it as a lecture.

There's definitely a bias to realist, psychologically-driven fiction in *The Half-Known World*, leaving me to want to interject several times ("But what about ...") and to bristle at his interpretation of "literary fiction," his essay on hardboiled mystery novels notwithstanding. Nonetheless, I appreciate this candid meditation on the craft of fiction writing. Boswell's passion is plain, and contagious.

Brittany says

This book was weird because as I was reading it, I didn't really care for it and didn't think the advice was that helpful. However, afterwards, when thinking about writing and writing a paper on writing, I found Boswell's words creeping into my head and on to the paper. His book proved to be the most helpful and his words stuck with me without me even knowing it. After writing a paper, I found a lot I too away from his book. Always half know the world you are writing about. To fully know it is boring and does not allow you room for creativity or imagination. Don't label characters as "good guy" "Bad guy" etc. You can't form a character from a list of traits you predetermined them to have. They have to grow as the story grows and become who they are supposed to be, much like how we become who we are supposed to be as life goes on. Also- Narrative spandrels. The things that just spew out on the paper and you have no idea where they came from or what they mean, are the most helpful point of a story and usually, according to Boswell, make the story.

Good read, helpful read.

Malbadeen says

Warning!

The following anecdote will tell you next to nothing about the content of this book.

Once I had a boyfriend that was freakishly worried that I would, "run off with a librarian or a writer". I, of course, acted extremely insulted by this assumption and found myself to be quite convincing at times.

And then tonight, as I'm sitting in my daughters room waiting for her to fall asleep this book fell open and I noticed one of the notes I'd jotted in the margin of page 1. The note is a small heart next to the writers description of himself as a young boy. It reads as follows:

"He and I played together in the woods: cowboys and Indians, pirates and captains, the War Between the States-anything with a narrative. We had decided we would be writers when we grew up and we played in chapters, narrating in the third person, pausing to invent a new chapter heading whenever we reached a suitably mysterious moment....."

Now. Would I run away with this writer just because I LOVE to hear writers talk about their affinity for story and for the insatiable desire to narrate? Course not! But I will drop my heart on a page here and there for them.

Mary Lynn says

Great series of essays on some of the more subtle elements of the writing craft. My favorites were: "The Half-Known World", "Narrative Spandrels", "Private Eye Point of View", and "You Must Change Your Life."

Definitely recommended for fiction writers seeking something new in a craft book.

Anna Vincent says

The worst part about this book was the author's notion that a writer should not be organized.

Like Annie Dillard in *The Writing Life*, Boswell emphasizes that the writer should not have a clear understanding, and certainly not an outline, of characters, plot, themes, etc. One page 21, Boswell notes, "A story may fail because the writer has made up his mind about the characters before any words reach the page." Can neither Boswell nor Dillard comprehend an author who is able to imagine the skeleton of a book in his/her head?—and to aid that mental structure by organization of an outline? Just because Boswell and Dillard can't see the bones of a book before it's begun doesn't mean it isn't possible, shouldn't be the goal, and doesn't make the book better for it.

I think they're justifying their own inadequacies. I understand using your subconscious mind to facilitate the writing process, but, as was emphasized in *Writing and Thinking*, by Foerster and Steadman, it's best for the clarity and mastery of the book for the author to have thought it all out before hand, sorting out their conscious goals and subconscious undercurrents then. Boswell understands the value of the subconscious in writing; on page 28 he explains, "This is often how I know a new story element belongs, even if it seems out of place in the early drafts—it persists. It won't let me shut it out. It demands my attention by providing me with details, which may seem inconsequential at the moment but nonetheless begin to add up." My point is that Boswell should understand his book before beginning to write; otherwise, he will be writing off shoots too far, later having to edit them out, and he will have a very disorganized mess when he's about finished,

making the final editing process chaotic and near impossible to untangle and sort.

I did not like this book, but the author did make a fair effort and gives us a detailed book. He goes into detail about the tactics of narration, for instance, and he gives frequent samples of autobiographical writing to illustrate certain concepts. These samples are interesting and, at times, insightful. Also, he is capable of wit; on page 184 he describes a sleepless night of emotional conflict with the following sentence: "I had a long argument with my pillow about the shape it wished to take about my head." That made me laugh aloud.

(view spoiler)

If you want a good book on writing, chose *The Art of Fiction*, by Ayn Rand or *Writing and Thinking*, by Foerster and Steadman.
