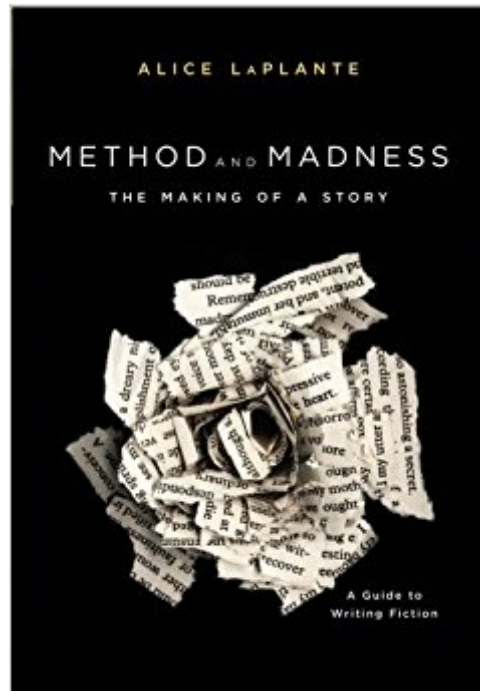


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Method And Madness: The Making Of A Story: A Guide To Writing Fiction



Synopsis

A fresh, inspiring guide to writing fiction. *Method and Madness* takes its title from Hamlet: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't." Comprehensive and accessible, it provides guidelines to all aspects of fiction writing, from generating ideas to getting published. With a wealth of imaginative yet practical exercises and 39 stories—the most in any guide to fiction writing—*Method and Madness* offers friendly, down-to-earth instruction in the art and craft of fiction.

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Customer Reviews

Alice LaPlante teaches creative writing at San Francisco State University and Stanford University, where she is a former Wallace Stegner Fellow. Her fiction has been published in the *Southwest Review*, *Epoch*, and *Stanford Magazine*, and her nonfiction has been published in *Discover*, *BusinessWeek*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*, among other publications. She lives in Palo Alto, California.

Reviewed by C J Singh (Berkeley, California). At my suggestion, our writing group recently switched from another book as the main reference to Alice LaPlante's "METHOD AND MADNESS: THE MAKING OF A STORY. Our writing group comprises beginners as well as two MFA writers who have published short fiction in well-known literary magazines. Two months later, the consensus: this book is a model of lucid exposition of fiction-writing art and craft. This exposition is complemented with craft-analyses of 29 masterpiece stories by authors such as Flannery O' Connor, Joyce Carol

Oates, and Robert Olen Butler. Here's an example of LaPlante's lucid exposition. Chapter Five, titled "Why You Need to Show and Tell: Dramatizing and Narrating," opens: 'Show, Don't Tell.' "If you've ever taken a creative writing workshop, shown a story or essay to a writer friend who has taken workshops, or read just about any beginning book on creative writing, you will have bumped into this piece of conventional wisdom. The only problem is it's wrong. Well, wrong is perhaps too strong a word. Let's say it's certainly not always right" (page 147). In support of her assertion "show, don't tell" advice needs to be modified, LaPlante cites from Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Lolita": "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sins, my soul, Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta' She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a pryncedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer." This is the opening passage of the novel. Would you tell Nabokov that he's 'telling' too much? Because he is--telling, that is. The first five pages or so of this acknowledged masterpiece of twentieth-century literature are completely told. There's no dramatization, no 'showing' in sight" (page 150). On page 156, under the subtitle, "Good Intentions, Bad Advice," LaPlante offers her explanation: "So why do so many well-meaning--and competent!--creative writing instructors use 'show, not tell' as their mantra?" "Because good telling is difficult to do." It goes back to the need to be concrete, the need for specificity. It is a relatively straightforward thing to be concrete when showing, or dramatizing, something after all, the characters are either there, or they aren't.... Telling, however, is where the temptation to generalize or go abstract is strongest. ...Creative writing professors urge their students to show and not tell, they are really trying to urge students to be more concrete and specific. They see student writing that is too general or abstract they make the mistake of blaming the technique--narration--for the poor writing that results. "Some of the highlights of the other chapters are: The first three chapters introduce creative writing to the beginner, focusing on "the basic building blocks" such as "details, details; imagery that works on two levels; seeing the general in the particular." Each story presented is followed by LaPlante's questions under the rubric "Reading as a Writer." For example, Amy Bloom's much anthologized story "Silver Water": "1. How does Bloom's treatment of mental illness avoid being clichéd or sentimental? 2. How does Bloom avoid stereotyping the members of the family in her portrayal of the ways they deal with Rose's illness? 3. Which character are you most interested in ultimately? What do you understand or learn about this character by the end of the story? How does this

surprise you?" (page 28). The fourth chapter presents the conflict-crisis-resolution model; linear versus modular stories; to epiphany or not to epiphany; is change necessary; and a detailed essay by Francine Prose, "What Makes a Short Story?" The sixth chapter, *Who's Telling This Story*, explains the three points of view and the related issue of shifting narrative distance. At the end of exposition in each chapter, LaPlante includes several exercises such as "Using Point of View as Way 'In' to Difficult Material" that she used in her teaching and a sample response by one of her students. Our writing group found these exercises highly effective in self-teaching. The seventh chapter, *How Reliable Is This Narrator?*, explains with detailed examples from William Faulkner's novel *"Sound and Fury,"* Ken Kesey's novel *"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,"* and Barbara Kingsolver's *"Animal Dreams."* The eighth chapter, *He Said, She Said: Crafting Effective Dialogue*, cites examples from Ernest Hemingway, David Mamet, Ralph Ellison, Peter Matthiessen, and others. The ninth chapter, *What Happens Next? Figuring the Plot*, explains the use and limitations of "plot points" and the Aristotle's complication-crisis-resolution model. Examples cited include stories by James Baldwin, *"Sonny's Blues,"* and by Michael Cunningham, *"White Angel."* The tenth chapter, *Recognizable People: Crafting Characters* includes examples from Anton Chekhov's *"The Lady With the Little Dog,"* Grace Paley's *"A Conversation with My Father,"* Julia Alvarez's *"The Rudy Elmenhurst Story,"* and Akhil Sharma's *"Surrounded by Sleep."* The eleventh chapter, *"Raising the Curtain: Beginning Your Story"* explains the "Characteristics of a Good Opening." with examples from Raymond Carver's *"Cathedral,"* Louise Erdrich's *"Mauser,"* Alice Munro's *"Wild Swans,"* Madison Smartt Bell's *"Customs of the Country"* and others. The twelfth chapter, *What's This Story Really About? True Emotions, Sensory Events* opens with "Sooner or later, we need to take a step back from our writing and ask the big question: What's the meaning of this story?" LaPlante answers by reviewing "the precept that writing must exist at two levels in the sensory world, and in world that embraces a complex emotional and intellectual subtext" (page 397). Examples cited include Margaret Atwood's *"Significant Moments,"* Jean Rhys's *"Wide Saragossa Sea,"* Stacey Richter's *"My Date with Satan,"* and Frederick Busch's *"Ralph the Duck."* The thirteenth chapter, *Learning to Fail Better: On Revision*, opens with a positive message, "Revision can be one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of creating fiction" (page 427). Advice cited include encouraging words from Leo Tolstoy, William Faulkner, and Bernard Malamud. A particularly instructive feature of this chapter are multiple versions of stories by Raymond Carver and by Jan Ellis. Raymond Carver's short story *"The Bath"* and his revised version *"A Small, Good Thing"* have both been frequently anthologized. Jan Ellis presents three versions of a story beginning with a 1000-word response to an exercise, a first draft, and the final story published in *"New England*

Review."The fourteenth chapter, Getting Published: A Guide to Starting Out, cites resources such as "Novel and Short Story Writer's Market," "The Literary Press and Magazine Directory,' and "Poets and Writer's Magazine." The chapter concludes with the case history of publishing Jan Ellis's story - from the previous chapter. The final section of the book is an Anthology of ten stories that add to the 29 presented in chapters. The additions include stories by Donald Barthelme, Alice Munro, and Tobias Wolff. All three are among my favorites - specially Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," which in my reading illuminates how choice of a profession can distort a person's behavior, deforming a sensitive, language-loving youngster into a scathing professional book-reviewer. Five shining stars.-- c j singh

Author LaPlante's textbook Method and Madness--The Making of a Story is a textbook you will not put down. You will be surprised to find new twists and turns on the subject and the various ideas of writing a short story, a novel or a novelette. For example, I was surprised and at first shocked to find out the everlasting dictum of "show and don't tell" have been misinterpreted. This is because high school professors and even college professors who continue to teach their students not to "tell" when writing, but to concentrate on "showing". LaPlante explains the "Show and Tell" idea in a clear understandable and clear way. This concept is explained in Chapter 5 under the subheading of, "Why You Need to Show and Tell--Dramatizing and Narrating". The chapter, as well as the rest of the chapters, is followed by a set of exercises the student and or reader may undertake in order to understand the nuances of the chapter. The exercises are followed by two short story readings. In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the short story titled, "Brownies" by ZZ Packer and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor. Both short stories complement the "Show and Tell" ideas explained in the given chapter. The textbook consist of fourteen chapters, an anthology of ten stories and thirty-nine readings. The chapters are as follows: Chapter 1, What Is This Thing Called Creative Writing--The Basics? Chapter 2, The Gift of Not Knowing--Writing as Discovery Chapter 3, Details Details--The Basic Building Blocks Chapter 4, The Short Story--Defining and Shaping Chapter 5, Why You Need to Show and Tell--Dramatizing and Narrating Chapter 6, Who's Telling This Story? Point of View Chapter 7, How Reliable Is This Narrator? How Point of View Affects Our Understanding Chapter 8, He Said, She Said--Crafting Effective Dialogue Chapter 9, What happens Next? Figuring the Plot Chapter 10, Recognizable People--Crafting Characters Chapter 11, Raising the Curtain--Beginning Your Story Chapter 12, What's This Story Really About? True Emotions, Sensory Events Chapter 13, Learning to Fail Better--On Revision Chapter 14, Getting Published--A Guide to Starting Out The last chapter, chapter 14, gives

the reader an insight into the world of magazine publishing. Some of the headings under this chapter are: The Lowdown on Literary Magazines Preparing Your Manuscript Choosing Your Target Publications--and Following Directions Carefully Sending It Off Simultaneous Submissions All Rejections Are Not Equal Success! Publishing: A Case Study This textbook is much better organized and developed than "Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft" by Janet Burroway. For your peace of mind, examine the reviews on both textbooks. Even the anthology of stories and short story readings included in "Method and Madness" are superb, interesting, and hard to put down. The reader will want more of the story once he or she has finished the two readings included after every chapter. All readings left me thinking further and with the wish to continue exploring other works from the given authors. Tim O'Brien's short story titled, "The Things They Carried" had a profound effect on me. "The Bees" by Dan Chaon is another of the many readings, which is not only suspenseful, but it left me thinking of the ending. All of the thirty-nine readings are superb and interesting. As a writer, and or student, you will not get rid of this textbook after you finish studying it. I guarantee you will decide to keep it next to your writing desk and often refer to it. It will come in handy as you develop your novel, short story, and novelette or to refresh your memory on the many writing concepts clearly and expertly described by author Alice LaPlante. I strongly recommend this textbook for creative writing students and to interested readers who like to learn more of the art of creative writing.

Let me just start off by saying that I am using this book as a textbook for a college class on creative writing. Although Textbooks generally, more or less often, are used to supplement lectures, reading this book manages to create the feeling that the author is really speaking to you and that makes it a lot easier to get into the readings. This mixed with all the supplemental readings and shorts by other successful writers makes this book really quite exceptional. I actually ended up buying the book for my personal library because of how useful it is. I find myself going back and reading it often.

Using as a text book in my creative writing class--usually I sell my books back once I'm done with texts, but this one has so many great short stories and has such great advice for writing that I will keep it.

Excellent read!

A+

excellent

I purchased this as a required textbook for a Senior level fiction writing class. It has good information for an aspiring writer and was far less expensive than the school's bookstore price. Will keep this one at the end of the semester.

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