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Foreword by Sir Andrew Motion

When I began teaching Creative Writing to M.A. students a little under 20 years ago, the whole business still had a lot of enemies this side of the Atlantic. It wasn’t just that the phrase sounded ugly and awkward – though that didn’t help. It was more to do with the commonly held view that good writing couldn’t be taught. Theatre, yes. Ballet, yes. Fine Arts, yes. There were distinguished Schools for such things, and everyone knew they did good work. But writing? Wasn’t that an American idea? Didn’t good writing happen regardless of teaching (and usually in an attic)? Wasn’t it . . . well, a bit like cheating? A bit like taking steroids?

Thanks to the efforts of teachers like Malcolm Bradbury at East Anglia and David Craig at Lancaster, to the success of graduates like Ian McEwan and Kasuo Ishiguro, and to broad educational and cultural shifts in the country as a whole (some of which are explored in the following pages), it’s rare to find much disparagement of Creative Writing courses these days. The term itself still gets a bit of flack. And there’s a concern that courses might somehow grind the writing of all students everywhere into roughly similar shapes and idioms. But by and large the teaching is seen as a force for good. As a fruitful way of allowing individuals to test and investigate themselves; as a way of increasing the spread of good reading; and as a means of increasing the stock of good books in the world.

The essays collected in this book give a useful account of these changes and achievements. More important still, they contribute to the ideas and ideals which inform the teaching of Creative Writing as well as its practice. If their focus was fixed entirely on theoretical matters, they would be welcome. Because they are also concerned with the experience of writing, they are valuable. They comprise a companionable Companion.
Introduction

Graeme Harper

This book is a “companion” to creative writing, and its title immediately brings to mind that the most common companion for any working creative writer is themselves. Of course, ours is not the only art that involves an individual so often working on their own and frequently according to their personal sense of creative practice. And yet, the notion of being an art of individual making combined with a form of communication relying almost entirely on the creative use of words – that is distinctive! This prompts the idea that creative writing is a very distinctive activity, distinctive in itself and distinctive as an art form. But is it?

We need to be wary of generalizations. Logic might appear to quickly confirm that creative writing is not the art of the fine artist’s studio, where words are infrequently the focus, and where space and time might be shared with other artists. Creative writing has also not often been the art of the actor’s theater where, even if there is not the need of additional actors the performance relies on so many other human beings with so many other roles that the artist’s individuality is more a capturing of a section of that art within a shared space and a shared time. Also, in the public distribution of completed works emerging from the activities of creative writers we have historically seen a set of production and distribution practices that are not very like those in filmmaking or television, and the relationship between maker and receiver of works of creative writing has not often been very like that seen in the fields of design or architecture.

Or is none of this completely true? After all, where do we truly draw distinctions? Can’t a creative writer’s working environment be sometimes exactly like a fine artist’s
studio, with much not manifest in words but occurring in the creative writer’s thoughts, memories and emotions, that only afterward (and only potentially) become the fodder for our art of words? Equally, do all creative writers have a pristine, singular space of their own in which to work? Similarly, don’t actors sometimes so strongly define a role that all else operates primarily as support for their individual art? Don’t many musicians compose their works, and is the mainstream distribution of these works not unlike, say, the mainstream distribution of a novel or a collection of poems? Isn’t a creative writer a little like an architect in their creative exploration of structure, form, and function? Don’t some creative writers work to a “design brief” provided by someone else – a publisher or theater company, say? Or isn’t creative writing just a little like filmmaking, in that we have a general sense of an audience but . . . The debate could continue!

In order to produce a companion volume to creative writing we need to know what makes creative writing something that can be discussed in a specific way. To do that we need to begin at the point where creative writing happens, and to see then how it manifests itself in certain occupational, societal, and cultural ways in our wider world. Not only do we need to consider what is distinctive about creative writing within the context of human practices, but also whether it is distinctive within the practices and outcomes of the arts. There are a number of important premises that therefore underpin this companion.

Because creative writing is a highly individualized practice, the reader of this book will inevitably bring to it their personal sense of the actions, understandings, and outcomes in creative writing. That is this book’s first premise.

Even if you are undertaking your creative writing in a relatively structured, formal educational setting you will have your personal set of ideas and ideals, skills and knowledge, and the activities of creative writing will strongly bring your uniqueness into play. Fortunately, and because of this individualism, there is no one way to understand creative writing and there is no one way to develop your creative writing. So recognizing and harnessing how you think, feel and act in writing is often an important clue to developing further as a creative writer.

It is assumed here that it is the undertaking of creative writing in which you are most interested. However, you might also have considerable admiration for finished works of creative writing (most often referred to by such very well-known names as “novel,” “poem,” “screenplay,” and so on). Those completed works might indeed be an important reason a creative writer begins writing. They might inspire a writer, provide wonderful (or sometimes, just so usefully, not so wonderful) models, suggest solutions to creative writing problems, give some grounding in the creative writing of the past and in what a creative writer might seek to achieve in the future. But they are not in essence creative writing. They are most certainly evidence of creative writing having happened; however, they are after the event of creative writing, after the action. As a companion to creative writing, this book thus proceeds on the premise that creative writing is an event or series of events in which someone (i.e. the creative writer) does something informed by their knowledge and by their skills. In other words,
creative writing is not static, creative writing is actions, and those actions produce a range of results.

It is often said that creative writers need to be good readers. Common sense tells us this must be true, otherwise how else could we come to experience the things creative writers create and the other evidence their activities leave behind? What a creative writer reads and why they read it are open to more detailed consideration. One thing seems certain: that a creative writer must read, and explore through reading what other writers have released into our world. In addition, however, common sense also tells us that stopping at those completed and distributed works will not get us as close to what creative writers have been doing as we might wish to be. Better understanding means embracing the possibilities informed by a wider range of reading. For a creative writer to be a “good reader” must in this sense mean that they are pursuing reading that informs their actions and understandings as a creative writer (and there is obviously an intention here that this companion will be one of those things pursued!).

Thoughts evolve further toward what a creative writer being a “good reader” might mean in pragmatic terms. Beyond encountering final works of creative writers, being a good reader of writers’ manuscripts and diaries might be exceedingly useful to a creative writer; after all, these clearly contain evidence of writerly creating. Being a good reader of newly released works within the context of older works might also assist. Knowledge gained through considering these comparatively comes to mind, making observations about how one creative writer or another, one creative genre or another, has changed over time. A creative writer might also be helped by being a good reader of varieties of visual material – for example, by being a reader of another writer’s doodles on the edges of their manuscripts, their marginalia, by being a good reader of photographs of writers’ rooms or libraries, a reader of the visual art or moving images of other creative writers. Much might be discovered in these kinds of reading, where the text to be read is that of a writerly habitat, of our writerly habitation, the engagement with and creation of spaces and times for creative writing.

This all might be a different version of “creative writers must be good readers” than that encountered by some students in creative writing workshops over recent years. If that is so then that is a good thing, given that as a companion to creative writing this book should be informed by newly emerging ideas about creative writing. It should aim to unearth more about creative writing than we have previously unearthed, and one of the aspects of doing this is to consider how creative writers read.

To finish this point, creative writers should also be good readers of human beings, of their actions, their expressions, their intentions. If nothing else, attempting to be a good reader of the lives and actions and attitudes of human beings must surely inform the very best creative writing, and the very best results of our actions as creative writers. Plainly, it is the premise here that a narrow sense of reading is not useful for a creative writer and might even be as harmful as not reading at all.
Other ideas also played key roles in the formation of the idea for this book and, later, in its evolution. Not all of these might have been discussed regularly in creative writing workshops, and it is with this in mind that they are mentioned here.

This book proceeds on the basis that in any of the arts creative understanding and critical understanding are intimately entwined and that dealing with one without consideration of its partner is to the detriment of our knowledge – in this case, to the detriment of creative writing and knowledge about creative writing. Knowledge is complex, and ways of moving our human knowledge forward have been the subject of thousands of years of contemplation, struggle, and excitement. Knowledge in creative writing is doubly difficult to speak about because, as our primary art form using words, creative writing must differentiate itself from other word realms while at the same time we acknowledge that it uses tools used by many other people for many more common, even “uncreative” purposes.

It could be suggested that all art forms must negotiate similar issues – issues about what constitutes the “creative” over what might be called the merely functional, and what constitutes other more common contemporary uses of image, voice, design, and so forth – but it is words that share a commonality across most forms of human communication and it is words that a creative writer must largely use to make art. So one defining notion in this book is that creative writing can be described as an art of making the extraordinary and artistic from the functional and commonplace.

In this book too the suggestion is that creative writing can be taught. Let me get that statement out in the open. My personal belief in this, as the editor of this book, is probably already obvious. The argument for the validity of such a statement goes like this: teaching and learning involve an exchange of knowledge and understanding and there is absolutely nothing in the human practice we call creative writing that suggests such an exchange cannot be accomplished in this particular field of human endeavor.

Of course, that is not to say that someone can be taught to be a great creative writer, a well-known creative writer; or that someone can be taught to write in ways, and about things, that are appealing to the contemporary publishing or performance industries – or that everyone can be taught to write creatively in the same length of time or in the same way. It is purely to say that there is nothing in the makeup of the human activity called creative writing that prevents it being taught. Therefore, there is no reason for anyone to declare that creative writers can only be “guided,” “encouraged,” or “mentored,” or to use any of the other weasel words (as such indirect expressions have sometimes been called) that have been occasionally used to avoid using the word taught. All these words have positive, non-weaseling meanings and applications, but creative writing can also benefit from learning and teaching, so we should not avoid this responsibility or underplay the potential in this statement and this intention.

Finally, this book proceeds on the basis that not everything that can be learnt about creative writing involves only practical skills. Yes, creative writing involves human action, so practical activities are a big part of it. But creative writing is more than
practical skills, so a book that simply looks at *how to* undertake creative writing is going to provide only a portion of the knowledge needed to advance our understanding, and it is going to overweight the discussion to the point where creative writing loses key elements of its identity and a creative writer is disempowered by not being able to draw on their full range of knowledge and experience. To develop understanding that has practical depth as well as application, that provides a basis on which to build further knowledge, and that gives us a truthful picture of the human activity of creative writing we need to go beyond *how to*. Going further, or deeper, than this we find that critical knowledge and creative knowledge form a network or web of connections and that what we might lack in one area, at any one time, can be contrasted with an abundance of understanding in another.

“Self-knowledge” is perhaps one way to describe the goal that a further and deeper understanding of creative writing is endeavoring to achieve – knowing more about how to connect our individualized knowledge and the practice of creative writing. But this suggests a more remedial need than the description intends. “Individual knowledge” is probably a better phrase, individual knowledge in relation to the shared human activity that is creative writing. Another way of describing the aim might be to say that “creative writing involves informed action.” That description gives a useful focus to how the activities of creative writing are at the center and the knowledge that informs them can work to improve our writerly activities – whether when we’re collecting material for use in one project or another, reading, drafting in the first instance, revising, editing, undertaking one or more projects at the same time as dealing with our day-to-day lives.

Contributing to the development of “informed action” in creative writing is one key goal of this companion. However, that immediately begs the question of what kind of information might best be included. In other words, action informed by what? It will quickly be apparent how this question has been answered.

First, this companion proceeds on the basis that informed action is action informed *by* action. This is not as tautological as it first appears! Simply, one-third of the book is entirely devoted to exploring the actions of creative writing and creative writers, to looking at the writing of particular genres, and to focusing on the actions associated with these areas. As you can imagine, this is not approached as if somehow such activities leave aside many forms of critical understanding. Quite the opposite! Discovery through action is one method of strengthening critical awareness. In this opening section the writers have very much been asked to talk about the act of creative writing, the undertaking.

Secondly, this book considers how creative writing has formed, influenced, or engaged with forms of what might be called “professional” activity. In some senses, this means creative writing manifesting itself as a profession, with undertakings and outcomes indicative of a profession. So, for example, the evolution of the role of “the editor” or historical aspects of book making and of bookselling, or the professionalization of the role of the critic. All are aspects that could be rightly labeled as professional in nature. However, this raises the question of whether creative writing can be an
occupation rather than a profession. That is, whether it can be something undertaken, but not undertaken as part of employment or as a career. Most certainly this is the case! So the word “profession” is also used more widely here to indicate something having specialized knowledge, something that can involve continuing interest and exploration, even if it is not what you do for a living.

Thirdly, creative writing is considered in this companion in the context of society and the world. Culture, politics, place, the self, and aspects of cultural heritage and education are all broached here. The idea behind this final section of the book was to encourage the writers to explore the phenomenon whereby creative writing is both from and about each individual and that it also finds its way out into wider society – not in terms of how it finds its way there but in terms of some aspects of what happens around it, out in the world.

There are, thus, three parts in *A Companion to Creative Writing* grouped around (a) action and the undertaking of creative writing, (b) creative writing as a profession and the manifestations of specialized knowledge, and (c) creative writing, culture and society. This arrangement aims to provide some marshaling of ideas, but not to suggest divisions. You’ll notice, for example, that explorations of education in and around creative writing occur in two of the parts, that there is work on other arts in the part devoted to writerly action, when this could easily have been included in the part devoted to culture, and that the part focusing on the occupation or profession related to creative writing contains a chapter on translating that is as much about action and undertaking as anything included in the first part of the book. All this is intentional.

The writers in *A Companion to Creative Writing* were encouraged to explore as they wished to explore, and the chapters therefore reflect individual expertise, considerable personal experience, and many choices made entirely by the writers themselves. Some indication was given, of course, of where these chapters would sit within the book, and the book’s overall intention was briefly explained. It should probably be said, also, that not every contributor to this Companion would consider themselves to be a creative writer. Some, indeed, are experts in what are often called cognate fields; that is, fields that are causally connected with creative writing or that have some shared characteristics, or that have logical connections: fields such as publishing, editing, literary studies, language, cultural analysis, psychology, and arts development. In that respect, I’d return to the note on reading and on informed action. Creative writers are often considerably impacted upon by activities beyond their own practice but connected to it. Thus, the contributors here include those for whom creative writing action is an immediate and personal activity, and those for whom creative writing somehow informs their work, just as their work informs creative writing.
Part I
Creative Writing
Many writers compare stories to dreams, and though this analogy is especially apt, it is nevertheless certainly worth revisiting. Like dreams, stories enable people to synthesize lived experiences, longings, and emotions, distilling the intensity of these through symbolic representation. Also, stories that are well told work the magic of dream by immersing readers in the fiction so effectively that this imagined space, its objects, and inhabitants feel convincing and true to life. But unlike dreams, which happen in spontaneous ways, fictional narratives are deliberately fashioned. With inspiration from Alice Munro's short story “Post and Beam,” wherein a historic house provides the central metaphor for a character who discovers her life has been erected upon a faulty foundation of compromise and sublimation of self, perhaps composing story is more like constructing a dwelling than experiencing a dream. In fact, creating a narrative shares much in common with building a home with many rooms, closets and cupboards to intrigue and astonish both inhabitants and guests.

Stories, while inspired by dreams, are the products of an intentional process of many steps – from blueprinting to final touch-up – and like houses, well-constructed stories invite readers to live and breathe within their walls, traveling from room to room, or scene to scene, as they inhabit and experience, along with the characters, their distinctive architecture. Similar to a designed structure, story imposes a certain vision and order on what is initially imagined. In so doing, fictional narratives suggest that particular patterns define what we experience, know, and dream about, and that we can interpret these patterns meaningfully. Early storytelling, such as mythology, folktales or biblical stories, often functioned as proto-science to explain
natural phenomena – such as the genesis of life or arrangement of stars in the sky – imaginatively and memorably. Storytelling also worked as a nascent philosophical framework, wherein cultures could speculate about the meaning of existence as well as work through ethical dilemmas by deploying imaginary characters and situations to enact and resolve these. Additionally, cultural values and historic occurrences have been preserved through narratives. Furthermore, stories offer hope by insisting that human beings possess sufficient agency to interact significantly with destiny – whether by altering its course or by comprehending it in illuminating and life-changing ways. Beyond this, storytelling provides entertainment, offering some shelter against the hardship and monotony entailed in daily living both in the past and now.

The need to tell stories is deeply embedded in our collective psyche and enmeshed with linguistic systems that generate and acquire language. Just as we process the world by telling stories, we produce knowledge through engagement with imagined lives. Furthermore, stories inscribe their tellers into larger cultural and historic narratives, an assertive act that often gives voice and agency to the marginalized and vulnerable. Writers sometimes construct stories in order to synthesize and comprehend personal experiences, fantasies, and emotions in an indirect and symbolic way. Fictional stories simultaneously provide both a protected space and a window view for writers and readers to examine what is challenging – even threatening – to contemplate, let alone process through firsthand experience. Whatever the specific impetus for fictional narratives, the drive to create stories is universal, while the methods of storytelling, just like the styles of building homes, have changed with the passage of time and vary from culture to culture. For instance, early fictional narratives in the English language tended toward great sweeping epics rendered from an omniscient perspective, whereas contemporary fiction focuses more on personal drama, often filtered through a limited and controlled point of view. Despite such changes, the traits that identify story have remained more or less recognizable over time.

To Build a Story

In fictional stories, a character or protagonist is beset by a particular problem that occurs because of some interference in attaining a particular objective. The narrative then traces an uphill trajectory as the character pursues satisfaction of this goal, despite various obstacles. The incline traversed crests at a moment of self-defining choice. Generally speaking, this is the site where the protagonist must decide whether to fulfill or sacrifice the driving desire, but it can also be the juncture at which the character discovers an underlying truth about the self and the object of longing. The resultant crisis moment forces choice that is followed by either change or recognition. Whatever the main character decides results in profound and fundamental transformation, usually signified by an action or a resonant image that clearly demonstrates to the reader how things will be profoundly altered for – or at least perceived differently by – the character in the aftermath of such crisis.
Exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution are terms familiar to most students of fiction writing as they describe the progression summarized in the previous paragraph. A nineteenth-century German novelist, Gustav Freytag, famously charted this trajectory, forming a triangular shape. Exposition and inciting incident introduce the character and situation, the longing, as well as the impediment complicating satisfaction of such yearning. Rising action inscribes that upward movement made by the protagonist toward his or her goal. Climax, marking the apex point, is the crisis moment, wherein the self-defining choice occurs. Falling action and resolution, or denouement, reveal the change or illumination that results from the decision made at the climax. While story form entertains seemingly endless variations, it is recognizable for these features to readers across a broad spectrum. Even children can perceive when storytelling falls short of form, and many will complain about narratives in which “nothing happens.”

But what we know as readers, we sometimes forget as writers. Emerging writers tend to rely on autobiographical material to compose their first narratives, and often they have insufficient distance from their experiences to shape this material meaningfully, or else they are unwilling or incapable of adapting the facts of what happened to allow for what could have occurred. Such narratives can have the same effect on a reader that a windbag conversationalist has on even the most avid listener. And then this happened and this happened and this happened, the windbag drones on, while the expectant look quickly withers on the listener’s face. Sophisticated storytellers know that personal experiences, if used at all, must be significantly mediated for successful retelling as story. They understand that lived experiences are not usually structured as narratives and that restricting stories to the facts of what transpired curtails imaginative possibilities. Successful stories are usually produced from three sources: memory, imagination, and inspiration from other works of literature. With these raw materials, writers structure stories so that they provide the trajectory – in one way or another – that defines them as fictional narratives.

Drafting the Blueprint: Prewriting

Once a person develops the desire to write stories, he or she must embark on a rather long and repetitive process that begins with the flash of a sustainable idea. People frequently have ideas for creating narratives, and these occur anywhere and at any time. Imagine sitting in a rural clinic’s anteroom, waiting to see a doctor, and glancing about at the various occupants of this room: a rude child, his oblivious mother, an elderly man feigning sleep, a middle-aged woman of working-class background, a silent and brooding farmer, and that farmer’s judgmental and superior wife who – affronted by the incivility of the others – stands while her injured husband claims the last available seat. Soon enough, and if one observes closely, a discernible dynamic among such characters emerges, and with these ingredients, a spark for story can be ignited. This may well have been the case for Flannery O’Connor, as suggested by the
opening of her well-known and often anthologized short story titled “Revelation.” O’Connor, who lived in the rural South and suffered from lupus, no doubt spent considerable time in waiting rooms similar to the one she describes in “Revelation,” and there she may have gazed upon people who inspired the characters she created for this story. Such inspiration likely provoked the curiosity that O’Connor managed to sustain throughout the long process of drafting her story.

Students of writing sometimes complain of having too many ideas and not knowing which to pursue. Sustainability is an effective litmus test for ideation in fiction writing, and ideas will often self-select by persisting in the writer’s thoughts and refusing to go away. But writers can wear out their curiosity for even the most worthy and time-resistant of ideas. They diminish the psychic energy for pursuing flashes of inspiration by discussing these too often with others, verbally telling and retelling the story they ought to be committing to paper. Writing instructors become wary of students who invest too much time and energy at this stage of prewriting, and many experienced writers will abstain from discussing stories they intend to write in order to preserve the drive to explore their inspiration.

Another problem related to expending too much time and energy in the inception and planning stage of developing a story results from overthinking the idea, so the story is fully mapped in the writer’s mind before the first paragraph is drafted. This can result in a predictable and unsurprising story, rather than the journey of discovery that it should be for both writer and reader. Unfortunately, professional writers – especially when applying for grants or residencies – are often required not only to explain the writing projects they intend to develop, but also often to explicate themes that will emerge in such work. For most fiction writers, this kind of directive is akin to demanding a person provide interpretation for a dream that he or she has not yet had, or – in keeping with the building analogy – insisting on a structural inspection before the blueprints have been drawn.

Thematic considerations, by and large, are not the storyteller’s concern when conceiving of and even when composing the work. Just as interpretation cannot occur before a dream has been experienced, theme should not emerge until after the story has been fully drafted. Nevertheless, many inexperienced fiction writers begin with thematic abstractions, rather than character or image, and this inverted process often dooms the narrative to work as a soapbox or pulpit from which the writer can espouse various beliefs and theories. As one might expect, the end result is usually about as exciting as a sermon or a speech. Stories are an art form, and art that serves a particular ideology or agenda risks becoming propaganda. Even so, emerging writers are often filled to bursting with many deeply felt principles. Such writers long to convince others of their beliefs, but for various reasons, ranging from the unpopularity of the form to the effort entailed in properly researching and presenting rhetorical argument, they eschew drafting philosophic essays. Mistakenly, they may believe writing creatively, and packaging abstract theories about life as fiction, is an easier way to persuade readers of their viewpoints.
Though the phrase “creative writing” may suggest that anything goes, drafting fictional narratives, like erecting any structure, involves protracted and deliberate effort. Many formal constraints — such as the aforementioned shaping of story — must be negotiated in producing a recognizable work of fiction. However, freedom to explore and experiment occurs for most writers at the outset of drafting a story. In prewriting, the writer ought to feel uninhibited and unconstrained by convention. Free writing — committing a random jumble or free association of words to paper — is sometimes a useful strategy for getting started on a fictional narrative. Some writers doodle, diagram, or list random-seeming items. Others may prefer prewriting strategies that appear more organized and intentional, such as outlining, plotting scenes, or making checklists of events they plan to include in their narratives. Again, with more involved planning strategies, writers should avoid investing so much creative energy in the blueprinting phase that they have little in reserve for completing the project.

One strategy that can be especially helpful is a mnemonic map, or a progression of concrete objects to guide the writer through the story, much in the way remembered images allow the dreamer to reconstruct a dream. Though it may appear that generating items for such a map is a somewhat random activity, usually the objects that surface in conscious thought are the striking images that writers remember experiencing or imagining. Like elements of dream, these “things” tend to embed themselves in the writer’s memory because they have symbolic value. Often writers are unaware of what these objects mean, and this is optimal since understanding a symbol too well and deploying it too deliberately compromises its efficacy. When rendered in fiction, such items enable the writer to penetrate the depths of the affective filter — bypassing the psychological constraints that prevent writers from tapping into the well of imagination — and to dive deeply into the unconscious, developing story in intuitive and imagistic ways, thereby achieving outcomes that often surprise and delight.

Such objects can also anchor the narrative to the physical world in a recognizable and convincing way. During the course of a day or week or even a month, we collect a vast array of images and most of these are forgotten over time or pushed from the forefront of consciousness by new impressions. Only a few especially tenacious mind pictures remain to provoke the imagination and cause enduring wonderment. William Faulkner claimed the sight of a child wearing muddy drawers while climbing out of a window triggered *The Sound and the Fury*. It is unlikely that Faulkner took the time to deconstruct and analyze that image; instead, he probably just commenced writing the novel.

More often than not, expending too much effort in prewriting is an avoidance technique. Drafting a story can be a daunting, even terrifying experience. Many writers complain of feeling intimidated by the blank page, and some recoil from it altogether when they suffer from writer’s block. The fear that underpins such a blockage usually emanates from perfectionism, reflecting dread of committing errors or producing a narrative that does not align with an original and idealized vision of the
work. Writer’s block is a serious impediment that can cause and be caused by stress, or even depression. There are no easy remedies, but when writers realize that in addition to unattainability, perfection also precludes spontaneity – the mistakes, missteps, and detours that have the potential to yield unexpected and worthwhile results – then the paralyzing desire to produce the sublime is often mitigated in a significant way. Furthermore, writers who understand that their initial vision of the narrative is no more than a working plan often feel freer to plunge into the work.

Building Materials: The Elements of Fiction

Early drafting of a work of fiction can be much like creating a symphony piece, wherein the composer must harmonize musical notes issued from a range of instruments, or to sustain the architectural analogy, an author, like any contractor, must use a wide variety of tools and materials throughout the building process. Of course, different writers have different methods for drafting early versions of their stories, but emerging writers, who believe they can begin by hastily sketching the bare bones of dialogue to fill in later, or that they can start out by intricately describing settings devoid of characters that they have postponed creating, usually find that the “fill-in” added to such work will appear poorly integrated into the story; the joints often show distractingly for the reader. Successful stories result when writers incorporate setting, sensory details, characterization, plot, dialogue, consistent perspective, and effective prose rhythm from the first draft, honing these throughout the long process. Just as no builder would contemplate erecting an entire house using nothing but a handsaw or just a hammer, no writer should be limited to only one or two elements of fiction. Apart from this, accessing the full toolbox of fictional elements enables the writer to immerse the self as well as the future reader convincingly in the fiction.

Setting and sensory details are absolutely essential when it comes to steeping both writer and reader in the physical world of the story. Beginning writers, though, often neglect these elements in the rush to develop plot, or else they neglect plot altogether while under the spell of their own lyrical language. Sometimes they forego presenting too many particulars because they fear such specific references will render the work inaccessible to the general reading public. If I set my story in Dubuque, Iowa, these writers may reason, how will readers in Sheridan, Wyoming or San Diego, California, or anywhere but Dubuque, be able to identify with and relate to what happens in it? This mis-apprehension results in generalized and unconvincing narratives that not only do not seem to have occurred in a specific place, but often seem not to have happened at all. Skilled writers, like builders and real estate agents, know that location matters; details count.

Paradoxically, the more specifics writers provide in their narratives, the more universal the appeal of their fiction will be, provided these particulars are believably rendered and well balanced with the other elements of fiction. Experienced writers not only embrace the universal appeal of specificity, they also understand what profi-