

Review of *How to Write a Truly Great Novel* *

By

Lindsay Grier Arthur, Jr.

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Reviewed

By

Gary A. Weissman

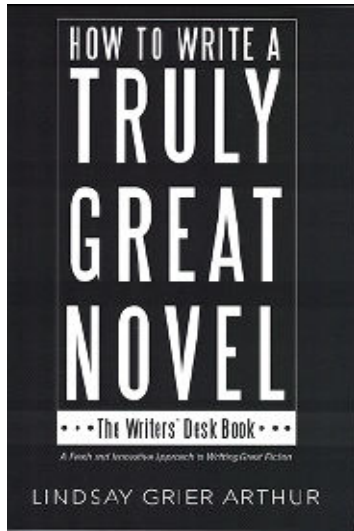
All too often, legal writing is to lucid prose as a polluted and muddy river is to a crystal clear mountain spring. We refer to the dialect in which attorneys' Briefs and judges' Opinions appear as *Legalese* because it almost invariably is impenetrably turgid and filled with irksome medievalisms, such as *hereinafter* and *therefrom*.

Law students learn to mimic the style of the appellate decisions that they read in practically every class, so that after three or four decades at the bar, few can still write scrutably.

What a welcome surprise, then, to read a book by someone

*Archway Publishing, Bloomington, Indiana, 146 pages (2018).

who, though having grown up the son of a judge, having co-founded a law firm, and having written hundreds of briefs in a 35-year career as an attorney, pulls off a book that is intelligible, even luminous. Lindsay Arthur Jr.'s *How To Write a Truly Great Novel, The Writers' Desk Book* is a gem. He knows of what he writes



because he himself has written a novel (*The Litigators*, published in 2005), ** has taught creative writing courses, and still conducts writers' workshops. In his non-fiction work, Arthur spells out what he terms the “Seven Principles of Literary Excellence,” namely: (1) **Compelling characters**; (2) **a captivating story**; (3) **conflict**; (4) **emotion**; (5) **mystery and suspense**; (6) **artistic vision**; and (7) **showing, not telling.**” He then defines, explicates, and gives examples of how to apply each of the principles.

Arthur manages to pull this off with panache, with humor, and without sounding arrogant, unlike so many of the guest speakers at the various Writers' Conferences around the country who impart their authorial derring-do in a manner mainly designed

** For a review of *The Litigators*, see Douglas A. Hedin, “Our World According to Arthur,” *The Hennepin Lawyer* (October 2005). That review and Arthur's response are posted elsewhere on the MLHP.

to impel the wannabees to buy the speakers' books on the Conference's book-signing day.

About the principle of compelling characters, Arthur writes: "Readers want to fall in love; they want arousal, to be swept off their feet and be drawn like quicksand into the life of a character that is so fascinating they cannot bear to put the book down" (p. 13). In advising why dialogue is an essential element in writing novels, he explains that "[d]ialogue becomes the gate through which the writer invites the reader into the minds of his characters." (p. 21). "Narrative is listening to the story; dialogue is watching the story through the mouths of the characters" (p. 93).

Arthur contends, quite accurately, that emotion is the prime driver of good characterization. He tells his readers: "It is passion and emotion that rule the world. We love, envy, hate, and destroy each other not because doing so is logical or rational but because our passions and emotions inevitably control our thought processes...[W]hy is that relevant in a book about how to write novels? The answer is that a writer who does not understand the role that emotion plays in the lives of real people cannot possibly understand how to write about emotion in a literary work" (p. 23).

Arthur devotes about 40% of the slim volume (144 pages of text, and a 2 page index) to those seven principles. Part Two covers successful writing techniques: Organization; storyboards; scene charts; chapter outlines; simple tenses; similes and metaphors; point of view; and the use of emotive verbs {“Using adjectives alone to describe a character is like driving a railroad spike with a tack hammer; it’s really easy to swing the hammer, but it does very little to advance the spike” }(p. 77).

The final portion of the book he calls “Finishing Touches,” which include overcoming Writer’s Block, an editing checklist, and publishing options – all containing helpful hints and good tips.

Some of what Arthur has to say is original. Truth be told, however, is that much of the contents in his book you can find in several tomes on how to be a good writer, at various writers’ workshops or conferences, and on many on-line, teach-ins. Almost all the ideas presented in the book fall into the category of Orthodox Axioms of Writing Fiction. Arthur just does it better than any other source I have seen or heard. The book does not need to be longer than 144 pages: There is no surplusage, and a lengthier text would necessarily include padding. What he has to say is useful, practical, edifying, and valuable.

Arthur does not take his own advice, however, when he counsels his readers about what he calls “the All-Important First Page.” As he points out, bookstore browsers tend to look at the front cover, the title, the squib on the back cover, and the first paragraph of the novel. Period! “The message,” he clarifies, is that “the first page is the most important page; the first paragraph is the most important paragraph; and the first sentence is the most important sentence” (p. 101).

Arthur’s first sentence in the first paragraph on the first page states: “Anyone with a reasonable command of the English language is capable of writing good fiction.” I’m surprised that he believes that. A music teacher can train pupils to read music, to understand treble clefs and bass clefs, and to recognize how breathing techniques help project one’s voice. But if the student does not have the basic talent to sing, s/he’s never going to be a singer, no matter how many techniques he or she masters. Similarly, a skilled football coach can help players learn blocking, running, passing, and catching; but if the would-be players lack athletic skill, they are highly unlikely to attain any discernible level of proficiency.

Candor requires that we concede that accomplished writers

have a gift, and while Lindsay Arthur's book will assist *them* to polish that gift; those who lack an ear for language will not really benefit from the seven principles of literary excellence or any other version of how to write a novel.

The cruel facts of publishing are these: (a) Literary agents reject 96% of all manuscripts submitted to them; (b) of the 4% that literary agents agree to represent authors, publishers only accept a fraction (depending on the genre, the quality of the manuscript, and the reputation of the agent); (c) every book actually published competes with 100 other books for shelf space in book stores; and (d) book sales in book stores have been steadily declining.

UPSHOT: If you're intent on being a fiction writer, join a local Writers Group; seriously ask for advice from your colleagues in the group; submit exemplars of your writing for critiques at a couple of Writers Conferences. If you get even flashing green lights from the feedback after those submissions, then Lindsay Arthur's book will be enormously helpful. If, however, the reviewers compliment your accompanying drawings, take the hint, and buy some paintbrushes.

Like Lindsay Arthur,

GARY WEISSMAN practiced law in Minneapolis for 30 years (though they never met) and in retirement became a novelist. He currently lives in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he teaches Spanish at the local Community College, leads walking tours of Jackson for the Jackson Hole Historical Society, and is a trooper in the Jackson Mounted Patrol.

He can be reached at weissman.gary@gmail.com.

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