

1952

How to Write a Novel

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Recommended Citation

Creeley, Robert. "How to Write a Novel." *New Mexico Quarterly* 22, 2 (1952). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol22/iss2/16>

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India's propensity for transcendental pursuit and the misery of India's history are, most certainly, intimately related to each other; they must not be regarded separately. The ruthless philosophy of politics and the superhuman achievements in metaphysics represent the two sides of a single experience of life.

Robert Creeley

HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL

THE RULES have been obvious enough—mainly the injunction to hold to 'character and action,' and one novelist, of at least some reputation, has said he was constitutionally in favor of 'plot.' But it means very little.

Otherwise, one can go back to even the hackneyed examples. "*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* . . . appeared on the 1st of January 1760." A simple fact; and from that time, hence, like they say, at least one major evidence, against the above rote, was there to be dealt with.

I am speaking, in short, of *time*—of what that is in a prose narrative, and of what it has done there. As frame, as the main means to a coherent order.

It is certainly very attractive. That is, it is a line, a very solid one, for the hoisting up of anything which may interest the novelist; his characters, etc., his apprehension of 'the meaning of life,' etc. And, more than that, what other continuum is possible; how else effect a reasonable series, how project, by language, the incident reality, say that it is there, and prove it?

At least that, for a clear sense of the problem. By some means or other, this demanded, a man must make of his narrative a cohesion of the things there occurring, must give them demonstrable relation. Which is order of a kind; and we've gone wrong,

only, in believing it to be of one kind, no other to be admitted.

Beyond humor, *Tristram Shandy* is the narrative of one man's attentions, of what they found to fasten on. That is a defensible comment,—there is very clear writing in this book.

"The lines were very natural—for they were nothing at all to the purpose, says *Slawkenbergius*, and 'tis a pity there were no more of them; but whether it was that Seig. *Diego* was slow in composing verses—or the hostler quick in saddling mules—is not averred . . ."

Go at it another way. Take it as your own headache, and think, then, if what counts is that the day goes by, etc., etc.; or that something in it, precisely in, was of interest, and that made it all otherwise. This is the contrary,—if one can fasten on there.

Similarly, one thing leads to another,—with or without *time*. An instant is a precise formulation, even of a universe. It doesn't finally matter much whether it lead to another; it has its own logic. Or say, perhaps better, that there are two ways of evoking a reality: that it has place in *time*, or that it is existent in *space*. There is some choice between them, at least for the novelist.

"Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that race which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people . . ." Whereas this present table, with the typewriter on it, two books, milk bottle, is something else again. Or clearly a different *field*. It is that sense I am intent on making clear.

To write of one is not to write of the other. There is the escape of *time*, that escape which *time* affords; so that the man dies, too soon, or the book ends.

What else. ("Is this a fit time, said my father to himself, to talk of PENSIONS and GRENADIERS?")

The divers techniques used to confront *time*, in the long narrative, are ultimately makeshift; they solve very little. Flashback, recall by certain of the characters, juxtaposition (too simply) of 'time' sequences—none of much use. Because, to be in that pas-

sage, to make that the sequence (that the days go by) , is a definite commitment, and not to be dodged easily.

But put the weight on the other sense, of things shifting, between themselves—and *time* there to be a qualification among many—it is a release.

A release, immediately, of the very things themselves—not gratuitously, since relation is aimed at—why they all keep together. And to the extent that *time* bears on that, all right, i.e., all right to make use of it. But not as the main line.

The present novel¹ is attack on this ground. Clearly. Unequivocally aimed at that, to break *time* back to a use which isn't crippling. It is of very great interest.

BRIEF REVIEWS

The Pathless Grove, by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; translated by Pauline Cook. Prairie City, Ill.: The Decker Press, 1950. 80 pp. \$1.50.

First and Last Poems, by Michael Sloane. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1951. 72 pp. \$2.50.

In 1651 Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez de Santillana was born, an illegitimate daughter, at Napanla, a village near Mexico City. In 1931 Michael Edison Sloane, grandson of Thomas A. Edison, was born in New York City. In 1695, having been for twenty-six years a sister in the Convent of San Jerónimo, and having been forbidden her "books and instruments" by a religious order which found her artistic independence of spirit unconventional and beyond tolerance, Juana Inés died at forty-three "showing (her contemporaries said) every appearance of desiring the end." In 1949, after having written for two years of the oppressive loneliness of his life, a loneliness which he felt could be relieved only by spiritual compromise ("Why do I keep on / Trying to burn under dull lights, / Draping my arm, book in hand,

¹ *The Beetle Leg*, by John Hawkes. New York: New Directions, 1951. 159 pp. \$2.50.