



JANET BURROWAY

IMAGINATIVE WRITING

The Elements of Craft

FOURTH EDITION

Imaginative Writing

Janet Burroway

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Imaginative Writing Details

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Ashley Elliott says

Used this for a creative writing course I took through BYU, and it was very helpful! I absolutely LOVED all of the writing prompts scattered throughout the book and used a lot of them for my exercises.

Venus Blancia says

I definitely recommend this book to struggling writers and enthusiasts for this covers writing in creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama. For sure, aside from the theories this book has offered, what you'll love the most is the "Try This" section where as a reader and writer you can follow through and try it yourself. You'll enjoy too the **thousands** of writing prompts for all writing genres.

Riley K. says

This is the book that all authors or writers should read. It definitely helped me hone my skills. The line editing guide is amazing.

Amanda says

I didn't get to read the entirety of this book because some weeks I would have time to delve into the prompts and some weeks I wouldn't, but it was very helpful and taught me more about creative writing. Personally, I'm not a fan of writing guide books, but for a class assigned book, this is the most helpful one I've encountered so far in my college career. Which is saying a lot, considering I'm almost graduated.

Sarah Schantz says

I was skeptical when my lead gave me the required creative writing textbook for the Front Range Community College CWI classes. I wasn't sure about a textbook for the craft. I've always taught technique by supplementing students with excerpts from Stephen King's, *On Writing*, Natalie Goldberg's, *Writing Down the Bones*, and others such as *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott and Gaston Bachelard's, *The Poetics of Space*, and while I still supplemented the text with these handouts, I read Janet Burroway's book, assigned it, and was impressed.

Personally, I was most impressed with the rhetoric. The basics on setting, voice, character, etc. helped me return to the beginner's mind (I've mostly been working with published professional writers). The creative work in the book is good as well, and diverse, but I feel more comfortable teaching the work I already know. So I also augmented a lot there--giving them Raymond Carver to read, and Flannery O'Connor, as well as other writers not included in *Imaginative Writing*. At one point, when I asked my students why they seemed

to like my handouts more than the textbook, they answered two-fold: 1. They found the literature I gave them to be more accessible and interesting, and 2. They hate writing in books; when I explained that textbooks are designed to be written in, they either retorted that they still couldn't bring themselves to do so, or they needed to sell their books back. I think these are both good points, especially for a CWI class where almost no one is probably going to go on to become a professional writer, and thus, appreciate any book on writing the way I do.

What I didn't expect was for the textbook to influence the order I taught the genres I'm expected to teach as much as it did. I was prepared to begin with poetry, then do CNF, and end with fiction. Burroway begins the book in chapters dedicated to the more universal aspects of creative writing such as voice, setting, character, so we read those chapters, studied the different types of work, and freewrote in whatever forms it took. Then, about four weeks into the semester, we focused on CNF. I think Burroway makes a valid point when she says people like to talk about themselves. Furthermore, because the demographic of my classes (even at a community college) still tend to be young adults, their lives (however short) are still all they really know, or have to write about. Then we transitioned into Fiction. They had the basic storytelling skills down from writing CNF, they were getting comfortable with concepts like "show don't tell," and "adverbs pave the road to hell," and the best transition is no transition, which meant they were ready to branch out, and start making shit up. From there, we moved into Poetry (I chose not to cover Drama which is also in the book because I don't have to, and I don't feel that I have the expertise to do so). I'd never imagined doing poetry last, but then I read a passage from the textbook where Burroway says something like this: "All the devices and techniques required for writing good prose are also needed for writing good poetry, only more so." Wow! She couldn't be more right.

Aside from that quote, I realized poetry gave us a chance to explore other workshop methods. My class was large--starting with 18 students, and dwindling down to 15, which meant we didn't have time to workshop CNF or fiction in class. We had to break into smaller groups and do the critiques at home. Poetry, at least shorter poems, gave us the chance to finally workshop in class, which means exploring different techniques--such formats included: the workshop model where the author can't talk, but just listens and takes notes as his/her classmates discuss (in third person) what works and what doesn't. Also, this allowed the writers themselves to practice reading their work out loud; poetry is not only meant to be spoken and heard, something editorial happens when a writer reads his or her work out loud to a group of people that is different from when he or she reads it out loud by himself/herself.

I gave the textbook 4 stars instead of 5 because my students still resonated more with the handouts from King's, *On Writing* and Goldberg's, *Writing Down the Bones*. Both King and Goldberg are incredibly accessible, and there is something about getting advice straight from a master's mouth regarding craft that no textbook can ever manage. I also didn't always agree or understand why Burroway chose the creative work she did as samples of what she was addressing in each chapter, but that might just be due to the fact I'm stuck in my ways. I use this story/writer for voice, and this one for setting, and this one for character, and so on. That said, I wanted her to surprise and inspire me with her choices, and she just didn't. Or rather, she didn't as much as I would have liked. I found the best creative work was in her CNF chapter.

I've also only used this textbook once to teach one class. I know I'll be using it again, and many times, so I can see myself growing to understand the means to her madness and coming back here to change my review and my rating.

Letitia says

Chapter 1: Invitation to the Writer

Try this 1.5: Make your list of "Questions I want answered." Pick one. Go online and research (on at least 4 sites) what is known about that question. If it is not an answerable question, you'll find much more written about it. Make notes in your journal. Then put away the notes and write what you seem to have learned, in the form of a poem or a dialogue.

Chapter 2: Image

* Any character – whether in a memoir, a fiction, poetry, or drama – who speaks in generalizations and judgments will undermine our trust.

* It is said of filmmaking that “every close-up is a synecdoche”, meaning that when we see a close-up of a hand, we assume that it stands for the whole person.

Try this 2.8: Describe someone entirely in negatives: what he or she does not do, does not look like, does not remember; how he or she does not dress, walk, sound, or the like. Can you make us know who the character is?

Chapter 3: Voice

Don't worry about “finding your voice”. Worry about saying things as clearly, precisely, and vividly as you can.

Try this 3.4: Write a short character sketch of someone you dislike. Write a monologue in which that person tells you an anecdote from his or her childhood.

Point of View: Who is standing where to tell the story to whom? At what distance?

Chapter 4: Character

“One reason that debate and argument seems static is that characters holding forth with well thought-out positions seem unlikely to change, whereas dialogue that represents potential change becomes itself dramatic action.”

Chapter 5: Setting

“If, on the other hand, the world you are writing about is itself in some way exotic, you may want to work in the opposite direction, to make it seem as familiar to us as the nearest mall.”

Try this 5.5: Pick a scene from your journal. Describe the setting using the pattern long shot, middle shot, close-up. Make sure that you begin with a wide sweep and end with a tight focus. Pick another scene. Begin with a very small, close image. Widen the lens until you have placed that scene in the context of the entire continent.

Chapter 6: Story

Try this 6.1: Write a two-page story about a journey. Give us the setting and at least two characters. They discover something that causes trouble. Let the main character make a decision and take an action.

Try this 6.2: Place two characters in a dangerous setting. Each has half of something that is no good without the other half. Neither wants to give up his/her half. What happens?

Chapter 7: Development and Revision

Try this 7.4, 7.11, 7.12, 7.13, 7.14, 7.18

Try this 7.5: Doodle a series of lists—of the characteristics of someone you have written about; or of phrases and idioms that character would use; or of objects assoc. with a person, place, profession, or memory you have written about. Generate, rapidly, a list of metaphors for some central object in a piece you want to develop.

Try this 7.7: Bring your research skills to your imaginative work. Identify something in a piece that you aren't sure about. You don't know the facts, don't understand the process or the equipment, aren't clear on the history or the statistics, don't know the definition. Find out. Consult books, reference works, newspapers, the Internet; interview someone, email someone, ask the experts.

Try This 7.9: State your central subject or idea in a single sentence. Reduce it to a word. Express it in an image. Express it in a line of dialogue that one of your chars might say. Are you clear about what you're writing about? Does it need thinking and feeling through again?

Try this 7.10: Go through your work and highlight generalizations in one colour, abstractions in another, cliches in a third. Replace each of them with something specific, wild, inappropriate, farfetched. Go back later to see if any of these work. Replace the others, working toward the specific, the precise, and the concrete.

Chapter 9: Fiction

“The human desire to know why is as powerful as the desire to know what happens next, and it is a desire of a higher order. Once we have the facts, we inevitably look for the links between them, and only when we find such links are we satisfied that we “understand.”

“Subtext is a necessary result and cost of civilisation—if everyone went around saying what they meant all the time, there would be fewer friends and a lot more pain—but it offers a glorious opportunity for art.”

Cecilia Hernandez says

too much to read for the same repetitive information .

Shawney Hilpert says

This was a college textbook I rented for my Creative Writing class. It's an easy enough textbook to follow, and the professor did a good job quizzing us on the things that mattered. The content was full of definitions and example stories/essays/poems/screenplays. I'd recommend this book to anyone who wants to better understand writing in general or to get better at it.

Clare says

This review is also posted on my blog at <http://inputs.wordpress.com/2009/03/1...>

This is a large and detailed book on how to engage in creative writing. Each chapter contains explanations of various elements such as 'image', 'voice', 'character'. It covers techniques of fiction writing, creative non fiction, poetry and drama.

Each chapter contains short exercises scattered throughout the text but handily enclosed in highlighted text boxes. These can be undertaken in writing workshops or by an individual writer. At the end of each chapter, there are short stories, short pieces of creative non fiction, poems and short drama scripts.

The exercises are very useful and the explanations of the various categories are detailed and useful as well. This is a great textbook for use in creative writing workshops.

I only have a few relatively minor quibbles. The first is that it is not always clear how the pieces of writing at the end of the chapter form examples of what has just been discussed. The second is that as the book goes on, the selections of material become a veritable gloom fest leading into serious slit your wrist territory. Some of poetry on the other hand is a bit less maudlin and I found some of the pieces quite clever and amusing.

Another problem is a purely geographical one. Working with this book in an Australian context the overwhelming focus on North American examples and literature has a rather alienating effect. But this can be easily remedied by modifying the exercises to give them a more local flavour and choosing different short stories as examples.

All in all, this is a wonderfully comprehensive text which can be used at both the introductory and advanced levels in teaching creative writing.

Karen says

Because of their strident whimsy, I soon took all the try-this exercises to be rhetorical questions. What if your main character was a giraffe? What does it have in its pockets?

Emily B. says

This textbook makes 'dissecting' a story entertaining. Its large variety of lessons offer many perspectives as

well. For example, I've found at least three different ways to look at plot. Is it a matter of thwarted desire (I wanted x, but then y happened), or is it more like a crime story, with an interrogator and culprit?

I often read this book outside of class too. I like the short stories and poems within this volume, as well as the writing prompts. I might save some of the prompts for later!

Tree Langdon says

This text was the best tool I purchased for a Creative Writing course at our local college. It covers structure as well as encourages you to use your own voice.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

The basis of this book is that writing should be play—even for professional writers there has to be an element of fun and joy. As long as an author can keep having fun, they can write indefinitely and improve their craft. While I'm no fan of the Iowa Writer's Seminar, (and this book is steeped in that tradition), it has a lot of useful tips and exercises for writing a little every day, and improving your own writing. I could see this useful for teaching a creative writing class, or as a self-guided seminar.

For a fan of literature as opposed to a practitioner, there's also a lot to enjoy here, with a feast of short fiction, essays, poems, and plays used as examples. Sometimes it's a little hard to see the relevance to the theme of chapter, but as someone who mostly stays away from modern fiction this was a lovely sampling.

Dianne says

I took so long to read it as I was often inspired into a spurt of writing before bed. Pick and choose what stories and exercises work for you and its a great tool.

Chanel Earl says

This was a pretty good creative writing textbook in that it helped start some good discussions. Part of the reason it did that though, was by saying things that were somewhat controversial like "Poetry should be spoken aloud" and "it is impossible to write a good story using only summary." I had trouble with some of the limits that I felt the discussion sections put on creative writing, but still enjoyed the book.

The reading selections (which I didn't read all of) were sometimes brilliant, other times trendy. There was always something I loved, even if I disliked a lot of others.
