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Heather Leach and Robert Graham. *Everything You Need to Know About Creative Writing (but knowing isn't everything...)*. London: Continuum Books, 2007. 195p.

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This offering from the United Kingdom is a handy manual of terms in alphabetical order to aid and advise aspiring (or blocked) novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and poets. Authors Heather Leach and Robert Graham as well as five more contributors listed at the book's beginning are all published fiction writers and professors of creative writing at various universities in England.

With some sections as short as a few sentences (*caricature, lyrics, synopsis*) to more extensive chapters several pages long (*description, dialogue, plot, scriptwriting, story*), these segments begin with *abstracts, action, and adjective* and continue up through *workshops, writing practice, and zeitgeist*. An astonishing number of topics—more than 200 in all—offer succinct advice on various kinds of writing techniques, philosophies, and encouragement for all types of fiction writers, particularly those who are just beginning or who are lacking in self-confidence.

"There are many ways to use this book," the authors state. "You can dip in and out; you can jump interactively from one entry to another using the many cross-references; you can follow one of the alternative routes to explore a specific topic in more detail; you can try out the writing ideas" (2). The "alternative routes" listed at the end of the book suggest various topics on which one might be seeking aid, then list several sections in the book that might be most helpful. For example, under Poetry, the authors recommend the pages on *alliteration and assonance, archaisms, ballad, epic, experimental poetry, fixed forms, haiku, lineation, metaphor, meter and rhythm*, etc. If one prefers to focus on editing and revision, one could proceed through *anachronism, clichés, clutter, drafts, editing, feedback, grammar, proofreading, punctuation, spellcheck*, and so on.

Many of the sections contain short excerpts from other well-known writers' prose and discuss how each is a good example of creating characters, conflict, description, dialogue, plot, point of view, and numerous other aspects of producing a short story or novel.

In an early entry titled *autobiography*, the authors assert that writing of the self is more than just a summation of events, but also an analysis of a person's relationship with his/her outer world (10). Urging each writer to discover his/her own style and direction, they state, "Think of your own strong likes and dislikes, obsessions and habits, as breadcrumbs leading you, like Hansel and Gretel, into the forest of

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memories. As you follow them, writing them down, sooner or later, you'll make out a faint track: a narrative through your life" (11).

Three of the most useful sections for budding writers also are found early in the book—in the B's—and concern the basic notion of being a writer, the frustrating problems of beginning a creative project, and getting beyond writer's block. In both the *being a writer* and *block* sections, the authors affirm that one must eschew the notion that writers are a pre-established and elite corps—"white people, geniuses, French absinthe drinkers" (19)—a falsehood and a sure recipe for blockage. "You may not feel much like a creative genius, you may not even feel like a writer, but you can just keep writing. This is what writers *do*: they sit down in front of the page, the screen, curious, afraid. Words appear one after another. They cross them out, they look at what they've written, they write more. Not being, but doing" (16). In the *beginnings* section, the authors acknowledge how difficult it can be simply to get a writing project started. They stress the importance of finding a preliminary "spark," writing the idea down immediately, then organizing and revising later. "Every story, poem, novel, script—every good piece of writing has at least three beginnings: the first is the germ, the idea that kick-starts something into growth: the second is the first draft, words staggering out of bed, unbrushed, unshowered... the third beginning is the one that belongs to the reader... neat, sweet and squeaky clean... Writing is what happens in between" (15).

A particularly interesting section titled *experimental writing* discusses the use of stream-of-consciousness and metafiction approaches and notes that certain authors apply film techniques such as jump-cuts, freeze frames, and scratch methods to the narrative arts. "Of course, we all need the reassuring and familiar pleasures of story and plot, answers and tied-up endings. But we also need looseness, openness, adventure and play, and at times we may find it liberating to struggle, as Wordsworth said, with 'feelings of strangeness'" (62).

Two more segments titled *failure* and *rejection* will help soothe the sting of non-acceptance of one's writing projects. "Every writer I know has collected enough rejection letters from magazines and publishers to make a life-sized origami Taj Mahal. Don't take it personally when it happens to you" (64). Many great books, the authors say, were turned down numerous times before being published. One was Nobel-prize winner William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (145). The authors give suggestions for revising a rejected work and persevering. "It is a hard world out there for writers, and although you may need to lick your wounds for awhile, don't wait too long before you're sending work off again. To infinity and beyond!" (146).

In the last section, *zeitgeist* ("spirit of the time"), the authors clarify their book's parenthetical subtitle. Leach and Graham state, "But rational consciousness, *knowing*

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is not all that we need. Writers who are in touch with their time and who write with commitment and passion are *part* of the zeitgeist: one of the makers and shakers, not one of the followers” (190).

At the end of most of the sections is a short list of related readings and/or websites on the specific topic. In addition, a substantial Further Readings list is found at the book’s end. Most of the titles are recent contributions from England, such as *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings* (2005), *The Creative Writing Coursebook* (2001), *The Ode Less Traveled: Unlocking the Poet Within* (2005), *Writing Poetry and Getting Published* (1997), *Becoming a Writer* (1996), and *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* (1988). Two of the books from this side of the Atlantic that the authors recommend are William Strunk and E.B. White’s venerable *The Elements of Style* (1918) and Stephen King’s brief but wonderful *On Writing* from 2000. Graham also has written *How to Write Fiction (And Think About It)* (2006), and he and Leach also collaborated on *The Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* (2005).

As a final testimonial to the practicality of this manual: during the course of reading this book, I sat down and cranked out an original short story. While I do not claim that it is a great creative work, Leach and Graham must concur that, for the moment, I have transcended writer’s block and conquered problems with beginnings. ✱