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TEXT review***The Writer's Guide: A companion to writing for pleasure or publication******review by Donna Lee Brien****The Writer's Guide: A Companion to Writing for Pleasure or Publication*

Irina Dunn

2nd edition. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000. (First published 1999)

ISBN 1 86508 832 3

387pp A\$26.95

Irina Dunn states that she wishes to offer the new edition of *The Writer's Guide* as "a practical guide to developing your writing skills", and I found the wealth of practical advice and information therein nothing if not encyclopaedic. In making this judgement, I tried to think up topic areas that were not included and just could not do so. I did believe I had found omissions in certain of the book's listings, and thought to posit this as a function of the fact that with the broad range of areas the book covers, this substantial text (of almost 400 pages) could offer only necessarily brief information on each of its many sub- and sub-sub-headings. A quick count reveals approximately two hundred separate topics, many of these generally relevant to writers of all kinds in all places, but with a special focus on writers in Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps we could all, I was going to suggest, in the most collegial way, send Dunn any omissions we note for her third edition? *TEXT*, as an example, was mentioned, whereas *dotlit*, the online journal I edit with Philip Neilsen, was not. Then I read on to another section (Magazines and Journals instead of the Websites area I was looking in) and found *dotlit* listed there. I now can't think of anything to send Dunn collegially, except for my congratulations.

Executive Director of the NSW Writers' Centre since 1992, Dunn has extensive experience with the needs of writers: aspiring, emerging and established. With this knowledge in mind, she has divided her guide into major sections which follow, logically, the process of moving through the stages of producing and publishing a manuscript. From "Getting started", "Kinds of writing" and "Getting down to writing" to "Getting published", "Promoting your book" and "Writing as a career, or 'Don't give up your day job'", these sections offer considered and sensible advice from the initial considerations of what to write - decisions as basic as deciding whether a text be fiction or non-fiction - and who to write for; to dealing with royalties, the Public Lending Right scheme and any tax deductions you may be able to claim after such payments. The final, and largest, section of the book is titled "Resources" and is organised into such areas as lists of agents, manuscript assessors, publishers and major festivals and events, as well as such specific information as the various industry-recommended rates writers can demand for their work.

This second edition incorporates new material dealing with recent developments in the digital world as it affects writers and readers, including much new and useful information on electronic publishing, publications and available computing software. There is also an enhanced section on Australian short film festivals as, in Dunn's words, "they considerably expand the opportunities for new screenwriters". All the excellent material from the first

edition seems to be retained, with a significant updating of the myriad of details which go out of date as soon as you print them.

The book is easy to use, with clearly titled topic areas, sidebar icons pointing readers to where else in the book they can find other information on the area under discussion and a good index. It is also pleasing to read, and I particularly enjoyed the numerous boxed quotes from writers - from the famous, the infamous and those less generally well known - additions which not only add opinionated content to the topic under discussion, but also dollops of charm, humanity and humour. These quotes are all referenced, and I can only dream of the time to go and find, let alone read, all the articles they are extracted from. Dunn writes "you must become a voracious reader" (68) to be a good writer - the latter the mantra we chant through our creative writing courses at QUT - and to this end, there is a long listing of useful books and other publications in the resources section.

Although I know I will use this book, as I frequently used the first edition, what especially touched me as a reader, writer and teacher of writing is Dunn's continuing passionate belief in reading and writing as valuable human activities. "No other human activity can leap the barriers of time and space as writing and reading can to bring you into contact with other cultures and other worlds", (xiii) she writes. Who could disagree?

Notes and Debate

Jeri Kroll and Steve Evans [How to Write a 'How to Write' Book](#)

Donna Lee Brien is Course Coordinator of Creative Writing and Cultural Studies and a Lecturer in Creative Writing at QUT in Brisbane. Her teaching and research interests include creative nonfiction and electronic writing. Donna edits dotlit: The Online Journal of Creative Writing <http://www.dotlit.qut.edu.au> with Philip Neilsen and her first self-help book, co-authored with Tess Brady, The Girls Guide to Real Estate, was published by Allen & Unwin in September 2002.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au

Text Review***Logistics or Strategy? Guiding and Resourcing the Writer******review by Patrick West****The Writer's Guide: A Companion to Writing for Pleasure or Publication*

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2nd edition. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000. (First published 1999)

ISBN 1 86508 832 3

i-xix, 1-387pp A\$26.95

Even a quick flick through Irina Dunn's *The Writer's Guide* is sufficient engagement to cue the reader to the central fault with a book that in many respects actually has a great deal to offer both the novice and advanced writer resident in either Australia or New Zealand. My first and lasting impression of this publication was of sheer overload of information. Sections of text seem to creep inevitably towards the edges of the page - if there is such a thing as "typeface drift" then here it is. Outrigger boxed quotations threaten to break from their moorings at the edges of paragraphs. I was reminded more than once of those dubious "pay for" verse anthologies in which font-challenged poems slide vertiginously towards oblivion in the interior shadow of the spine. How can it be explained, this desire to say far too much for the space? Even the publicity blurbs at the start risk a considerable measure of overkill.

An appreciation of the difference between two terms that have avowed significance in this book's sense of its own function might shed some light on the issue I am raising in this review. A couple of words pop up in key places: "guide" and "resources". Dunn's monograph clearly wants to operate as the former; unfortunately for the author, it's more like a collection of the latter. In fact "collection" is just the right word for this quantity of discrete (relatively unconnected) items of information. *The Writer's Guide* has high on encyclopaedic ambitions, a pretension not without some value. But one effect of these ambitions, in the context of this publication and its target audience, is to make of the title a misleading label.

There has been a lot of argument about war in the media of late. Amateurs talk strategy while professionals talk logistics, runs a current cliché. Dunn would appear to have produced a perfect arsenal of logistical matter. This reader felt almost shanghaied between Contents and Index. Everything that a writer might need advice and information about is certainly contained within the dense pages of this quite voluminous book. But it is not a good guide as such. A sense of strategy is not sufficiently in evidence. Where is the flesh-and-blood (not to mention resource-rich) writer in these pages? There is inevitably a section on "your ideal reader" (page 8). Who is the ideal (pre-positioned) reader of this book? I did not really feel that Dunn had in mind the problem of the writing self in relation to the world, the one who seeks traction as a producer of text in his/her specific personal, cultural and professional environment. Any guide will tell you when the cathedral was built or when the museum opens. Only a special sort of guide can relate the two in a living sense. To some extent, I would say that I did not hear the voice of a teacher between the lines of *The Writer's Guide*.

The necessary addendum to the cliché about strategy and logistics, of course, is that some version of strategy can almost be presupposed whenever this comparison is made. Amateurs only talk strategy, professionals talk both. But Dunn appears only to talk logistics, and that in a reduced sense. You might say that the qualitative dimension is missing. Nine branches of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) are listed. Which is great as far as it goes. The question of a writer's identity with respect to associations of other people, which might include a discourse on the pleasures of solitude for example, is not sufficiently addressed. "Tips for budding novelists" lists a series of points that beg a multitude of questions: "maintain colour, mood and tension"; "make your story plausible"; "choose language that suits the characters and the circumstances"; and, my personal favourite: "listen to how people use language and then practise writing dialogue" (46). I submit that such concision and apparent transparency risks being positively misleading. At best, sometimes the advice in Dunn's book simply flat-lines, giving out nothing.

I also wonder about the fashion in which germinal writers will necessarily accommodate themselves to largely normative assumptions and positions in the text that, in my view, require energetic re-evaluation today. It's sad that the image of the writer who must suffer in the name of art still rears its head in my classes from time to time. I would have liked to see Dunn engage rigorously and vigorously with such very problematic notions. There are other ways of positioning oneself, as a writer, than as an economic victim (unless, of course, that's your thing). The practical should be combined with a sense of the generative and the unexpectedly possible; words are the biggest industry in the world. As Foucault might say, are you outside power or inside it? "Few [writers]," according to Dunn, "go off to play the stockmarket in the morning, make their millions by lunch-time, and return home for a pleasant afternoon of creative writing in their three-storey waterfront mansion" (205). Well, perhaps three stories is excessive, and myself I prefer a view of the hinterland. What seeds do we want, as teachers of writing and as writers about the business of writing, to plant in the minds of other and emerging writers?

I don't want to be misunderstood. As a collection of resources, this publication is valuable beyond any doubt. The more practical and concrete it gets, as it goes on, the better the book becomes (the escape from the title reaches its apogee in the seventh part). My gripe is largely with the lack of fit between packaging and content - this is not really a guide - and especially with the potentially harmful effects of engaging with this book as something that it is not.

The comparison with an encyclopaedia can be extended to generate another line of critique. A not insubstantial amount of the information in this book strikes me as simply redundant. Skip the stuff on email, for example, unless you have just dropped from the moon. Extended insights into the question of electronic text forms and what they do to inherited conceptions of language, however, or comparisons between artistic creations and the odd fired-off keyboard missive, would have been more than welcome. (And something else nags away here. The presumed reader of this text would appear to be someone just a little behind the times and out of touch - although I am assuming that section 3.1.2 is just a joke. I kept thinking that any developing writer would simply have to know more about the world, to be that blunt, than Dunn would seem to imagine. Writers are supposed to know everything. I doubt if anyone, for instance, can teach me very much that I don't already know about how to use sticky tape, or about the dangers of making notes on serviettes.) A great deal of this text could have been excised, leaving more room for investigations into the types of questions that might generate genuine guidance. Connections between elements of the craft, if you like: the art of navigating one's way through the world and through words. It's frustrating to know, on the balance of the evidence, that Dunn has the capacity to engage so much more usefully with the world of writing and writers - indeed with the world.

All of the above criticism comes with one significant qualification however. The outrigger boxed quotations raise many of the issues that I have been lamenting the absence of in the main body of the text. Perhaps this is the subtle masterstroke of the book that takes the ground away from under what I have just written in this review. I felt that here, at least, I was in the presence of real writers, dealing with those real issues that slip through the net of craft matters or practical advice (valuable though this is to a point). Ironically, it is these moments of connection - both to us, and from one excerpt to the next - that are literally corralled on the pages of this text (although there is also a certain freedom in this for the reader).

So I am undecided about this book in the end. It's true that I can actually locate everything in it that I might ever want from both a guide and a resource. But it is an odd sort of a guide that has to be read so insistently against its own grain. Unless that is the point of the whole exercise - somehow I don't think so.

The almost transcendental claims in the testimonials might be balanced, in the conclusion to this review, by the observation that what Irina Dunn's *The Writer's Guide* offers of most value to the field of writing learning and enterprise is a more immanent sense of the growth of this field in Australia and New Zealand, and of the veritable flurry of questions (from the most practical to those hardest to pin down) that have accompanied this growth. This book is not so much the victim of its own already very considerable success, but of the success and the sheer breadth of the field that it tries so hard to encompass. It's an index of what's happening all around us. Writers in any genre, it's true, do need to know all about email and sticky tape, and about everything else besides. And no book can ever hope to contain everything.

I genuinely hope that a lot of people buy this book, but I would also like to know that the guidance it offers is never considered the last word in guidance. *A Writer's Guide* perhaps?

Notes and Debate

Jeri Kroll and Steve Evans [How to Write a 'How to Write' Book](#)

Dr Patrick West is a lecturer in Creative Writing in the School of Arts, Griffith University.

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au