



## COVER SHEET

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# *Writing with Imagination: A Practical Guide*

*review by Nicole Bourke*

*Writing with Imagination: A Practical Guide*

Linda Aronson

Macmillan Education Aust., South Yarra,

rrp \$24.04pb, 196pp

ISBN 0-7329-4682-4

A quick flick through Linda Aronson's book on imaginative writing will tell you a great deal about its intended audience and uses. This is a book developed to help secondary students (and teachers) faced with the task of developing skills in writing fiction, probably in the context of a high school English class. Each chapter is simple and clear, with abundant sub-headings and small bites of discussion, diagrams, tables and exercises. It is clearly a workbook, with brief discussions followed by illustrative exercises.

The book is divided into four main sections, each of which includes a series of chapters. The first section – 'Thinking like a writer' - is largely given over to a discussion of the two styles of thinking which Aronson insists are intrinsic to all professional writers (lateral and vertical thinking), as well as the Three Step process for putting the formulation into action. The second section – 'Getting Good Ideas' - consists of a series of exercises for coming up with plot ideas, while Part Three – 'Narrative Skills' - is about developing those ideas further, breaking down the elements of plot into the three-act structure familiar to most scriptwriting students. The final section – 'The Personal Element' - focuses on how to utilise memories and senses to enhance your writing.

*Writing with Imagination* has a lot to offer the young writer who is struggling to come up with plot ideas. The ideas for analysing and reworking traditional tales are certainly interesting and productive, although I found myself thinking that they might ultimately lead to students unable or unwilling to explore more innovative plot devices. Many of the exercises and suggestions for developing narratives are specifically designed for students facing the task of writing during an exam, and certainly many of the devices would be useful to the student wanting to be able to write a piece of short fiction in an hour or less, but I found myself wanting more from this text. I wondered how students, schooled in the methods developed in this text, would move from writing exam fiction to more considered work.

While there is some discussion of metaphor and dialogue in the final chapters the majority of the book is focused on structure and plot. In this sense the title is misleading, since most of the exercises and suggestions for developing plot and narrative ideas have relatively little to do with the kind of imaginative writing which the title and cover (with its moon and feathers) imply. Far less attention is paid to what I tend to think of as the actual work of writing - to the development of voice or character for example - to the writing of one good sentence, and then another. Perhaps this has more to do with my own process as a writer - to my belief that plot and structure are certainly important but equally important is the need for strong characterisation and good style.

I think the thing that most worried me about this text was its prescriptiveness. Many 'how to write' texts argue for a particular way of approaching the writing of 'good' fiction. The kind of formulaic approach used in *Writing for Imagination* is no different. By the time I finished reading I had rather startling visions of high school students struggling to write stories to formula, producing cookie-cutter fictions that their teachers found easy to mark - checking off the key elements described in the text - but which they (both students and teachers) found largely dull as a result.

I was worried by how the book would be positioned by a teacher - would students be expected to accept the theorems on how 'good' fiction is written as absolute? Would students find inspiration here, or the kind of bored listlessness I remember from English classes? I was reminded of how well my high school English teacher had managed to make even *A Clockwork Orange* seem boring. It has been a long time, however, since I was in high school, and perhaps I have forgotten how exciting it all seemed at the time. How on first cracking the spine of my now falling-apart copies of *Lord of the Flies* or *Hamlet*, I discovered something that no textbook would ever be able to match - a love of literature that has never left me.

After struggling with how useful this book is for high school students, or their teachers, I handed it over to my daughter and her friends - teenagers who are the book's intended audience. It's school holidays and much shuffling of feet and rolling of eyes ensued, until they finally agreed (under duress and with extravagant promises about new Korn CDs) to have a look and tell me what they thought. Their verdict? It's a textbook. No better or worse than any of the other textbooks which lurk, lunch-encrusted and largely unloved, in the bottom of their schoolbags. Books they are sure their teachers love far more than they do, and ones that they will leave behind them when they finally venture out into the world.

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