Fiction Techniques

By Mark Farrington, NVWP

Ed. note: The following is an excerpt from Chapter One of Mark Farrington’s book-in-progress, Fiction Techniques: A Course in the Craft of Writing Fiction for the Student, the Teacher, and the Self-Taught. The book builds on Mark’s 15 years of experience teaching the course “Fiction Techniques” in the Johns Hopkins University M.A. in Writing Program. The course, a “core” requirement for all students pursuing their degree in fiction writing, lays the foundation for the ideas and processes that will hopefully shape them for the remainder of their writing lives. Designed to mirror the writing process itself, the book begins with chapters on the creative process, then moves into more detailed craft issues such as plot, characterization, and style.

The Journal is pleased to announce that, over the next two issues, we will publish the remainder of Chapter One. It is our hope that the ideas contained within this chapter will help plant some seeds in the minds of other TCs, no matter what their grade level, and help them consider new ways to bring fiction writing into their own classrooms. As Mark explains:

As a student, I longed to have a comprehensive book on fiction writing that not only explained the basics that most creative writing books cover, but that helped me through the entire process from first step to last. As a teacher, I’ve long sought one complete, comprehensive book that I could use as a text in my classes. And during the period I was not part of academia but struggled on my own…I longed for a book that could help me learn those things I couldn’t teach myself, and help me progress faster than I was able to on my own. My hope is to present a work that speaks to all three audiences, and succeeds as both a book and as a representation of a course as well.

Chapter One: First Class

A story is not a bookcase

To be successful, a piece of fiction has to have two qualities. It must demonstrate a proficiency with craft, skill, thought and judgment; in short, it must show that the artist is in control of the material and is capable of crafting that material to reflect his or her unique vision. A successful piece of fiction must also contain surprise and mystery, wonder and spontaneity; it should keep us guessing, every bit as much as does life itself, at what might be around the next corner.

Dorothea Brande, in her book Becoming a Writer, (first published in 1937 and reissued in 1980 with an introduction by John Gardner) emphasizes this notion of the two sides of the artist when she says:

The author of genius [cultivates] the spontaneity, the ready sensitiveness, of a child, the ‘innocence of eye’ that means so much to

“In her original book, Brande uses the word ‘unconscious.’ I have substituted ‘subconscious’ because that is the term more commonly used today.
the painter, the ability to respond freshly and quickly to new scenes, and to old scenes as though they were new; to see traits and characteristics as though each were new-minted...instead of sorting them quickly into dusty categories and pigeon-holing them without wonder or surprise; to feel situations so immediately and keenly that the word 'trite' hardly has meaning.

But there is another element to the writer's character, fully as important to success. It is adult, discriminating, temperate, and just. It is the side of the artisan, the workman and the critic rather than the artist. It must work continually with and through the emotional and childlike side, or we have no work of art. If either element of the artist's character gets too far out of hand the result will be bad work, or no work at all. The writer's first task is to get these two elements of the writer's nature into one integrated character.

...Like any other art, creative writing is a function of the whole person. The subconscious* must flow freely and richly, bringing at demand all the treasures of memory, all the emotions, incidents, scenes, intimations of character and relationship which it has stored away in its depths; the conscious mind must control, combine, and discriminate between these materials without hampering the subconscious flow.

So the final work must demonstrate both surprise and spontaneity, as well as carefully thought-out control. This might seem a paradox at first; how can I be both spontaneous and controlled? The answer is that I can't—at least not in any one moment. But I can be first one and then the other, and thus the writing process is a continual movement back and forth between the subconscious, spontaneous mind and the conscious, controlling mind. To succeed, a writer needs to learn how to work in each mind, and needs to learn how to go back and forth between the two.

Brande goes on to say that,

*It is the subconscious, in the long run, which dictates the form of the story...The story arises in the subconscious. It then appears, sometimes only vaguely prefigured, at other times astonishingly definite, in the con-

sciousness. There it is scrutinized, pruned, altered, strengthened, made more spectacular or less melodramatic; and is returned to the subconscious for the final synthesis of its elements.

While I believe this general pattern is true for most writers—with the first draft being almost entirely from the subconscious, and the latest draft coming from the conscious mind—the process is rarely as "clean" as Brande suggests; I often find myself returning to the subconscious, even in late drafts, to re-envision a scene that's never quite worked; I will stop and step back in the middle of a first draft to consciously consider if I have enough tension, or if I'm getting at the heart of the story instead of writing around it.

Two terms I find helpful to reinforce the idea of this process are "discovery" and "communication." Early drafts are discovery drafts; I'm attempting to discover what's there, what this story might want to be and how it might best be told. During this discovery stage, I remain largely in the subconscious, but as needed I will step back into the conscious mind as well. The second stage is the "communication" stage, in which I am trying to tell this story in such a way that readers will take from it what I'd like them to; I know what the story is, and I'm trying mainly to figure out how to tell it in such a way that readers may interact with it, and feel compelled by it. This stage is spent largely in the conscious mind.

Betty Flowers, in her article "Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process," creates these four roles—madman, architect, carpenter and judge, for her students to adopt at various stages of the writing process. The "madman" arises from that spontaneous, subconscious realm; what I particularly like about this role being named the madman is that one characteristic of a madman is that he does not care what others think of him; another characteristic is that he has no sense of his actions having consequences. While these traits make it difficult to live a "normal" life in our everyday world, they are exceptionally helpful traits for a writer to have, especially in that first discovery stage. Write as if there is no reader, no one other than yourself, no one you care about pleasing or worry about disappointing; write as if the words you put on the paper will have no consequences whatsoever. When you are able to do this, you are truly listening to the subconscious; you are in the true "madman" stage.

The architect introduces the conscious mind; the architect looks at the big picture—overall structure, or-
The architect would attempt to answer a question as basic as, "Am I writing a short story or a novel?" Or a question as complex as, "What value does that particular scene have for the story as a whole?"

The carpenter works at the sentence and the word level: sentence structure and order, word choice, sequencing. The judge shows up last, to come down hard on errors of grammar and punctuation, but also to help answer questions like, "What do I do with this next? Is it ready to send out? Should I show it to my writing group first? Is there something missing that I haven't figured out yet, that suggests I should put the manuscript away for awhile?"

I like the notion of roles a great deal, because they remove any fears one might have of needing to become the "tortured soul" many romantics think writers are; I don't need to force myself to dig into the deepest recesses of my psyche to get at the heart of my fiction. I can simply don the cloak of the madman and play at that role for a while instead. Rather than forcing myself to engage in heavy psychoanalysis, I can simply pretend to be finger painting.

I also like the way Flowers discusses the timing of these roles. There is no room for the judge in the early stages of writing; in fact, allowing the judge access in the early stages will inevitably make for bad writing, or no writing at all. "Start by promising your judge that you'll get around to asking his opinion," Flowers writes, "but not now. And then let the madman energy flow."

As a writer, how can I make use of this concept of the subconscious and the conscious minds? First, decide where you are most comfortable; which side you tend to gravitate toward in your own writing (even, perhaps, in your own life). In college I was an English literature major; as far back as high school I wanted not just to be a writer, but to write great literature. In my personal life, I tend not to be a risk-taker; I like to feel in control of myself and the small portion of the world around me.

Consequently, when I first started writing fiction, I tried to spend all my time in the conscious mind; I was all architect, carpenter and judge. I both feared the madman and felt so alienated from him I didn't know how to access that part of myself even when I wanted to. My writing was full of great ideas very tightly structured. It was also lifeless, with characters who came across like puppets and plots that were painfully predictable. Before I wrote a scene, I decided in my conscious mind exactly what each character should do, from beginning to end.

After college I tried to write my first novel. It was a dreadful book about a group of college friends sharing a house in a small town in Maine and anguish over love, sex, and their futures. I included a minor character based on someone I'd known, a comic figure who had the look and build of a mountain man with wild curly hair like Art Garfunkel's. He made his own clothes, his own shoes, and he walked around carrying a homemade staff.

The people in the house divided responsibilities, and this character's job was to take out the garbage. One day their green plastic garbage can developed a slit in the side that rendered it useless. My comic character put it with the trash but since it was a trash can, the trash people didn't take it. The next week he put it out with a sign that read, "This is trash. Please take it," and they took the sign but not the trash can. I was having great fun writing these moments, chuckling with anticipation of how delightful my readers would find my sense of humor—as I said, I had no connection to the madman and his lack of concern over what others might think.

One morning I was writing a crucial scene between the male and female main characters. They'd been moving slowly but inevitably toward a relationship and here, finally, they were to have their first sexual encounter. As I was writing the lead-in to that moment, the phone rang. That is, I heard a phone ring in my head. This noise startled me, as I was so settled in my conscious mind that I'd never heard actual sounds from inside my story before.

The phone, I realized, was ringing in the room in which my two characters were attempting to have sex. They tried to ignore it, but eventually the male character got frustrated and answered it. On the other end was the comic character, calling from the town jail. He'd been arrested, he said. That morning he'd gone to the Department of Sanitation to once and for all settle the question of the garbage-can-turned-into-garbage; he'd grown frustrated dealing with the beaurocracy and had raised his ever-present staff (for emphasis, he swore, not to threaten anyone) and had been arrested for attempted assault.

I was amazed at having "seen" all this, witnessing like an uninvolved observer as my characters took on lives of their own. I was also appalled. This was not what I'd planned to happen in this crucial scene. I didn't want comedy at this moment, I wanted passion. And I knew no more about the legal system than what I'd seen on television. How could I navigate a character being arrested?

So I tore up what I'd written and started again. Just as I reached the critical moment between my

The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project • Volume 31:2
soon-to-be lovers, the phone rang.

I tried this scene several times, and every time it was interrupted by my comic character telephoning from the town jail. I finally gave in and wrote the scene as the characters seemed to be dictating it. Who were these characters to imagine they could hijack my carefully planned scene? Didn't they realize they were jeopardizing the entire blueprint I'd laid out for this novel?

After writing the scene as "it" wanted to be written, I got back into my well-planned novel, interrupting it only occasionally for token attempts to extricate my comic character from jail. I finished my novel, still a little ticked off at this character who'd given me such trouble, and set about trying to get the book published.

Along the way, a funny thing happened. Agents turned the book down. Editors who would look at unagented manuscripts also passed. A few of my friends whose opinions about fiction I respected admitted they weren't thrilled by my book. And finally, after having it out of my hands for many months and then finally sitting down to read it myself, I realized I didn't much like the book either. It was predictable, and the characters came off like puppets dancing to the orders of the writer.

All, that is, except one. The only lively, engaging part of the whole book involved my comic character's experiences with the Department of Sanitation and later, the town jail. It alone had life, surprise, and spontaneity; it alone seemed like something that could have happened to a real person. In fact, this character I'd fashioned as a clever cross between Falstaff and Jeremiah Johnson, had, once he'd finally risen up of his own accord, become the only character in the novel who seemed the least bit compelling.

For a long time after this, I continued to fight the impulses that had brought this character to rise up and attempt to take his own life; I fought against the subconscious stage I'd slipped into that made me feel like an outsider (not the creator) of my own fiction. I'd meticulously planned out my novel, and my novel-writing experience, as if I were building a bookcase—I'd assembled all the materials, drawn up my blueprint, and listed step-by-step directions. (Imagine actually assembling a bookcase and finding that the third shelf refuses to stay where you are trying to place it.) What, I wondered, had gone wrong?

I finally admitted that what I thought had gone wrong was actually the only thing that went right: my comic character coming alive. What had gone wrong was my approach, my process; I'd tried to write a novel without accessing the madman—a novel built like a bookcase.

Fiction is not a bookcase. Stories rise up from inside us. As Brande says, they rise in the subconscious, and by adopting the role of the madman we allow ourselves to "witness" the story. A colleague of mine asks his students, "What does this writing want to be?" as if the piece itself is a living, breathing being—which, if it's any good, it ought to be.

My task, after completing that first, failed novel, was first to accept the necessity of the madman as a part of the writing process, and then to train myself to move into that role, or, as Brande writes, to allow the subconscious to "flow freely and richly," never letting my critical mind "hamper its flow."

As a teacher, I have found that this is also a task that most adult students must learn, as they begin writing fiction. Most adults are more comfortable when in control. I also think that when adults read great literature, they are more conscious of the craft involved, so they want to make sure that their writing, too, is well crafted. Perhaps it's as simple as this: most adults have learned we must try to avoid making mistakes, and giving up control increased the likelihood mistakes will be made. Most adults won't need too much help tapping into their conscious, critical minds. It's the freedom of the madman they need to re-learn.

With young people the opposite is true. A long time ago I taught children in fourth and fifth grade as part of a writer-in-residence grant I received from the Massachusetts Council for the Arts. Usually, I had only to describe a brief scenario, or mention an idea or a phrase, and then say, "Okay, write." They could let their imaginations loose at the drop of a hat, and many of them had to be told to stop or they would have kept writing for the entire class period. They lived with their madman as a close companion.

Of course, when I asked these fourth graders to revise, most lost interest. They didn't care about craft; they only wanted to tap into the energy and spontaneity of an unleashed imagination. Once they'd done that, they were done.

The key for any writer at any age is to find where you are, and which of the two main roles—madman or judge—you need most to "learn." It doesn't matter which it is, and it also doesn't matter how incredible you are in the area you find most comfortable. Every writer needs balance, and needs to be able to move back and forth between the conscious and the subconscious mind. Being able to do both, and to find your way into the right state of mind at the right time, will give you the best chance to write fiction that is both well crafted and delightfully full of surprise.