

A Misfit Success

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Elizabeth McCracken, *A Long Game: Notes on Writing Fiction*.
Ecco, \$21.60 paper.

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BLANK PAGE?

As bestselling author Elizabeth McCracken observes, “craft” books explaining how to write fiction aim to reassure novice ink-slingers that they’re on the right path, that they can crank out a novel resembling established authors’ work. But writers’ paths to stardom will vary, and they are notoriously reluctant to swallow advice. So why not make one’s how-to-write book a DIY project, that is, a book written for the author herself?

Any writer’s ideal craft manual must be bespoke, like a suit, made to measure. Write a manifesto aimed only at your own work without worrying whether it applies to or offends anybody else in the world. Address, in your silent heart, punctuation, plot, character, all your picayune concerns and grandiose plans, all the things that make you want to be a writer. Make it living, an armor-clad list that might change. It will be dearer to you than any other guide.

Sounds great! A craft book offering its author self-help. But if all writers fear facing the blank page, can anyone make a craft book helping not only herself but the masses of fearful scribblers? McCracken scores by admitting from the start that she’s not sure. *A Long Game* is the genuine article, dispensing writing advice not just for those wanting to emulate successful authors but for people who share her key traits—a love for humanity and a stubborn determination to be heard.

A Long Game both shows and tells; that is, it works as both memoir in its stories from McCracken's peripatetic life as librarian, scholar, and writing instructor; and craft-book in its quirky, pragmatic tips for aspiring writers. McCracken's canny metaphors tilt the world to offer you a new way of seeing:

When I write, my own decisions are guided by delusion, heartfelt wishes, hubris, and a fondness for running jokes, not clarity, structural integrity, or literary merit. We are not meant to know what we're doing. Spiderwebs are sturdier, made as they are by engineers, but they're my inspiration, unadorned or jeweled with dew.

A Long Game paints its author as the misfit success—a high school oddball who invested in colorful oversized thrift-store apparel and vented into her writing—whose career proves that U-turns on the usual advice will suit many aspiring authors.

Over 30 years of publishing, McCracken has aimed high. Spawned by a Boston University professor and a BU editor, Elizabeth yearned to be celebrated on the printed page, to merit her own entry in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. She pitched the first of her nine books, the 1993 short-story collection *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, from a public librarian's desk on Cape Cod. McCracken routinely mixes literary genres, as in her novel *The Hero of This Book* (2022), whose writer-protagonist straddles the Atlantic while eulogizing her mother. Her memoir, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (2008), reviews her experience with two pregnancies. Her novels span Victorian New England (the 2018 *Bowlaway*) life with a colossus (*The Giant's House*, 1996), and early Hollywood (*Niagara Falls All Over Again* (2001)).

Writers of craft books are like parents fixing their children dinner: they must mix what's nourishing with what's entertaining. McCracken, who holds the James Michener Chair in fiction at UT Austin, shapes her literary repast by letting us in on the doubts that drive her work. She gladly tells us about the four books she abandoned unfinished, and admits to writing for attention: "the subtext of all my writing is *love me*."

Authors-in-training, McCracken reminds us, come in all shapes and sizes. Writers aren't all tough, exactly. But they are resilient:

Writing anything and expecting somebody else to read it is an act of hubris, but nothing good can be written without persistent doubts, one of the paradoxes of a writing life. I don't believe that I have ever taught anyone to write. Every writer in the end is an autodidact. It's a lifelong course of study, or should be. You must believe that you are the only person for this job, which is a fact.

Now cramming her work into late nights and UT Austin's semester breaks, McCracken "harness[es] the power of my own self-loathing" to accomplish a draft over a period of weeks or months. "*How mad will I be if I don't get this done? How much will I hate myself?*" Avoiding these feelings is as simple as putting in effort. McCracken entertains and inspires with her honest account of how writers' dread of facing the page, of reaching out to the snobbish, ignorant, demanding, or oblivious audiences out there, vanishes during the emotional experience of each writing session.

And besides her advice for misfit writers, she offers this universal truth:

The first day of workshop, I tell my students that a writer has a mantra, and it's the same for everybody:

I am a genius with much to learn. .A