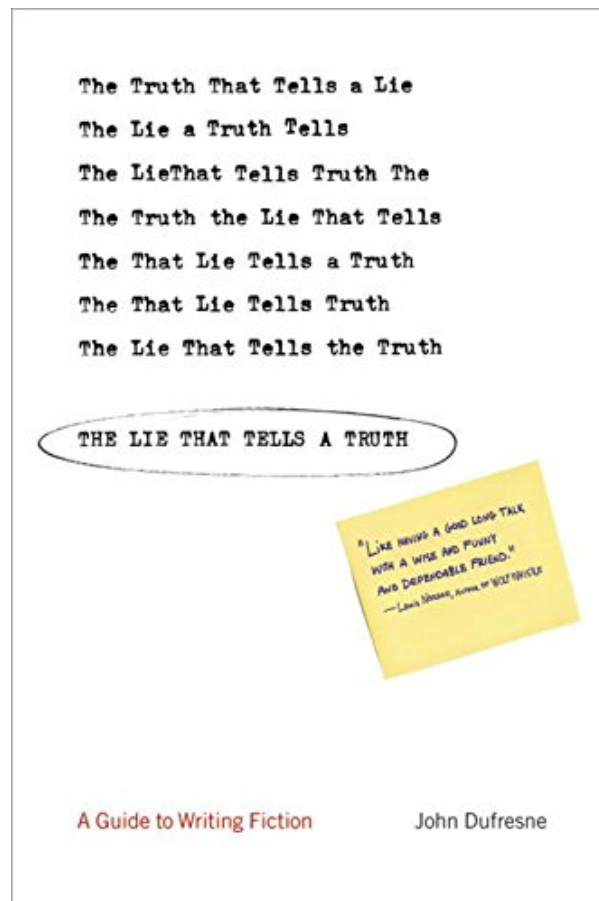


# THE LIE THAT TELLS A TRUTH: A GUIDE TO WRITING FICTION BY JOHN DUFRESNE



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THE LIE THAT TELLS A TRUTH

"LIE HAVING A GOOD LONG TALK  
WITH A WISE AND PUNY  
AND DEPENDABLE FRIEND."  
— Louis Stouffer, Author of *WOLF HUNTER*

A Guide to Writing Fiction

John Dufresne

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"This is the most practical, hard-nosed, generous, direct, and useful guide to writing fiction."?Brad Watson

Finally, a truly creative?and hilarious?guide to creative writing, full of encouragement and sound advice. Provocative and reassuring, nurturing and wise, *The Lie That Tells a Truth* is essential to writers in general, fiction writers in particular, beginning writers, serious writers, and anyone facing a blank page.

John Dufresne, teacher and the acclaimed author of *Love Warps the Mind a Little* and *Deep in the Shade of Paradise*, demystifies the writing process. Drawing upon the wisdom of literature's great craftsmen, Dufresne's lucid essays and diverse exercises initiate the reader into the tools, processes, and techniques of writing: inventing compelling characters, developing a voice, creating a sense of place, editing your own words. Where do great ideas come from? How do we recognize them? How can language capture them? In his signature comic voice, Dufresne answers these questions and more in chapters such as "Writing Around the Block," "Plottery," and "The Art of Abbreviation." Dufresne demystifies the writing process, showing that while the idea of writing may be overwhelming, the act of writing is simplicity itself.

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From Publishers Weekly

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35 of 38 people found the following review helpful.

I'm in love with this book

By Robert Graves

John Dufresne's "The Lie That Tells A Truth" is one of the best books on writing that I own, rivaling even Steven King's "On Writing." From the start, TLTTAT gets you writing, the most obvious and ironically overlooked aspect of being a writer.

The introduction starts, "I'll assume that if you're reading this introduction, then you must want to write. Why else would you be loitering around the Writing/Publishing section of the bookstore when all the really interesting and dangerous people are over in the Self-Help/Addiction aisle?" The book is laden with a self-aware humor, knowing writers are in a desperate state, completely miserable when they are not writing yet so prone to finding other things to fill their time.

TLTTAT is divided into three main sections that logically break the writing process down. The first section, "The Process," covers the basics of getting it in gear and writing a story. He repeats again and again that a writer writes, and if you're not writing every day then you are "inviting madness." I could relate to this deeply. There's nothing more frustrating than wanting to write but for some reason not doing it. Dufresne's solution is simple - just do it. And he gives you plenty of exercises to get you going. In this first section he also discusses rewriting, clearly driving the point home that rewriting is the essence of writing. In fact, he's able to show, in what might be the only book I know of that does this, the real process of writing a novel or screenplay or short story or poem, or any work of creativity. He tells you to disallow your critical self to sit down at the desk with you while writing the first draft, to write from the heart. Get to know your characters and then allow them to lead you through their story (and he provides exercises to encourage this). Then, discussing the revision process, he specifically outlines several steps you can take to produce stronger writing, such as eliminating adverbs, eliminating most adjectives, avoiding the passive voice. These things may seem obvious, but he presents them in a lucid way, with actual examples of revision, that will improve your overall writing quality.

The second section deals with the specifics of plot development, dialogue, character growth, point of view,

beginnings and endings, and settings. Taking what you know from how the writing of a story actually occurs (from the first section) you now learn the mechanics of developing that story.

The last section is primarily about how to glean the most from the work of others.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. If you are an aspiring writer, buy this book today, along with Steven King's "On Writing" and Linda Seger's "Making a Good Writer Great." In a library full of writing books, "The Lie That Tells a Truth" shines brightly.

21 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

A great teacher

By Lazyboy

I procrastinated writing this review for weeks because it meant so much to me.

The great gift this book offers is its infinite passion for writing. You feel it from the author and from all the great authors whose quotes are included. Being immersed in this love of literature for the time it took me to read and reread this book was a pleasure.

The book also provides great insights into creating characters, starting stories, writing dialogue, "borrowing from other writers", and common mistakes made by authors.

The following two points helped me the most. First, don't be discouraged by flawed first drafts and scenes that don't match the images you had in your head when you decided to write them. All writers experience this. Rewriting is where the magic occurs.

Second, only include writing that advances the story or reveals something important about the character. No matter how much you love a scene you wrote, remove it if it doesn't meet this criteria.

I can't recommend this book enough.

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

A Rich Resource for Teachers and Students of All Levels

By Heather G. Salerno

The Lie That Tells a Truth: A Guide to Writing Fiction is a rich resource for teachers of any fiction course (high school to graduate level), aspiring writers, or veteran writers seeking inspiration or the decadal refresher. Regardless of level or need, Dufresne has something for everyone. He covers the gamut, from the creative writing process (freewriting, first drafts, the habit of writing, your writing room, etc.) to the fundamentals of story craft (plot, dialogue, character, etc.).

There are three main parts: Process, Product, and Other Matters. Process addresses every obstacle an aspiring writer faces, from finding time to write to revising for clichés. Many points in this section bear mentioning, but I'll limit it to a few: Dufresne suggests harvesting material for stories from your own life, while minding the ethics of such theft (His mantra: First do no harm). He also notes that expecting too much from a first draft is a common beginning writer's mistake. And finally he prompts the writer to see, "to look at (the world) an inch at a time," so that our writing can light up with such details. In the Product section, Dufresne tackles the elements of craft. His chapters flow from openings/endings to plot to character to dialogue. In the section, The Queen Died of Grief, Dufresne explains the difference between a story and a plot, championing that a plot contains cause and effect, while story, in its rawest form, is simply news. And finally, in Other Matters, Dufresne discusses the necessity of writers to be readers and suggests that writers begin compiling catalogues (Sears, office supplies, lingerie, etc.) for imagining setting and details in your stories.

What makes this guide unique is Dufresne's voice, tone, and candor. He exposes his life and his writing mishaps in an attempt to demystify the writing process. For example, in the chapter titled, Doing It Again (And Again [And Again]), during a list of inspirational revision tips, Dufresne breaks the prose to write, "(I just wrote two lines here, and then I took them out. Here they are [or were]: Visualize your characters..." Dufresne goes on to share a long, nonsensical, and clunky sentence. By giving us his raw revision, we see it in contrast to his inspirational prose and the point of revision is hammered home. The guide is practical and



straightforward, peppered by thought-provoking quotes by fiction greats. Dufresne diffuses the reader's writing fears by offering systematic advice for every possible writing obstacle or blunder. And at the end of each chapter there are exercises that reinforce the chapter's lesson.

Some quotable/referenceable moments: "The worst thing you can do in writing a first draft is to let your critical self (the boss) sit down at the writing table with your creative self" (page 72). Later, when discussing revision, Dufresne offers 15 editing/polishing tips on pages 87 through 90, including Challenge every adjective, Challenge the first and last paragraph, Cut every nonessential dialogue tag, and Challenge every line that you love.

The greatest strength of this guide is Dufresne's view of the first draft. In the brilliant section, *Getting Black on White*, he argues that the true first draft is the exploratory/discovery draft. Here the author is painting the set, from the rug to the roof. Dufresne suggests freewriting the set until the room is alive in your mind and on the paper. Then do the same for the characters. The first draft can go on for days, notebooks even, until the world you've created and its characters become clear. Dufresne writes of his first draft, "I answered the questions for days, writing away in my notebook" (page 74). The story you will start to tell in your second draft will be born of this first draft, but in the first draft there is no story yet. Here you are simply exploring.

As Breton might have fought with Greenberg, so might I fight with Dufresne. Dufresne subscribes to the freewriting school of thought, frowning on thoughtful plotting before the pen has met the page, or even after the first draft. It is not until many drafts into your story that Dufresne suggests you ask the story (page 85), "What is my story about?" While I plan on trying to leave the critic at home during my first draft, I think the content critic should creep in much sooner than Dufresne suggests. I am not sure this is a weakness of the guide, though, but rather a difference of opinion.

Urgency rating:

-Drop everything and read right now. Okay, well not right now, but definitely the next time you are stuck on a story, experiencing writer's block, or are just about to teach an introduction to fiction class. Then, yes--drop everything (unless you're carrying something fragile, like a baby or a melon.)

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