

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

Irina Dunn

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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 nigh 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*

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