

DEAR WRITER

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

D^{EAR WRITER}, a series of letters to a woman who is learning to write fiction, was first published in 1988 by McPhee Gribble. Two years later McPhee Gribble was sold to Penguin. This sale created an opportunity for me to re-negotiate the agreement between me and the publisher for the rights to *Dear Writer*. Instead of assigning rights to Penguin forever at this point, I licensed them for five years. At the end of the five years I was able to re-license them to another publisher, and so you see this new revised edition from Random House.

Dear Writer has been popular with students and teachers, as well as with general readers who read it for insights into the writer's art. It is set as a text on courses throughout Australia. At the time when Penguin was out of stock, and the contract with Random was being finalised, I had a phone call from a teacher who was alarmed that she couldn't get enough copies for her students for 1996. It was then that I decided to publish a sort of interim edition myself.

I am no stranger to the pleasures of publishing my own work, as I published my first two books myself. So I saw the chance to have some fun and to supply the students with their text. Fast Books, a Sydney company that specialises in the quick, quality production of self-published as well as other books, did the job. The speed and simplicity of this operation was exhilarating, and something close to magical. Of course the big question for a self-publisher is how to distribute the book. For the interim *Dear Writer* I had the customers ready and waiting; my first book I planned to give away; my second book I placed with a commercial distributor. The self-publisher has to be

clear about how to dispose of the books. There is no letter in *Dear Writer* on self-publishing, as self-publishing is a wide and specialised topic, and not one that interested Writer. The subject is well covered in other publications, but I do have a few things to suggest: If you decide to publish your own book, do it cheerfully, whole-heartedly, using all the information you can get, and be realistic in your expectations. It is probable that the book will not be reviewed, and it probably won't be a prize-winner or a best-seller—although it *might* be. You will also be the subject of a certain amount of derision and also, interestingly enough, of envy. Other people can be quite jealous of your guts when you publish your own book. However I think I am right in saying that it is likely to take years before a self-published book will begin to be taken seriously. But don't forget that Beatrix Potter and Patrick White began as self-publishers, and that Virginia Woolf's books were published by her own press. If you look for them, you will find some interesting precedents.

This edition of *Dear Writer* has been revised, and although I have tried to retain the original text as much as possible, my experience with readers and students in the years since the book was first published has given me things to add to what I wrote in the first place. (I have in fact written another book on writing fiction, *Not Now Jack—I'm Writing a Novel* where I did something I did not do in *Dear Writer*—I took one of my own stories and examined and exposed the manner of its creation from the first inspiration to the finished text.) Curiously enough the most quoted passage from *Dear Writer* is the one referring to giving up housework in Letter Five. And in this revised edition I have seen fit to modify my words, suggesting writers give up *most* of the housework. Actually I don't think it is any accident or joke that so many people (mostly women) feel strengthened as writers by the idea of giving up housework. Most writers work at home, and can be seduced or oppressed by the need to clean and tidy the house. They can use the housework as an excuse to avoid writing—and after all cleaning the house is virtuous, and writing for its own sake is somehow a wicked indulgence.

In the end of course you might make money by writing, or you might get a degree if you study writing within a course, but as you work your way towards these goals, there you are alone at the word-processor, making stuff up. It can take quite a bit of discipline to keep yourself at the keyboard and away from the kitchen sink, not to mention the corner pub. Before I get onto this discipline, I should draw attention to my reference to the word-processor. Readers of the first edition of *Dear Writer* might be staring at this paragraph open-mouthed, because in the first edition I had a pretty luddite atti-

tude to word-processors, and I expressed this in Letter Twelve—In the Beginning Was the Quill.

So what happened? The year after I wrote *Dear Writer* I spent some time as writer-in-residence at Rollins College in Florida. The post was too slow; the phone was too expensive. So I kept in touch with people at home by the use of Bitnet, which is an early form of the Internet. I was entranced by computers, and I now write my books on a word-processor and communicate by email (carmel.bird@carmelbird.com). I am working on a project with two other people to develop one of my stories as an interactive CD-ROM. I have had a great deal of help from dear and patient friends, and I am by no means expert, or even particularly competent in many ways. But if you decide you want to use a computer, there's nothing to stop you. Like most things it does take time and practice. And patience with yourself and with the technology, which can be maddening. It is also expensive—the writer who is not attached to a university or some other organisation that offers support is on her own and has to provide all the necessary equipment and services herself. But it is very useful to have email, to browse the Net, and to be able to send your work out on disk.

I think the important thing is to work in whichever way is comfortable for you. I still have the old black and red notebooks in which I write from time to time, if I feel like doing that. I don't use my typewriter very often though, but I have kept two manual typewriters and one electric. For emergencies and pleasure and perhaps old time's sake. Anyhow, Letter Twelve is the one in which you will find the most dramatic changes in the text.

As I revised the letters, I felt once again in touch with Dear Writer, she who wrote the story called 'The Scream at Midnight' and submitted it to Virginia O'Day for assessment, and ended up, after much editing and letter-writing, with a very different story called 'The Teeth'. I felt myself become Virginia as I wrote, wanted to ring Writer up and have a heart-to-heart about her work. For Dear Writer is not a straightforward manual for fiction writers, but is a piece of fiction in which the reader can participate. You can become Writer; you can become Virginia. Best of all you can imagine how it would be if you had written 'The Scream at Midnight' and seen it go through all its changes. Some people have suggested that it would be interesting if I supplied both versions of Writer's story, but I would really hate that. I confess I love the way the reader can imagine the two versions, and can feel the changes as they are made, and can sense Writer's reluctance to change (the story and herself) alongside her desire to give the story the power of its potential. And of course I love the character of Writer who, under the guid-

ance of Virginia (not a particularly pleasant character herself when all's said and done), comes up trumps with the story. The devotion that woman has to her task!

The original *Dear Writer* had twenty-one letters from Virginia. This edition has twenty-two, the extra one being a lovely surprise. I was writing it, grinning and sometimes laughing, when a friend put her head around the door and asked me what I was doing. Without thinking, I said I had just had some very good news and I was writing a letter in response. It gets you like that, writing fiction. And I suspect that it has to. You as the writer must believe—I mean really believe—in your characters to the extent that there are times when you don't seem to perceive a difference between your Virginia, your Writer and the friend who puts her head around the door. They are all part of the world you inhabit which is a place different in quality from the everyday world. When I write sentences such as that last one, I get nervous because I think I am starting to sound vague and crazy, starting to sound as if I think there is something mystical about writing fiction. In my heart of hearts, I know there is, and I once heard A.S. Byatt say as much at a festival, but it's not something to say often or very loud.

And you can see that there is an element of play in the way I work. I am writing this in 1996, and I sense that the climate of my culture is anti-play, is very serious and literal and functional and material. It is a climate in which the language itself is being policed by universities and politicians so that a student will fail an essay if she as much as uses the word 'mankind' once. It is a climate in which Christ on the Cross talks to Father-Mother. I feel out of step with this. But that's OK; fiction writers are probably meant to be out of step.

In the Appendix I have included an essay on writing which has a bearing on many of the points made in the letters from Virginia to Writer. I decided it was better to let the essay stand alone, rather than tamper too dramatically with the letters themselves in order to include the material. And I have included one of my own stories in first and final draft in order to demonstrate some of my own writing processes. Sometimes the first draft I write is almost the same as the final draft; but in the case of this story the differences are so great that I was interested in examining them myself, and decided to go public with them. When I made the decision to do this, I realised how unguarded this action was, how vulnerable I was—and I think the first draft is pretty terrible. There were times when I thought I had better not go ahead—such moments are exciting for a writer—will I dare to do this particular mad thing? I did it.

I think perhaps it demonstrates some of the ways in which my stories evolve, although this is not to say that my method is anything other than the way I happen to go about things. I am not offering it as a prescription for writing, merely as some kind of illumination about my own story. Writers find their own ways, the important thing being to keep working, the real work being to keep doing the work, to keep on and on until you have said what it is you mean to say, until you are satisfied that you have given voice to your own particular view of the world in such a way that other people will listen—and be delighted, informed, and perhaps, amazed.