

# The Writer's Life

## Elizabeth Lyon's world of words

**A WRITER'S GUIDE TO FICTION:** A concise, practical guide for novelists and short-story writers by Elizabeth Lyon. A Perigee Book, Penguin Group, 2004. Paperback, \$13.95.

Elizabeth Lyon has lived in Eugene since 1986, and she describes living a writer's life here as "a long, hard journey." Her multi-faceted writing and editing career began when she started a business called Custom Letters in Corvallis in 1984-85. "I just hung out a shingle," she said, offering to write letters, including love letters, as well as standard resumes, press releases, business letters and advertisements.

In what Lyon said was a "combination of timing and dumb luck," the press kit — her first ever — was received by the media in January, when reporters were seeking an original Valentine story for February. KVAL-TV came to rural Corvallis to interview her, and the *Gazette Times* in Corvallis ran a photo feature. "Within two weeks, I had a 20-hour-a-week business," Lyon said.

It was a modest beginning for Lyon's entrepreneurial businesses, which now include a successful editing partnership, Editing International LLC, and her own company, titled Elizabeth Lyon Unlimited, for her non-editing work.

Besides teaching non-credit writing courses at LCC and workshops at conferences, retreats and seminars, Lyon has also found time over the years for her own writ-

ing. Her published books include *A Writers' Guide to Nonfiction*, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit*, and her latest book, *A Writer's Guide to Fiction*.

I noticed that form and function are well wedded in Lyon's new book. The organization of chapters is lucid, beginning with an overview and the first fleshing out of characters, story ("the deepest meaning of a tale"), plot (the specific characters and events that fulfill the story), and mapping (overall structure: situation, complication, resolution).

"I see myself as a structuralist," Lyon said. "I teach people how to create the skeleton. Once you've mastered structure, then you can forget it," she said. The techniques of fiction writing can be applied to literary non-fiction, including memoir, she said.

Later chapters revisit the topics but go deeper into the art of fiction writing, including characterization, which Lyon calls "the source of a writer's greatest magic." The final chapters include trouble-shooting, learning to market and refining your vision.

The small text boxes that summarize

complex ideas in all the chapters are helpful, such as: "Flashbacks too early annoy readers; flashbacks later on can fill in missing information and supply character depth." And: "The fewer main characters you use, the more control you retain." Also: "Omniscient point of view rarely works, except in the hands of a masterful writer."

Another helpful structure is Lyon's use of short passages or opening sentences from successful novels to illustrate, for example, narrative leads that hook the reader. Simply realizing the variety of ways to start your project may help you think about what you're writing in a different way.

Although I am writing nonfiction, I found many of the ideas here relevant and genuinely useful. However, I had to skip over the section in "Deepening Your Characters" chapter on the use of assigning archetypes to fictional characters.

Archetypes are by definition non-human; they represent powerful, self-governing characteristics of the unconscious, which, as far as I know, cannot be harnessed for any project one might have in mind.

Lyon is a warm, personable woman, and it is easy to imagine she would be a pleasure to work with. In addition to her professional editing work, Lyon is invited to speak at many conferences and to present workshops.

Several years ago I interviewed a writer

who had taken a workshop from Lyon and bought one of her books. This writer sold her first book (nonfiction) on the basis of her query letter. An impressive number of Editing International's clients have published nonfiction and fiction books and film proposals. They are listed on "Your passport to publishing," a brochure about the service ([www.4-edit.com](http://www.4-edit.com)).

**EW**

**BOOK NOTES (July 29 - August 26):** Congratulations to **Diana Abu-Jaber** (*Crescent*) and **Floyd Skloot** (*In the Shadow of Memory*) for winning Pen Center USA's 2004 Literary Arts awards for fiction and creative nonfiction, respectively. ...Kudos to Elmira's **Dean Van Leuven** (*Life Without Anger: Your Guide to Peaceful Living*) for being first runner up best book of the year in the self-help category at the International New Age Trade Show. ...Summer 04 *Etude*, an online magazine from the UO Literary Nonfiction Program, includes an interview with **Barbara Ehrenreich** at <http://etude.uoregon.edu>. ...Soft Skull Press presents **David Ohle** (*The Age of Sinatra*) at 5 pm on Aug. 6 at Tsunami Books. ...The 35th annual **Willamette Writers Conference** takes place at the Embassy Suites Portland Airport Hotel August 6-8. ([www.willamettewriter.com](http://www.willamettewriter.com) or 503-452-1592). ...**Lane Literary Guild's** annual potluck will be held from 4-7 pm on Aug. 7 at the Quonset hut at Mt. Pisgah. Bring food, non-alcoholic drink and something to read at open mic. ... Nearly 30 Oregon authors will appear at the Lane County Fair, August 17-22, including **Bob Welch** (*American Nightingale*), **Carola Dunn** (*The Case of the Murdered Muckraker*), **Leigh Anne Jasheway** (*Laugh Lines*) and **Joe Blakely** (*The Tall Firs*). ...**Joe Meno** (*Hairstyles of the Damned*) will read at 7 pm on Aug. 18 in Barnes and Noble. ...**Maura Conlon-McIvor** (*FBI Girl: How I Learned to Crack My Father's Code*) reads on Sept. 9 at Tsunami Books. Call for time.



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