



What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers

By Anne Bernays, Pamela Painter

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What If? is the first handbook for writers based on the idea that specific exercises are one of the most useful and provocative methods for mastering the art of writing fiction. With more than twenty-five years of experience teaching creative writing between them, Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter offer more than seventy-five exercises for both beginners and more experienced writers. These exercises are designed to develop and refine two basic skills: writing like a writer and, just as important, *thinking* like a writer. They deal with such topics as discovering where to start and end a story; learning when to use dialogue and when to use indirect discourse; transforming real events into fiction; and finding language that both sings and communicates precisely. *What If?* will be an essential addition to every writer's library, a welcome and much-used companion, a book that gracefully borrows a whisper from the muse.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Anne Bernays, a novelist and writing teacher, is the author of eight novels, including *Professor Romeo* and *Growing Up Rich*, as well as two works of nonfiction, including *The Language of Names* written with Justin Kaplan and *What If?* written with Pamela Painter. Her articles and essays have appeared in numerous major publications, among them *The Nation*, the *New York Times*, *Town & Country*, and *Sports Illustrated*. She lives in Cambridge and Truro, Massachusetts with her husband, Justin Kaplan. They have three daughters and six grandchildren.

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Chapter One

First sentences are doors to worlds. -Ursula K. Le Guin

New writers often find beginnings difficult--whether they're starting a story or a novel--because they take the word "beginning" too literally. They cast around for the "beginning" of a story--forgetting that beginnings rarely have the necessary ingredients for trouble, for conflict, or for complication. Your story can begin with dialogue, narrative summary, description, whatever, but it must begin *in medias res*, in the middle of things. You must resist the temptation to give the reader too lengthy an explanation as to how things got to this point. Remember, you are trying to hook the reader's attention, to pull the reader into your story so that he won't wonder, *What's on television tonight?*

Another stumbling block to beginning a story is that new writers think they have to know where their story is going and how it will end--before they begin. Not true. Flannery O'Connor says, "If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact, it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't, probably nobody else will."

The following exercises are designed to encourage you to think about real characters who are involved in situations that are already underway--situations that are starting to unravel because of, or in spite of, the desires and actions of their beleaguered characters. Don't worry about middles or endings yet. Just give yourself over to setting stories in motion--you will soon know which stories capture your imagination and seem unstoppable, which stories demand to be finished. Till that time, begin and begin and begin.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Douglas Henry:

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