

**A COURSE IN  
NARRATIVE  
WRITING**

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A course in narrative writing by Gertrude Buck & Elisabeth Woodbridge Morris

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**GERTRUDE BUCK & ELISABETH WOODBRIDGE MORRIS**

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BY

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## PREFACE.

No form of composition is perhaps more inherently interesting to students of all ages than is narration. Once fairly launched upon the task of representing in story-form some section of life as observed or imagined by them, neither time nor effort looms large in comparison with the joy of the attempt. The "drudgery of composition" seems in this field more frequently than in any other to be performed without consciousness of its being drudgery, the "laws of discourse" to exemplify themselves painlessly in the written product, sentences to acquire somewhat spontaneously a firm standing and a decisive movement, "fine writing" voluntarily to efface itself and a simple, effective, and at times even a relatively fine-wrought style to develop.

For this delightful outcome the subject-matter of narration is doubtless largely responsible. Its concern with "human documents," with concrete action and events, with feeling as well as thought, gives it in point of the student's interest marked advantages over descriptive, expository, or argumentative writing.

But aside from the claims of the material, the story-form seems in some respects notably adapted to purposes of composition-teaching. In the simpler, more pedestrian narratives, the essential structure is easily grasped as a whole by immature minds and may serve to initiate a general sense of organization in discourse, capable of being carried over into all the various types. This simple structure, moreover, if traced throughout its development into the highly sophisticate forms of the story, admits of the finest discriminations of which the mature intelligence is capable, while the details of technical workmanship carry far into the field of literary art. The range of study in narrative construction is thus practically co-extensive with the entire period of education. It may be entered upon by the child in the primary grades,—Quintilian suggests it as the first exercise in composition,—and yet will profitably engage the college senior.\*

As an offset to these obvious advantages of narration as a field of training in composition, certain equally obvious difficulties declare themselves at the outset. The very idea of writing stories usually appears to the literal-minded majority of students an incredible presumption and absurdity. "I never wrote a story in my life," "I simply can't make

\* The treatment of the subject in these pages is designed for students of college age, though advanced pupils in good secondary schools ought to be capable of using it intelligently.



up a story, you know," "Nothing exciting ever happened to me, and I haven't a particle of imagination," are familiar asseverations at the beginning of a course in narration. The presupposition is that story-writing is an occult art, due to the direct inspiration of genius, inscrutable in its processes and unassailable in its results. Such a notion need not be formally combated, since it yields inevitably to a closer acquaintance with the process of narrative construction. Why one should be able to write a story who has no more definite notion of its structure than that something happens in it, is difficult to say. One might as well set out to paint a picture on the sole basis of knowledge that a canvas and brushes are requisite, or to construct a steam-engine under the vague impression that it consists of iron and steel, and comprises among other things a boiler and wheels. With even a crude idea, however, regarding the essential nature and structure of narrative composition, an intelligent attempt may be made to write a story.

The lack of material is an obstacle less easily surmounted. In spite of the student's greater interest in human beings than in abstract ideas or in natural scenery, he knows little more about the one than about the other. Here, however, as in all training, the use of what one has tends infallibly to increase one's stores, and the preëxisting interest hastens markedly the progress of acquisition. It is in view

of the untrained student's inability to discover and develop story-material in the earlier stages of its organization that considerable stress has been laid in this book on the finding of suitable matter and becoming thoroughly acquainted with it, the fixing of a point of view from which the story is to be told, the marking of terminal points and the choice of essential scenes between these points. The writer's experience has yielded a firm conviction that these initial stages present by far the greatest difficulties to the young student. Let him but once get the idea of a possible story and come to understand, by exploration of its capacities, what opportunities are offered by the material itself, and the teacher's function is thenceforth that of the rein rather than the goad. The getting of the raw material is, of course, in last analysis, a question of individual perception; but certain quickening influences have been here suggested, which in the practice of many years have availed to reveal to students of widely varying imaginative powers the resources of their own heretofore unnoted experience and observation.

The study of narrative writing may abundantly be justified as training in composition; but its best fruits are perhaps, after all, those of appreciative reading. As a corrective of the indiscriminate swallowing of fiction, good, bad, and indifferent, unfortunately so all but universal even among supposedly educated young people, the development of a sense of literary

workmanship stands unsurpassed. A dawning consciousness of structural values alone in this form of writing goes far to quicken the reader's pleasure in a well articulated story and to cause at least a vague dissatisfaction with one carelessly thrown together, however gorgeously the slovenly edifice may be hung with meretricious ornament. The intellectual satisfaction yielded by artistic technique, even crudely apprehended, is not to be despised as a source of delight in itself, while, as in some degree a test and an educator of taste in fiction, it meets a genuine need.

Narrative writing has herein been treated primarily and almost exclusively from the point of view of structure, considerations of style in the more detailed sense of the term having been left to the numerous manuals of composition in general, which treat elements common to all the forms of discourse. Granted that there is a narrative style as distinct from descriptive or expository or argumentative style, the best way of acquiring it would seem to be through directing the attention not specifically to this narrative style, but rather to the larger structural features which condition and determine it. If Stevenson's principle holds, that there should be no word which "looks another way" from the trend of the action, the style of any narrative is the creation of its unerring progress, and is brought to highest efficiency only by the author's vigilant furthering of that progress.