

A simple approach may get you writing

Bang the Keys: Four Steps to a Lifelong Writing Practice by Jill Dearman. Alpha Books/Penguin, 256 pages. Paper, \$16.95.

By Stephanie Dickison

PEOPLE CONSTANTLY ask me how to get started writing. Do you just sit down one day and do it? How do you know where to start? Should you take classes? How long should you write for? What format do you use? *Bang the Keys: Four Steps to a Lifelong Writing Practice* by Jill Dearman has all the answers. This accessible workshop-in-a-book is suitable for both beginners and old-timers like myself (after all, it's never too late for reminders of what to do and what *not* to do).

Dearman has done it all in the realm of writing. She's a writing coach and editor, plus she's taught journalism at New York University since 2001 and writes for publications such as this magazine as well as many literary journals. Her "Bang the Keys" philosophy is also imparted through her classes at NYU, but you can get it all here for under \$20. Pretty great deal, wouldn't you say?

The philosophy she's come up with is broken down into four easy-to-follow steps: B—Begin with your strongest idea; A—Arrange your material into a concrete form; N—Nurture your project with love, so that others may love it, too; and G—Get it done and let it go out into the world to live independently. The book is broken down into these sections with further chapters on each that include exercises.

What makes the book so accessible is Dearman's willingness to delve into her own life experiences and share them on the page. In one instance, she is determined to write her mission statement but instead, "The *Law and Order* epi-

sode that night was a good one. A middle-aged couple took their dog for a morning walk through Central Park when the old mutt stumbled upon a dead body."

Dearman also culls experiences and advice from friends and colleagues for the book. For example, she writes:

My friend Claudia Valentino, an editor and writer for national magazine pieces, shared these thoughts with me: "We don't need to get wrapped up in metaphysical definitions of the self in order to understand the relation between meditation and writing. Both grant greater access to that internal landscape which really is the source of everything we create. Writers need to be able to get there reliably and must believe that putting in uninterrupted, undivided time will make a qualitative difference in their work and in how they feel about it."

As Dearman combs through her own life as well as the lives of others, she manages to maintain a light-hearted and humorous tone throughout the book. In "The Sex-and-Money Workshop" exercise, for example, she tells both Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake that she is available to write lyrics for their next CDs. In "Critical Mass," she writes:

The inner critic is like the bogeyman. When we are lying in the dark near an open closet we may see monsters. When we turn on the light we see what's really there: a shoetree, some dry cleaning, and a shoebox containing news clippings that reveal our partner to be a crazed lunatic who killed her twin and successfully covered up the murder. Oh sorry, I was channeling *Single White Female*. I adore that

funfest, by the way. Sadly, the critics did not. Viva Barbet [Schroeder, the film's director]!

See what I mean? Not at all like a domineering, scary professor who intimidates you into writing. Dearman even manages to make her exercises not all that homeworky feeling and at the end of each chapter, she has a section, "Kudos, Kiddo(s)!" where she congratulates you on your efforts thus far, such as: "You explored the methods of different mediums. You chose a medium for your piece. These are no small feats. And I promise: your feats won't fail you now!" and "You learned a little about the hidden defense mechanisms

that each of us unconsciously uses. You applied this knowledge to some of your characters, to get a better sense of their psyches. You observed your characters interacting with other characters, and gained deeper insight into these relationships. That was a lot of work. Retreat to the couch, sans shrink, *with snacks*."

This, my friends, is a workshop/book that will not only result in your becoming a better writer, but one that won't destroy you or your spirit. In fact, it will cause you to alight from the house with a smile on your face and 10 pieces ready to send out for publication. And perhaps even the confidence to start your own writing workshop one day! It could happen—sooner than you think, too, thanks to this book.

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