Daren Dean:

Daren Dean is the author of the novel *Far Beyond the Pale* and the short story collection *I'll Still Be Here Long After You're Gone*. In addition, *The Black Harvest: A Novel of the American Civil War* is forthcoming from the University of West Alabama's Livingston Press (May 15, 2021). Another novel, *This Vale of Tear*s, is also forthcoming (October 2021). His work has been featured in *The Huffington Post, Ploughshares online,* and *Bloom*. Dean's story "Bring Your Sorrow Over Here" was selected as runner-up by Judge George Singleton in Yemassee's William Richey Short Fiction contest. Another story, "Affliction" was a Finalist in the *Glimmer Train* Short Fiction Contest for New Writers. His work has appeared in numerous magazines such as *Bull, Fiction Southeast, The Green Hills Literary Lantern, Louisiana Literature, Maryland Literary Review, Midwestern Gothic, The Oklahoma Review, StorySouth*, and many others.

He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. In the past he worked in scholarly publishing as a marketing and acquisitions specialist at the University of Missouri Press. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at Lincoln University of Missouri.

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**Writing Fiction from the Subconscious**

In this presentation, we’ll talk about how to write short stories or novels from the subconscious. Rather than regard these ideas as rules, think of them as suggestions. In my experience, many people would love to be writers without actually doing the work. There must be a trick! The trick, you might say, has to do with how we look at our own creative work. If you think of writing as something you ought to do, something that might be good for you like working out or taking vitamins, you’re looking at it all wrong. Instead, you need to make writing a part of your life. As Ray Bradbury said, “The things you do should be the things you love; the things you love should be the things you do.” The first step is accepting that you are a writer and writing is not something you ought to do; it’s something you have to do.

If you’re the kind of person who works hard, you have already acquired an important part of the puzzle. Writers need energy and the ability to concentrate. In addition, if you find yourself getting started with gusto, only to give up a few days or a few weeks into a project and wonder what happened, chances are you need to change your way of thinking. Or maybe you feel like you’re wasting your time and energy writing summaries, character descriptions, outlining chapters, and following the so-called ethos of the “10 Easy Steps” the internet has been built on. It’s not always easy, but almost anything worth doing isn’t easy. If you’re still wondering when does the brilliant fiction start making its way from your brain, through your fingers, and onto the page? Well, you’re not alone.

I’ve made every mistake you could possibly make and I’m here to share with you how real writers think about their work and how they write from the subconscious mind. You can write nonfiction and business-related documents from your critical mind, but you need to open up yourself to the subconscious mind to write in a more organic way. I wish it were a 1-2-3 process. It’s not, but I’m going to give you some strategies that will help you become more successful and enjoy the process if you don’t already.

**What’s the Secret?**

*“Man, you don’t play what you know, you play what you hear.”—Miles Davis*

**Write from Your Continent**

1. Michael Pritchett, a writer who now teaches at UMKC, once told a group of us, his students at the University of Missouri-Columbia, to *write from your continent.* I thought I knew what he meant at the time, but I wasn’t quite sure. What he’s not saying is to write what you know. Rather, this idea of writing from your continent means writing from your own obsessions, writing about what is most important to you. This may mean you’re writing fiction about religion, maybe even politics, or it could be a coming-of-age story. If you have written much already, you might have noticed that you sometimes end up writing the same theme over and over. When I was younger, everything I wrote was coming of age precisely because I was busy coming of age. Think of Picasso’s Blue period and all the periods that followed. If you keep at it long enough, you will go through many different stages. Writing from your continent, if I can expand here, also means writing about the people and situations that live with you up there in your mind. It is a mental-physical-spiritual topography that you must endeavor to discover. If you write about your people and situations in a style that fits you as a writer, you will have more success and write the kind of work you’ve always wanted to write. Respect yourself as a writer: Trust that the things you want to write about are important and worth it.

**“Art Comes from the White-hot Center of You”**



1. A book I would strongly recommend to you is *From Where You Dream* by Robert Olen Butler. Some writing books are written by genre writers I’ve frankly never heard of. I’m not so sure about some of the advice that’s out there. Don’t get me wrong. I am a big believer in learning about craft, but you have to balance that with process-oriented writing. You hear about writing, read about writing, but in the end all that means nothing if you aren’t actually writing. We need to have both a sense of craft and actually to write. Otherwise, you run into the problem we see in that film with Jeff Daniels called *The Squid and the Whale*. In the film, Daniels plays a writer and an English professor who is called in to meet with his son’s high school English teacher (or maybe it was his principal now that I think of it). His son can talk about all the great books and writers on a genius level, but the school official reveals that he doesn’t believe the boy has actually read any of the books he talks about so eloquently. He learned it all from sitting at the feet of his father and parroting what he heard without actually knowing the books themselves. Butler gives us this very good insight, “Please get out of the habit of saying that you’ve got an idea for a short story. Art does not come from ideas. Art does not come from the mind. Art comes from your unconscious; it comes from the white-hot center of you.”

**Get into the Flow**

3. Another book that I strongly recommend is *Flow* from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In Csikszentmihalyi's words, flow is “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” It reminds me of when I first started meditating. At first, I felt nothing but boredom and even impatience, but then one day I had a brief feeling of euphoria when I meditated. This is the same feeling I have when the writing is going well. That’s what happens when I’m writing from the unconscious and I see my characters doing and saying things I never planned for them to do or say. I’m not saying you shouldn’t have a plan or an outline for what you’re writing. What I’m saying is that when the characters or the words start taking control it becomes your job to record them. That’s what I mean when I talk about writing from the subconscious.



**Guided-Meditation or a Seance of the Mind**

4. As writers we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us. Another great book I would recommend is *Narrative Design: A Writer’s Guide to Structure* by Madison Smartt Bell. The first thing Bell deals with is the necessity of learning to write from the subconscious. He even gives a guided meditation for writers that I would like to share with you during this presentation. It’s very brief and begins on pp. 12-13 in his book. Bell says, “All hypnosis is self-hypnosis.” Make the time to find ways to get in touch with your creative mind. Allow yourself to see your characters so vividly you can understand them as people and even see in this seance of the mind the very ectoplasm coming out of their mouths.

**Ectoplasm and Grammar**

5. Most people look askance at creativity and want to stick to what’s logical. However, Bell says creativity should be innate. I think it is. Unfortunately, we unlearn it as we go through the process of becoming educated and indoctrinated into the world of work. When I first meet people and they ask me the inevitable question, “What do you do for a living?” I see a look of horror come into their eyes when I tell them I teach English. The ghosts of grammar teachers past pass before their eyes. The problem goes back to the ectoplasm of English teachers . . . grammar. The teacher teaches you grammar rules as through the rules will guarantee good or worthwhile writing. You’re asked to read an O. Henry short story and innocently asked to answer 10 questions from the textbook. You hand in your work, none the wiser until it’s handed back to you bleeding to death in a sea of red ink! You broke all the grammar rules! What insolence is this! This is how many of us learned to write. We were taught by well-meaning grammarians but not writers. It’s possible to write well-polished, grammatically correct, and perfectly boring sentences that fail to thrill the reader. This wrong-headed approach to writing, putting grammar and the beauty of your cursive handwriting front and center, can take a long time to get over. We were never taught how to be creative or to write from the place where all of our best ideas live.

**The Work**

6. So how I do it? Good question. First, if you have been working on something, I want you to think about it in a new way. Stop worrying about publishing and becoming famous, how much you will get paid, or anything like that. The work itself is what is important. If you have a character in a tough situation you have everything you need. Instead of writing, allow yourself the time not to write but to dream. That’s right! If you’re like me, you got in whole lot of trouble for daydreaming in school. Now I’m saying, “Go for it!” Bring your characters up in your mind and observe them. Don’t try to control what they will say or do. Don’t immediately write anything. Sometimes the muse needs a nudge, but first you have to be there ready to receive. So if you’re undertaking a short story or a novel, I want to suggest you start writing 5-6 days a week. The more involved you are with your story and characters, the more likely your subconscious mind is to start working on the story when you’re not looking. Instead of disciplining yourself to write, the way you’d approach exercise or dieting . . . remind yourself that writing is something you actually want to do. After all, no one’s going to notice that you’re the “temperamental artist type” unless maybe you get the work done.

**Automatic Writing and Desire**

7. Every so often, due to the pressures of work and family life, you might feel like you’ve tilted your subconscious. That’s when AUTOMATIC WRITING comes into play. Flannery O’Connor said in one of her essays about writing fiction, “I write to see what I am going to say.” My experience has shown me the need for writing from the subconscious, but also the need to do automatic writing when things aren’t going as planned. Taken together, these two ways of writing will help push your writing where you want it to go. What’s required is not so much discipline as desire. People often say to me, ‘Ah, you have a book coming out. You must be very disciplined.’ More important than discipline is the actual desire to write. Make it a natural part of your life. Just like John Gardner said, “Fiction is the only religion I have.” He may have meant that tongue-in-cheek, but I understand the sentiment.