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Writing Archaeology: Telling Stories about the Past

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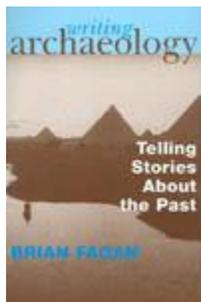
Book Review

Brian Fagan. *Writing Archaeology: Telling Stories about the Past*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, ISBN-10 1598740059, ISBN-13 978-1598740059, 176 pp., December, 2005.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Carol McDavid, Project Director for Public Archaeology, Yates Community Archaeology Project.

When John McCarthy asked me to review Brian Fagan's new(ish) book *Writing Archaeology: Telling Stories about the Past*, I assumed that it would be a well-written and well-researched volume, as Fagan has a long and well-established reputation as a good and entertaining writer. In addition, the book is one of the first books published by Mitch Allen's new Left Coast Press, and Mitch's efforts to produce readable books about archaeology are well known to the readers of this Newsletter.

What I was not prepared for was how very useful the volume would turn out to be -- after all, a book can be well-written and even interesting, but not particularly relevant to one's particular needs. Maybe it is just because I am struggling through a considerable amount of writing myself these days, but I found this book to be chock-full of useable and pertinent information about both the craft and business of writing. This is not a book about academic writing, it is a book meant to guide archaeologists who want to write for more general audiences. In many important ways, this is a book about *writing as public archaeology*.

Fagan starts by reminding us that our best power, as writers, likes in the fact that archaeologists have good stories to tell -- and he shows, though many examples, how this is true. Most of these examples are drawn from his own writing, thus focus mostly on prehistoric archaeology topics, but all are interesting and carefully chosen to illustrate various points about good *writing*. This is what distinguishes this book from many other "how to write" books -- Fagan is dealing specifically with *archaeological* writing. Therefore he is able to offer useful and particular advice about how archaeologists can make the leap from formal *writing up our data* to more general *writing stories* in a way which makes sense. I found myself thinking about my own writing in a very different way.

The book contains a great deal of specific information, ideas, tips, how-to lists, and guidelines. One chapter deals with magazine and op-ed articles and columns (marketing ideas, proposing stories, and writing); another deals with trade books (where I finally learned what those are, exactly). Writing book proposals and outlines is handled in another chapter; his comments on how to write with passion, and how to develop effective leads are especially useful. One chapter deals with publishers, agents and editors -- how, whether and when to use them, what their jobs are, and how to negotiate contracts. An entire chapter is devoted to writing a first draft of a book -- how to start, how to develop a writing habit, how to create a useful workspace, how to deal with writer's block, and how to

research special topics. Another chapter deals with the revision process (with a number of useful editing strategies); another looks at the production and marketing process, and a final chapter examines the specialized processes involved in writing and marketing textbooks. Throughout are countless nuggets of information and advice, all of which are presented in an amiable, self-deprecating, but authoritative style. In short, there is a lot of information here, and it is a good read besides.

My only complaint about the book is serious: there is no index. This has an extremely negative impact on the volume's potential usefulness. There is a good list of other sources for writers, and the bibliography is fine -- but no index in a book meant to be used as a practical and even inspirational guide? I hope the readers of this Newsletter will forgive this conversational tone -- but Brian and Mitch -- please correct this in future editions!

Despite this flaw, this book is must-read for anyone who hopes to write about archaeology to general audiences, but it should also be read by those who write mainly for other archaeologists. We often bemoan how boring some of our writing is, and this book could point the way to correcting that as well. Anyone who writes about archaeology should read -- and more importantly, use -- this book.