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**Review of:**

**Fagan, B. 2006. *Writing Archaeology: Telling Stories About the Past*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 175 pages. ISBN 1598740040. Hardback £40. ISBN 1598740059. Paperback £15.99.**

In the “publish or perish” world of academic research, writing magazine articles and books aimed at the general public is not generally considered a worthwhile use of time (Waters 2004: 3). However, archaeology is more dependent than most disciplines on public perceptions of its value: Cripps et al. (2003: 1) summarise this as ‘public or perish’. In the last 30 years few have done as much as Brian Fagan to raise the profile and standard of popular archaeological writing. His books on ancient climate change, American prehistory and a host of other subjects, together with his column in *Archaeology* magazine and several successful textbooks, have undoubtedly contributed to the considerable public interest in archaeology. In light of this his latest work, a guide to popular archaeological writing and publishing, deserves our attention.

*Writing Archaeology* offers advice on writing for newspapers and magazines of various kinds, as well as a short section on writing textbooks that is almost a warning not to try. The bulk of this short book, six of the nine chapters, focuses on writing and publishing ‘trade books’ – popular works for general publishing houses, sold in high-street bookshops: think Paul Bahn rather than Ian Hodder.

From the start, Fagan emphasises the value of perspiration over inspiration, reminding us repeatedly that any polished-looking text will have gone through numerous drafts and rewrites.

Concentrate on getting words written. Your instincts may tell you that you are writing garbage, or superb stuff. Ignore them and just keep writing. At the revision stage you will probably sling out at least half the original text, but that’s not the point.

(p. 95)

The point is that ‘everyone’ should have a try: with an evangelist’s zeal he exhorts us to “*Write! Write! Write!*” (p. 12). The chapters are clearly structured with bullet-point summaries of key topics. To assist the budding popular author he offers a series of rules, ranging from the whimsical “Rule 1: Always tell a story” (p. 13), to the stern “Rule 4: Treat the proposal as seriously as the book because you’re selling yourself and

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your idea” (p. 63). Others are possibly born of bitter experience: “Rule 9: Never write a textbook unless you have time to revise it” (p. 143).

Fagan recognises the problem of extracting gripping narratives from archaeological data:

Detail! We archaeologists love it. We tend to forget that others do not share our fascination. When writing a general narrative, be ruthless about eliminating unnecessary detail, and anything that smacks of a list of artifacts.

(p. 106)

He highlights a number of alternative approaches to the material, including dramatic reconstruction, first-person narration and the dubious technique of focusing on the personalities of the archaeologists (such as they are). The most important factor is a plot, a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, and most importantly characters: “We forget that all archaeology is the result of human behavior, of people like ourselves” (p. 17). It is notable that many of the best practitioners of this art are non-archaeologists such as journalists and ethnographers.

The editor of a popular archaeology magazine has complained to me of the generally low quality of the submissions he receives from both professional and academic archaeologists (cf. Hodder 1989). Fagan’s claim that there is “an insatiable demand for popular articles on archaeology of every kind and not enough archaeologically literate people to meet it” (p. 29) highlights the paucity of communication skills within the discipline:

It is as if we have a secret code for communicating with one another, which is unintelligible to the world at large ... Add to this the generally appalling standards of writing in archaeology, and it’s easy to understand the huge chasm between archaeological research at the technical level and our wider audience.

(pp. 16-17)

The largest part of *Writing Archaeology* focuses on the kind of popular books with loud covers and eye-catching titles that make up the ‘archaeology’ sections in most provincial bookshops, and here Fagan’s decades of experience in the publishing world shine through. His advice on the entire writing and publishing process, from initial idea through to book tours, is articulate, succinct and often humorous: “If you appear on *Oprah* or *Martha Stewart*, then you are really in business. Dream on...” (p. 141). Difficult issues such as bad reviews and writer’s block are dealt with sensitively, and discussions of details such as manuscript packaging and cover design are impressively comprehensive. Fagan’s insights into the internal workings of publishing houses are invaluable, and include an important reminder that the economics of trade books are

very different to academic publishing. In the sections on deadlines and production processes he rightly stresses the importance of professionalism and attention to detail.

As a handbook for general interest archaeological publishing this short book scores highly, but who is it aimed at? Academics, certainly, and specifically American ones: a cynic might suggest only those established or tenured academics with the spare time and career security to write popular books. Someone like Glyn Daniel perhaps, who managed to combine editing *Antiquity* with popular and scholarly writing including several detective novels, as well as a television career (Daniel 1986). Do people like that really exist anymore?

Cynicism aside, there is a need for professional and academic archaeologists to write more books aimed at the public. Books that reach a wide audience, such as the works of Jared Diamond, are the best antidote to the Graham Hancock and Erich von Dänikens of this world, who feed on the extraordinary public interest in archaeology that Fagan highlights. In addition, popular books on traditionally dry academic subjects have the potential to introduce challenging ideas into the public sphere and lead to novel interdisciplinary collaborations, as with the works of Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould.

A more useful book, from a British perspective at least, would focus on the needs of the growing ranks of community archaeologists based in local societies, museums, universities and some commercial units. A central part of their work is raising awareness of local archaeology through newspapers, leaflets, community newsletters and booklets. A few amateur archaeological societies have begun to take advantage of the digital printing revolution to produce high quality, short-run publications aimed at local communities. The professional writing and presentation skills that Fagan discusses could most profitably be applied in these areas; they should also be core components of MA courses in heritage management, museum studies and public archaeology.

*Writing Archaeology* is an excellent book, I hope it reaches the audience it deserves and spawns a generation of good popular archaeology writers. Fagan's anecdotal writing style helps make what is largely a technical guide to publishing into a pleasurable and rewarding read. The quotes and longer extracts from his many books remind us why he is so qualified to write it.

### References

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