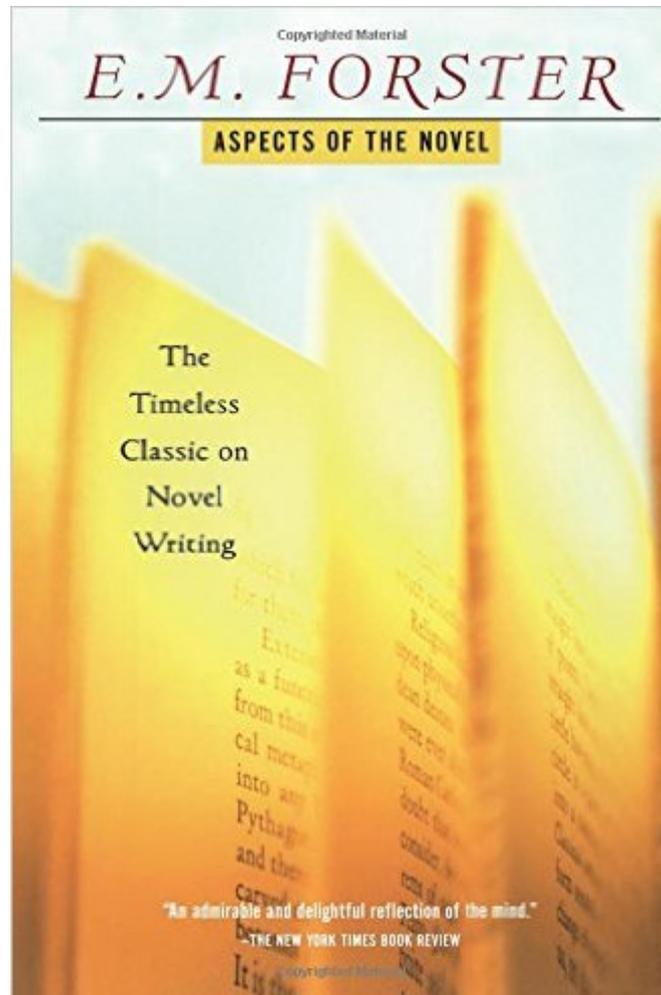


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ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL



Synopsis

A highly original and intelligent investigation of the novel from celebrated writer and "gentle genius"; E. M. Forster's renowned guide to writing sparkles with wit and insight for contemporary writers and readers. With lively language and excerpts from well-known classics, Forster takes on the seven elements vital to a novel: story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm. He not only defines and explains such terms as "round" versus "flat"; characters (and why both are needed for an effective novel), but also provides examples of writing from such literary greats as Dickens and Austen. Forster's original commentary illuminates and entertains without lapsing into complicated, scholarly rhetoric, coming together in a key volume on writing that avoids chronology and what he calls "pseudoscholarship."

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Customer Reviews

Though Forster structures his essays around such fundamental novelistic elements as plot, character, and language, this is a rather loosely constructed and free ranging discussion of the literary form that has come in the past two hundred years to dominate the Western world's literary preoccupations. It is not systematic, nor is it comprehensive. Its tone is more personal and impressionistic. Fortunately, Forster has a large number of tremendously perceptions about the novel and novelists, and because he couches these reflections in frequently brilliant sentences, this book makes for reading that is both insightful and delightful. It is also an intensely personal book, so

that we gain a great deal of insight into Forster's tastes and quirks. Nearly every chapter in this book has something to offer the reader, but I have found his discussion of the difference between flat and round characters to be especially useful in reading other novels. In Forster's view, a round character is one that can develop and change over the course of a novel's story. They adjust, grow, and react to events and people around them. They are fuller, and therefore more lifelike. A flat character, on the other hand, is essentially the same character at the end of the tale as at the beginning. They do not grow, do not alter with time, do not admit of development. Flat characters are not necessarily bad characters. As Forster points out, correctly, I think, nearly all of Charles Dickens's characters are flat characters. Not even major characters such as David Copperfield change during the course of their history. I have found this distinction to be quite helpful in reading the work of various novelists. Some authors have almost nothing but round characters. Anthony Trollope is a premier example of this.

Sometimes one reads a book and it opens up the brain and heart in such a way that one views the world differently thereafter. This is such a book. You will never again read a novel and think about the book in front of you or how it was written in quite the same way. There is nothing else like it. Delving into this book was part of a quest over the past year to read books on writing by writers. The books did not address HOW to write a novel other than tangentially. Although there are a plethora of dubious choices along those lines, I stayed away from them. The books that I searched out were books on the process of writing, the very lonely experience of the writer in creating fiction. Several of the books were forgettable. A surprising number of them were memorable, including *Mystery & Manners* by Flannery O'Connor, *On Writing* by Stephen King, and anything by Margaret Atwood. Of all of the books that I read, this one was the best by far. It covered not only the process of writing but also provided a structure for discussing and understanding the novel art form. As a result, I highly recommend this book for book clubs. When presenting this book recently to my book club of 14+ years as my pick, there was a collective groan. Upon finishing the book, we all thought that it was one of the best of the 125+ books that we had read. It gave us a missing structure and tools for moving discussions and disagreements forward. Several times over the years, one or more of us have disagreed over some book selection or an aspect of it, but the discussion would stall for lack of a way to bridge the various viewpoints. For the first time, we were able to go back through those arguments in a new light using the tools presented in the book.

...the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect... -EM Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*
I liked this collected series of lectures on what makes for good novel writing much better than almost

any of the novels that Forster actually wrote (A Passage to India being the lone exception). Forster treats seven different aspects--the story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm--in a breezy conversational style. Along the way, he offers examples, both good and bad, from literary history. I found myself agreeing and dissenting about equally, but the whole thing was immensely interesting and entertaining. Here are some of the observations that I agreed with and why: A story "can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next." One inevitably thinks of James Joyce's Ulysses, which by now has surely retired the title of "the book most likely to remain unfinished". No matter how revolutionary the technique, how insightful the observations or how compelling the characters, a book that you can put down and not care what happens next has failed in its most basic task. ----- The constant sensitiveness of characters for each other--even in writers called robust, like Fielding--is remarkable, and has no parallel in life, except among those people who have plenty of leisure. Passion, intensity at moments--yes, but not this constant awareness, this endless readjusting, this ceaseless hunger. I believe that these are the reflections of the novelist's own state of mind while he composes, and that the predominance of love in novels is partly because of this.

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