

“As a writing teacher, I was especially interested in any insight I could glean that might help me understand how to better teach writing to my students.”

BOOK REVIEW ...

A NEUROLOGIST SUGGESTS WHY MOST PEOPLE CAN'T WRITE—A REVIEW OF *THE MIDNIGHT DISEASE: THE DRIVE TO WRITE, WRITER'S BLOCK, AND THE CREATIVE BRAIN*

BY DR. ALICE W. FLAHERTY
BOSTON, MA: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 2004

REVIEWED BY JAMES B. LEVY

James B. Levy is Assistant Professor of Law at Nova Southeastern School of Law in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Dr. Alice Flaherty, a neurologist by vocation and author by avocation, became interested in the physiology of writing after experiencing a bout of hypergraphia (a medical term for an overpowering desire to write) following a postpartum mood disorder. The result is *The Midnight Disease* in which Flaherty describes for us what science knows about the neurobiology of creativity, inspiration, and the desire to write, including some of the attendant problems like writer's "block" and hypergraphia. Given the complexity of the material, Flaherty provides an easy-to-follow explanation about the often mysterious relationship between mood, cognition, and the drive to communicate that is the source of all human creativity. Along the way, she weaves in helpful and interesting references from the world of literature and art to illustrate key points. In particular, Dr. Flaherty focuses on the neurobiology of creative writing, as opposed to the more routine writing most of us do in our daily lives, because that is where her interests lie. Nevertheless, there is a lot to learn from this book about the how's and why's of even the most mundane writing, which should be of interest to anyone who teaches writing for a living.

The jumping-off point for Flaherty's discussion of the neurobiological roots of how and why we write is the hypergraphia she suffered following a pregnancy and its opposite, "writer's block," which she also suffered. Both conditions are typically thought to be psychologically based problems resulting from everything from a fear of failure to an overly self-critical inner voice. But Flaherty was interested in exploring whether these conditions also have an observable biological footprint. And if writer's block, for example, is a brain state, does that mean it can be medically treated? This led Flaherty to raise some interesting and related questions about the neurobiology of creativity and inspiration. For instance, she asks: "why do we write, and more specifically, why do we write creatively?" Does it serve some evolutionary purpose? Is there a drive to communicate just as there is a drive to procreate? Can the drive to communicate be enhanced pharmacologically, suggesting one day we may have creativity or productivity "pills" that can make us more talented and prolific writers? The author suggests that the answers to at least some of these questions might be "yes."

Fortunately for me, other than suffering from a lack of ideas (which, according to Flaherty, is often mistaken for "block"), I have never suffered the kind of debilitating writer's block described in this book. The kind that makes sufferers climb the walls with frustration after months, or even years, of enduring a creative dry spell. Nor have I ever experienced anything even remotely like hypergraphia, since I consider writing such hard work I don't find it difficult to avoid. Instead what I found most interesting about *The Midnight Disease* was Flaherty's discussion of the neurobiology of the more routine writing most of us do in our everyday lives. As a writing teacher, I was especially interested in any insight I could glean that might help me understand how to better teach writing to my students.

By coincidence, at the same time I was reading *The Midnight Disease* I was also reading Susan Kosse's and David ButleRitchie's article *How*

Judges, Practitioners, and Legal Writing Teachers Assess the Writing Skills of New Law Graduates: A Comparative Study, found at 53 J. Legal Educ. 80 (2003), reporting the results of their research attempting to identify the reasons the writing skills of recent law grads are so poor. Flaherty suggests an alternative explanation to the ones in the Kosse and ButleRichie article that is so obvious it is easy for us to overlook. In *The Midnight Disease*, Flaherty suggests that the reason new law school grads, and just about everyone else, are such poor writers is because good writing is just plain hard to do. Flaherty lays out the neurobiological explanation for what many of us already feel intuitively: writing is a complex undertaking that requires a lot of practice to get right.

She also provides some interesting evolutionary background that helps explain why writing is such a difficult task for so many people. Unlike the relatively recent phenomenon of the written word, human beings have been able to engage in verbal communication for an estimated 100,000 years or so. In fact, we have been doing it for so long, we are now hardwired for verbal communication, including a discrete area of the brain devoted specifically to speech. Every healthy newborn child comes into the world possessing the genetic material enabling that child to learn any language provided he or she is exposed to it sometime before puberty.

On the other hand, we are not hardwired to write. That helps explain why all of the world's healthy adult population can communicate verbally but only a small fraction of that number is literate. In evolutionary terms, a widely accepted theory posits that human beings acquired the ability to write only within the last 5,000 years or so. We started writing, so the theory goes, out of a necessity to record economic transactions. Thus, the first writing may well have been a sales receipt. Unlike its discrete area for verbal communication, the human brain has developed no specific area designed to manage the task of writing. Rather, writing employs several different, coordinated brain functions including aspects of the limbic

system (which is associated with emotion and drive) and the cortex (which controls rational thought). Flaherty points out that casual speech—the polite chitchat that comprises most daily verbal exchanges—requires little conscious effort to produce, while writing is a far more cognitive heavy function.

Writing is also more difficult because we hold it to a higher standard than oral communication. By its nature, writing is a permanent record that is scrutinized and critiqued more thoroughly than is speech. To draw a very rough analogy, speaking is, in neurological terms, more like breathing—another hardwired activity—while writing is more like welding—a skill that is not innate but that the brain can learn by engaging several neurological functions to make it happen.

The neurobiology of learning also helps us understand why becoming a good writer is so difficult.¹ When a student learns a new skill, whether it be writing or welding, a nascent neurological pathway is formed among the areas of the brain used to perform that particular skill. Every time the task is repeated, the pathway becomes a bit more defined until it is sufficiently embedded in the brain to be considered as “learned.” Practice does indeed make perfect in neurobiological terms. Flaherty also tells us that the internal drive and motivation mechanisms of the limbic system are a critical aspect of learning to write well. In fact, Flaherty suggests that these may be the most critical components of writing, because only someone who has the internal drive necessary to write well will become proficient at the task.

Another area that Flaherty touches upon that the *Perspectives* audience may find especially interesting is her discussion of metaphors. She tells us that the ability to think metaphorically is a complex neurological process that engages both the emotional functions of the limbic system and the cognitive functions of the cortex. As an initial matter, this helps us understand why metaphors are such powerful learning tools: they engage more areas of the listener's brain (both emotions and

“The neurobiology of learning also helps us understand why becoming a good writer is so difficult.”

¹ The support for the points in this paragraph come from Michael Brearley, *Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom* 35–38 (2001).

“Because of the limitations of our own biology, our students’ writing will not get better until law schools do more than they are doing now.”

.....

cognition) and thus make the material more vivid and memorable to the audience. Next, it may help us understand why not all law students are good with analogies. Assuming Flaherty’s observations about metaphorical thinking have some application to the brain’s ability to use analogies, which may be a leap, she tells us that we are simply not hardwired to think in metaphorical terms. Metaphorical thinking, which is at the root of all human artistic activity, is a complex function involving several regions of the brain. Some people are better at it than others because of their particular brain “wiring.” This point helps confirm our classroom intuition that some students are indeed better at understanding and using analogies than others.

I began reading *The Midnight Disease* because I was interested in learning how the creative mind works. What I discovered, though, is that Flaherty provides us with perhaps the best explanation about why our students’ writing is generally so bad: it is because, from a neurological standpoint, writing is a really hard and complex skill to learn. Moreover, like welding, it takes tremendous motivation and practice to become a proficient writer. As a result, she suggests an argument more compelling than anything in the McCrate Report,² or more recent articles like the Kosse and ButleRichie piece, about why legal writing courses have to be taken more seriously in the law school curriculum. Because of the limitations of our own biology, our students’ writing will not get better until law schools do more than they are doing now.

© 2004 James B. Levy

² American Bar Association Section of Legal Education and Admission to the Bar, Report of the Task Force on Law Schools and the Profession; Narrowing the Gap, Legal Education and Professional Development—an Educational Continuum (1992).