

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft

Stephen King

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“Honesty’s the best policy.” – Miguel de Cervantes

“Liars prosper.” – Anonymous

1st Foreword

“In the early 90s (it might have been 1992, but it’s hard to remember when you’re having a good time) I joined a rock-&-roll band composed mostly of writers. The Rock Bottom Remainers were the brainchild of Kathi Kamen Goldmark, a book publicist & musician from San Francisco. The group included Dave Barry on lead guitar, Ridley Pearson on bass, Barbara Kingsolver on keyboards, Robert Fulghum on mandolin, & me on rhythm guitar. There was also a trio of “chick singer,” *à la* the Dixie cups, made up (usually) of Kathi, Tad, Bartimus, & Amy Tan.

The group was intended as a 1-shot deal – we would play 2 shows at the American Booksellers Convention, get a few laughs, recapture our misspent youth for 3 or 4 hours, then go our separate ways.

It didn’t happen that way, because the group never quite broke up. We found that we liked playing together too much to quit, & with a couple of “ringer” musicians on sax & drums (plus, in the early days, our musical guru, Al Kooper, at the heart of the group), we sounded pretty good. You’d pay to hear us. Not a lot, not U2 or E Street Bans prices, but maybe what the oldtimers call “roadhouse money.” We took the group on tour, wrote a book about it (my wife took the photos & danced whenever the spirit took her, which was quite often), & continue to play now & then, sometimes as The Remainers, sometimes as Raymond Burr’s Legs. The personnel comes & goes – columnist Mitch Albom has replaced Barbara on keyboards, & Al doesn’t play with the group anymore ‘cause he & Kathi don’t get along – but the core has remained Kathi, Amy, Ridley, Dave, Mitch Albom, & me . . . plus Josh Kelly on drums & Erasmo Paolo on sax.

We do it for the music, but we also do it for the companionship. We like each other, & we like having a chance to talk sometimes about the real job, the day job people are always telling us not to quit. We are writers, & we never ask one another where we get our ideas; we know we don’t know.

1 night while we were eating Chinese before a big in Miami Beach, I asked Amy if there was any 1 question she was *never* asked during the Q-&-A that follows almost every writer’s talk – that question you never get to answer when you’re standing

in front of a group of author-struck fans & pretending you don't put your pants on 1 leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, & then said: "No one ever asks about the language."

I owe an immense debt of gratitude to her for saying that. I had been playing with the idea of writing a little book about writing for a year or more at that time, but had held back because I didn't trust my own motivations – *why* did I want to write about writing? What made me think I had anything worth saying?

The easy answer is that someone who has sold as many books of fiction as I have must have *something* worthwhile to say about writing it, but the easy answer isn't always the truth. Colonel Sanders sold a hell of a lot of fried chicken, but I'm not sure anyone wants to know how he made it. If I was going to be presumptuous enough to tell people how to write, I felt there had to be a better reason than my popular success. Put another way, I didn't want to write a book, even a short one like this, that would leave me feeling like either a literary gasbag or a transcendental asshole. There are enough of those books – & those writers – on the market already, thanks.

But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos & the Updikes & the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists. Yet many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, & care passionately about the art & craft of telling stories on paper. What follows is an attempt to put down, briefly & simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, & how it's done. It's about the day job; it's about the language.

This book is dedicated to Amy Tan, who told me in a very simple & direct way that it was okay to write it." – King, 2010, p. 9

2nd Foreword

"This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do – not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less the bullshit.

1 notable exception to the bullshit rule is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. & E. B. White. There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. (Of course it's short; at 85 pages it's much shorter than this one.) I'll tell you right now that every aspiring writer should read *The Elements of Style*. Rule 17 in the chapter titled Principles of Composition is "Omit needless words." I will try to do that here." – King, 2010, p. 10

3rd Foreword

"1 rule of the road not directly stated elsewhere in this book: "The editor is always right." The corollary is that no writer will take all of his or her editor's advice; for all have sinned & fallen short of editorial perfection. Put another way, to write is human, to edit is divine. Chuck Verrill edited this book, as he has so many of my novels. And as usual, Chuck, you were divine. – Steve" – King, 2010, p. 11

1 C.V.

"I was stunned by Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liar's Club*. Not just by its ferocity, its beauty, & by her delightful grasp of the vernacular, but by its *totality* – she is a woman who remembers *everything* about her early years.

I'm not that way. I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years & who – I am not completely sure of this – may have farmed my brother & me out to 1 of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time. Perhaps she was only chasing our father, who piled up all sorts of bills & then did a runout when I was 2 & my brother David was 4. If so, she never succeeded in finding him. My mom, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, was 1 of America's early liberated women, but not by choice.

Mary Karr presents her childhood in an almost unbroken panorama. Mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees . . . the kind that look as if they might like to grab & eat you.

What follows are some of those memories, plus assorted snapshots from the somewhat more coherent days of my adolescence & young manhood. This is not an autobiography. It is, rather, a kind of *curriculum vitae* – my attempt to show how 1 writer was formed. Not how 1 writer was *made*; I don't believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances or by self-will (although I did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package. Yet it is by no means unusual equipment; I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers & storytellers, & that those talents can be strengthened & sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

This is how it was for me, that's all – a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, & a little talent all played a part. Don't bother trying to read between the lines, & don't look for a through-line. There are *no* lines – only snapshots, most out of focus.

” – King, 2010, pp. 13–

2 What Writing Is

“Telepathy, of course. It’s amusing when you stop to think about it – for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists, folks like J. B. Rhine have busted their brains trying to create a valid testing process to isolate it, & all the time it’s been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe’s Purloined Letter. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation. Perhaps I’m prejudiced, but even if I am we may as well stick with writing, since it’s what we came here to think & talk about.

My name is Stephen King. I’m writing the 1st draft of this part at my desk (the one under the eave) on a snowy morning in December of 1997. There are things on my mind. Some are worries (bad eyes, Christmas shopping not even started, wife under the weather with a virus), some are good things (our younger son made a surprise visit home from college, I got to play Vince Taylor’s “Brand New Cadillac” with The Wallflowers at a concert), but right now all that stuff is up top. I’m in another place, a basement place where there are lots of bright lights & clear images. This is a place I’ve built for myself over the years. It’s far-seeing place. I know it’s a little strange, a little bit of a contradiction, that a far-seeing place should also be a basement place, but that’s how it is with me. If you construct your own far-seeing place, you might put it in a treetop or on the roof of the World Trade Center or on the edge of the Grand Canyon. That’s your little red wagon, as Robert McCammon says in 1 of his novels.

This book is scheduled to be published in the late summer or early fall of 2000. If that’s how things work out, then you are somewhere downstream on the timeline from me ... but you’re quite likely in your own far-seeing place, the one where you go to receive telepathic messages. Not that you *have* to be there; books are a uniquely portable magic. I usually listen to one in the car (always unabridged; I think abridged audiobooks are the pits), & carry another wherever I go. You just never know when you’ll want an escape hatch: mile-long lines at tollbooth plazas, the 15 minutes you have to spend in the hall of some boring college building waiting for your advisor (who’s got some yank-off in there threatening to commit suicide because he/she is flunking Custom Kurmfurling 101) to come out so you can get his signature on a drop-card, airport boarding lounges, laundromats on rainy afternoons, & the absolute worst, which is the doctor’s office when the guy is running late & you have to wait half an hour in order to have something sensitive mauled. At such times I find a book vital. If I have to spend time in purgatory before going to 1 place or the other, I guess I’ll be all right as long as there’s a lending library (if there is it’s probably stocked with nothing but novels by Danielle Steel & *Chicken Soup* books, ha-ha, joke’s on you, Steve).

So I read where I can, but I have a favorite place & probably you do, too – a place where the light is good & the vibe is usually strong. For me it’s the blue chair in my study. For you it might be the couch on the sun-porch, the rocker in the kitchen, or maybe it’s propped up in your bed – reading in bed can be heaven, assuming you can get just the right amount of light on the page & aren’t prone to spilling your coffee or cognac on the sheets.

So let’s assume that you’re in your favorite receiving place just as I am in the place where I do my best transmitting. We’ll have to perform our mentalist routine not just over distance but over time as well, yet that presents no real problem; if we can still read Dickens, Shakespeare, & (with the help of a footnote or 2) Herodotus, I think we can manage the gap between 1997 & 2000. & here we go – actually telepathy in action. You’ll notice I have nothing up my sleeves & that my lips never move. Neither, most likely, do yours.

Look – here’s a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose & pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.

Do we see the same thing? We’d have to get together & compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do. There will be necessary variations, of course: some receivers will see a cloth which is turkey red, some will see one that’s scarlet, while others may see still other shades. (To color-blind receivers, the red tablecloth is the dark gray of cigar ashes.) Some may see scalloped edges, some may see straight ones. Decorative souls may add a little lace, & welcome – my tablecloth is your tablecloth, knock yourself out.

Likewise, the matter of the cage leaves quite a lot of room for individual interpretation. For 1 thing, it is described in terms of *rough comparison*, which is useful only if you & I see the world & measure the things in it with similar eyes. It’s easy to become careless when making rough comparisons, but the alternative is a prissy attention to detail that takes all the fun out of writing. What am I going to say, “on the table is a cage 3 feet, 6 inches in length, 2 feet in width, & 14 inches high”? That’s not prose, that’s an instruction manual. The paragraph also doesn’t tell us what sort of material the cage is made of – wire mesh? steel rods? glass? – but does it really matter? We all understand the cage is a see-through medium; beyond that, we don’t care. The most interesting thing here isn’t even the carrot-munching rabbit in the cage, but the number on its back. Not a 6, not a 4, not 19.5. It’s an 8. This is what we’re looking at, & we all see it. I didn’t tell you. You didn’t ask me. I never opened my mouth & you never opened yours. We’re not even in the same *year* together, let alone the same room ... except we *are* together. We’re close.

We’re having a meeting of the minds.

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, & the number 8 in blue ink. You got them all, especially that

blue 8. We've engaged in an act of telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy. I'm not going to belabor the point, but before we go any further you have to understand that I'm not trying to be cute; there *is* a point to be made.

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair – the sense that you can never completely put on the page what's in your mind & heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched & your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass & take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: *you must not come lightly to the blank page*.

I'm not asking you to come reverently or unquestioningly; I'm not asking you to be politically correct or cast aside your sense of humor (please God you have one). This isn't a popularity contest, it's not the moral Olympics, & it's not church. But it's *writing*, damn it, not washing the car or putting an eyeliner. If you can take it seriously, we can do business. If you can't or won't, it's time for you to close the book & do something else.

Wash the car, maybe.” – King, 2010, pp. 83–85

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References

King, Stephen (2010). *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Anniversary edition. Scribner, p. 288.