

Stephen King. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

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As a prolific and beloved author, it is no surprise that Stephen King's advice on writing would be sought by many. However, as King notes in *On Writing*, his fans and critics alike seldom asked him about his use of language, his writing process, or his formation as a writer—at least, before 2000 they seldom asked. This, King explains, is because popular authors are commonly thought of as lacking in craft. It's likely that many readers of popular fiction believe they, too, could turn out novels if only they had the time or the motivation . . . and critics of the popular novel see the wide appeal and seeming simplicity of the popular novel as an indication that it is a lesser piece of writing. Of course, this isn't true—and King tells his readers why.

The book is arranged in three parts—a CV, a toolbox, and “on writing”—with an assortment of prefaces and postscripts as well. The CV is intended to provide a series of snapshots and stories that show how Stephen King, the writer, was formed. He makes it clear that the memoir does not show how a writer was “made;” in fact, King subscribes to the idea that a writer is a writer, no matter what his or her formative experiences were. Likewise, he believes in something akin to innate ability. This ability can be improved, but ultimately individuals can't transcend their natural boundaries. Talent has something to do with success. On the other hand, because he is not setting out to write a book on futility, he suggests that talents can, and often need to be, honed.

The CV shows many ways in which King's own talent was honed (and also berated, discouraged, encouraged, and set back) in his youth and young adulthood. Some are rather personal and specific to King. For example, we learn that his mother had a dark and imaginative sense of humor—surely a shared family trait that must have influenced King, even subconsciously (see 9, 17). Some of the stories offer more general lessons about writing. King makes it clear that he had a need to write stories from an early age—and that it was a pursuit that was encouraged by his family. The success he had among his family and friends was enough to overcome some of the discouraging comments he encountered at school. I'm sure that King's teachers thought what they were saying was innocuous enough—don't waste your time on junk—but the comments clearly affected King, even though he continued to write horror stories anyway.

One of the lessons that comes through rather strongly in the CV section is that of submitting work often, and becoming accustomed to the inevitable rejection. King seldom received advice from these rejections—but when he did, he took the advice. He also took jobs and writing opportunities as they came, from “Dave's Rag” to the school newspaper, to the local newspaper's sports section. It was his experience with the local newspaper that provided him with his first experience with useful editing. It comes as a surprise to me that he never received editorial comments on his school papers, but at any rate the simple and clear editorial directives came as a revelation to King (46).

The other lesson of the CV has to do with addiction, and work. King talks about his dedication to writing even while he did other work to stay afloat, a lesson from which we can all benefit. He also talks about a long-term addiction to alcohol, and the ways it was detrimental to his life, if not to his writing. King makes it clear that while, somewhat miraculously, his writing seems not to have suffered under alcoholism, that his abilities were also not enhanced by drink. In the case of addiction, and later with recovery from an accident, work (is writing) is a major force in healing.

In the following section, the toolbox, King begins by telling us that writing is not something we ought to come to lightly. It has to have some kind of meaning to the writer—and to express that

meaning in the best possible way, the toolbox must be properly equipped. Vocabulary and grammar make up the top shelf. Both of these are developed more or less unconsciously, though they can be improved—and of course there is always room for breaking rules, provided you understand the rules in the first place. Brevity, specificity, and action are also important elements of King's toolbox. He gives lots of concrete examples.

Another thing that might have made it into the toolbox, but instead made it into the “on writing” section, is theme. King talks about the basic themes in which he interested, and from which he seldom strays. It's true, though I think most people don't notice theme unless they are interested in literary criticism. I think it's the theme, in addition to style, that sets writers apart from each other. How many times have I read that something is in the tradition of Graham Greene, and it looks nothing like the writing of Graham Greene? Every second-rate spy story carries this plug, and wrongly. Not only is Greene's writing sharp, memorable, funny and unusual—but his theme is almost always innocence. How many other writers successfully write books with the theme of innocence? Almost every single Greene novel and short story has this element.

Finally, King includes some nuts and bolts in his “on writing” section that may prove useful to the aspiring author: how to set up a (humble) writing space; how to schedule your day to include writing; how to set writing goals and keep them (it is *work*, after all); and how to approach an agent. Mercifully, King tells us that the proletarian approach to finding an agent (just ask) is the right approach. Send a letter, make a call—this stumbling block is not really a stumbling block, though like everything else, may require some perseverance. He also gives some advice about when to revise manuscripts, and which readers (ideal or not) should be offering their critique of your writing.

*On Writing* is a quick read (one day), and lots of fun to boot. But, I wondered, how much significance will it have for the historians in my class? The book is assigned in the history-writing classes at my university, though it is addressed to aspiring novelists. To be honest, as a longtime fiction reader and sometimes writer, none of King's advice comes as any great surprise to me. This isn't because I'm a great writer of fiction (I'm a rather mediocre writer of fiction.) But I have read countless novels—pulpy and literary—and I know what works, and what I like. One thing I've noticed, however, is that my classmates, and sometimes my faculty, rarely read fiction. I can't understand why this is, but it seems to have something to do with a singularity of interest—a personality trait I appear to lack. But I read fiction, and they don't. So, maybe reading a popular novelist writing about what makes good writing will come as a revelation to my classmates.