

Book Review

Stephen King's "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft"

By Mameve Medwed

There's no disputing Stephen King, the king of bestsellers, can write. What's more, and what's new, is that he can teach you how to do it. In the process, King makes mockery of that old bromide, those who can, do; those who can't teach. For the wannabe novelist, the publishing hopeful, for any student of literature, for all King's fans, for readers everywhere, On Writing mines a writers' lode of advice, humor, entertainment, and inspiration.

In gritty, pull-no-punches, lose-the-euphemisms, ban-the-adverbs language, King brackets the central section on craft with personal history. "This is not autobiography. It is... my attempt to show how one writer was formed. Not how one writer was made. I don't believe writers can be made."

Still, this writer's beginnings weren't auspicious: A hardscrabble Maine childhood; a father who left when he was two; no money. When measles and ear infections kept him out of the first grade for nine months, his mother gave him a quarter for each of four stories about a bunny named Mr. Rabbit Trick. "That was the first buck I made in this business."

In high school-- "Dogpatch with no sense of humor"--, King reported on sports for the local newspaper. "When you write, you're telling yourself the story," his editor instructed. "When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story."

In a college writing class, King met his wife, Tabitha. His sustaining marriage "outlasted all the world's leaders except for Castro." They had kids. He worked in a laundry; she, the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. While living in a double wide trailer outside Bangor, he started Carrie. He had so much trouble with it he threw it in the wastebasket. Tabby fished out the crumpled pages; "You've got something here," she said. From Carrie came two important lessons: "The writer's original perception of a character...may be as erroneous as the reader's" and "stopping a piece of work just because it's hard...is a bad idea." Never did he stop writing, even through years of alcohol and drug addiction, even when Tabby ordered him to get help or get kicked out. He ends this section with a final piece of advice: "put your desk in the corner, and every time you sit down there to write, remind yourself why it isn't in the middle of the room. Life isn't a support system for art. It's the other way around."

Such practical wisdom informs the middle of the book which is illustrated by examples from his own novels and scenes from his own life. Here King explores the tools of craft: vocabulary, grammar, dialogue, style. Pick the first word that comes to your mind, he suggests. "The adverb is not your friend," he warns. He said, she said wins out over the he shot backs , she retorts. View the paragraph as "the beat instead of the actual melody." "Words have weight." He extols Strunk and White's Elements of Style. He recommends taking books to waiting rooms, theater lobbies, johns, meals, and on walks. "The more you read , the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor." King himself writes ten pages a day including Christmas, July 4th, and his birthday. His secret is to stay healthy (before his accident) and to stay married. His goal is to tell a good story. Distrusting plot--"the good writer's last resort

and the dullard's first choice."--, he puts situation and character first. Nuggets abound: "description begins in the writer's imagination but should finish in the reader's." "The key to... good dialogue is honesty." Writing a novel is "like crossing the Atlantic in a bathtub." Considering whether writing workshops work, he concludes that "the most valuable lessons of all are the ones you teach yourself." And he even goes so far as to answer that scourge of all book tour questions: how do you get an agent?

The second half of this book was written as an "act of faith, a spit in the eye of despair," he confesses. Its postscript describes the accident that almost killed him in the summer of 1999. His injuries-- a leg broken into nine pieces, a knee split down the middle, a fractured right hip, a spine chipped in eight places, four broken ribs, flesh stripped from the collarbone, a lacerated scalp that needed thirty stitches-- catalogue enough horrors to rival those in any Stephen King novel. "How was I supposed to write about dialogue, character, and getting an agent when the most pressing thing in my world was how long until the next dose of Percocet?" he asks.

Yet he recovered. "I still don't have much strength...but I've had enough to get me to the end of this book, and for that I'm grateful." As is the reader, for this remarkable work of intelligence and generosity. And to those literary snobs out there who scorn the word popular: Shame on them that such an author had to pay his own way to the National Book Awards. Stephen King is a national treasure. (Note: no adverbs were used in the writing of this review.)

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