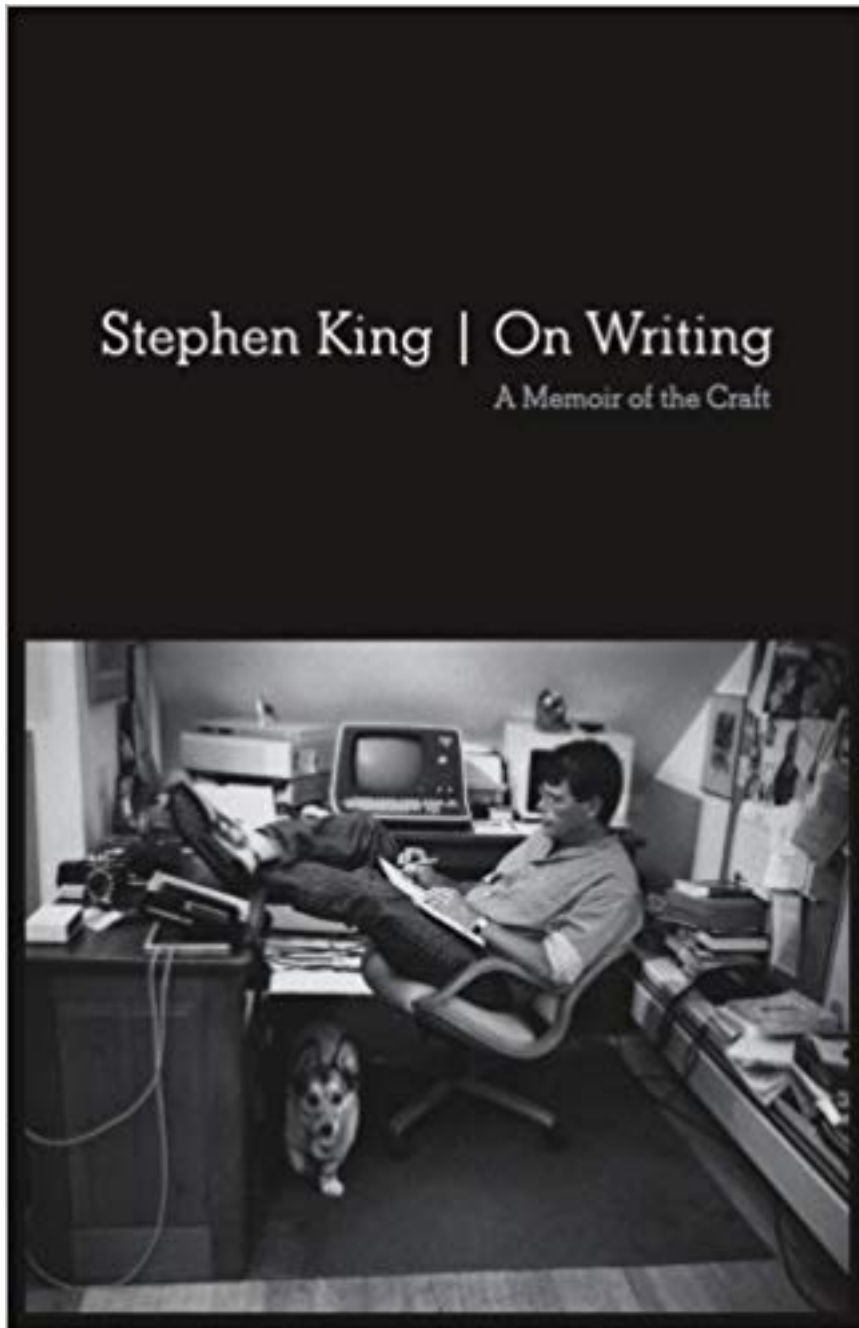


#101: On Writing

#books/date/2019/09

#books/type/non-fiction

#books/rating/★★★★



Overview

I don't believe writers can be made, either by circumstances or by self-will. 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 and storytellers, and that those

talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

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, and it's not church. But it's *writing*, damn it, not washing the car or putting on 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 and do something else.

Wash the car, maybe.

You know Stephen King, right? The horror guy. Clowns, Carrie, demonic pets. Well turns out the dude can really write.

Despite (or rather in addition to) dozens of movie covers that occupied my childhood nightmares, Stephen King is truly a master of his craft and his On Writing is a testament to that. Part memoir and part writing manual, it succeeds at both telling some great stories from his early life and career, and teaching one what they must do to move from being merely a competent writer to a great one.

I wish I wrote more (who doesn't), but maybe this is the kick I need to get started.

"You can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will. Writing is magic, as much as the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up."

Book Notes

CV

- "I don't believe writers can be made, either by circumstances or by self-will. 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 and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time." (pg. 18)
- "Good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky...Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up." (pg. 37)
- On thinking your life isn't going as planned...

- "I'd think *This isn't the way our lives are supposed to be going*. Then I'd think *Half the world has the same idea*" (pg. 70)
- His first major paperback deal for *Carrie* was worth \$400,000 (\$200k was his). Was making around \$7,500 a year as a teacher at the time. (pg 86)
- "The idea that creative endeavor and mind-altering substances are entwined is one of the great pop-intellectual myths of our time...Any claims that the drugs and alcohol are necessary to dull a finer sensibility are just the usual self-serving bullshit." (pg. 98)
- "**Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around.**" (pg. 101)

WHAT WRITING IS

- "Let me say it again: **you must not come lightly to the blank page.**" (pg. 106)
 - "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, and it's not church. But it's *writing*, damn it, not washing the car or putting on 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 and do something else. Wash the car, maybe."

TOOLBOX

- Uncle Oren on why he carries his big heavy toolbox everywhere...
 - "I didn't know what else I might find to do once I got over here, did I? It's best to have your tools with you. If you don't you're apt to find something you didn't expect and get discouraged." (pg. 114)
- Vocabulary
 - "Common tools go on top. The commonest of all, the bread of writing, is vocabulary." (pg. 114)
 - "I believe that Blood Meridian is another [fine novel], although there are great whacks of it that I don't fully understand. What of that? I can't decipher the words to many of the popular songs I love either." (pg. 116)
 - "One of the really bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because you're maybe a little bit ashamed of your short ones. This is like dressing up a household pet in evening clothes. The pet is embarrassed and the person who committed this act of premeditated cuteness should be even more embarrassed." (pg. 117)
- Passive Voice
 - "You should avoid the passive tense...I think timid writers like [passive verbs] for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe."
 - "I think unsure writers also feel the passive voice somehow lends their work authority, perhaps even a quality of majesty." (pg. 123)

- Adverbs
 - “The adverb is not your friend.” (pg. 124)
 - “I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops.” (pg. 125)
- On Fear
 - “I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one’s own pleasure, that fear may be mild—timidity is the word I’ve used here. If however one is working under a deadline...that fear may be intense.” (pg. 127)
 - “Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation. Affectation itself, beginning with the need to define some sorts of writing as ‘good’ and other sorts as ‘bad’, is fearful behavior. Good writing is also about making good choices when it comes to picking the tools you plan to work with.” (pg. 128)
- Paragraphs
 - “In expository prose, paragraphs can (and should) be neat and utilitarian.” (pg. 130)
 - “Writing is refined thinking.” (pg. 131)
 - “I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing—the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words.” (pg. 134)
 - “You must learn to use it well if you are to write well. What this means is lots of practice; you have to learn the beat.” (pg. 135)
 - “At its most basic we are only discussing a learned skill, but do we not agree that sometimes the most basic skills can create things far beyond our expectations.” (pg. 137)

ON WRITING

- “I am approaching the heart of this book with two theses, both simple. The first is that good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, the elements of style) and then filling the third level of your toolbox with the write instruments. The second is that while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, **it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.**” (pg. 142)
- On Reading
 - “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut.” (pg. 145)
 - “You have to read widely, constantly refining (and redefining) your own work as you

do so. It's hard for me to believe that people who read very little (or not at all in some cases) should presume to write and expect people to like what they have written."

- "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that."
- "Reading is the creative center of the writer's life." (pg. 147)
- "Constant reading will pull you into a place (a mind-set, if you like the phrase) where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness...The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor." (pg. 150)
- "I like to get ten pages a day, which amounts to 2,000 words. That's 180,000 words over a three-month span, a goodish length for a book." (pg. 154)
- "Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story. Good description is a learned skill, one of the prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot." (pg. 173)
- Storytelling
 - "Practice is invaluable and honesty is indispensable. Skills in description, dialogue, and character development all boil down to seeing or hearing clearly and then transcribing what you hear with equal clarity." (pg. 195)
- "2nd Draft = 1st Draft - 10%" (pg. 222)

ON LIVING: A POSTSCRIPT

- "Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life as well. It's about getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy." (pg. 269)
- On Writing...
 - "You can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will. Writing is magic, as much as the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up." (pg. 270)