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On Writing

By

Stephen King

—A Memoir of the Craft—

Scribner



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An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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This Scribner trade paperback edition, June 2020

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DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBING
Set in Garamond No. 3

Manufactured in Canada

11 13 15 16 14 12

Library of Congress Control Number: 00030105

ISBN 978-1-4391-9363-1
ISBN 978-1-9821-5937-5 (pbk)
ISBN 978-0-7432-1153-6 (ebook)

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Owen King's essay "Recording Audiobooks for My Dad, Stephen King" first appeared in the *New Yorker* on June 16, 2018. The conversation between Stephen King and Joe Hill was hosted by Porter Square Books at the Somerville Theatre in Somerville, MA, on October 20, 2019.

Honesty's the best policy.

—Miguel de Cervantes

Liars prosper.

—Anonymous

ences as a boy and a man, out of my roles as a husband, a father, a writer, and a lover. They are questions that occupy my mind when I turn out the lights for the night and I'm alone with myself, looking up into the darkness with one hand tucked beneath the pillow.

You undoubtedly have your own thoughts, interests, and concerns, and they have arisen, as mine have, from your experiences and adventures as a human being. Some are likely similar to those I've mentioned above and some are likely very different, but you have them, and you should use them in your work. That's not all those ideas are there for, perhaps, but surely it's one of the things they are good for.

I should close this little sermonette with a word of warning—starting with the questions and thematic concerns is a recipe for bad fiction. Good fiction always begins with story and progresses to theme; it almost never begins with theme and progresses to story. The only possible exceptions to this rule that I can think of are allegories like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (and I have a sneaking suspicion that with *Animal Farm* the story idea may indeed have come first; if I see Orwell in the afterlife, I mean to ask him).

But once your basic story is on paper, you need to think about what it means and enrich your following drafts with your conclusions. To do less is to rob your work (and eventually your readers) of the vision that makes each tale you write uniquely your own.

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So far, so good. Now let's talk about revising the work—how much and how many drafts? For me the answer has always

been two drafts and a polish (with the advent of word-processing technology, my polishes have become closer to a third draft).

You should realize that I'm only talking about my own personal mode of writing here; in actual practice, rewriting varies greatly from writer to writer. Kurt Vonnegut, for example, rewrote each page of his novels until he got them exactly the way he wanted them. The result was days when he might only manage a page or two of finished copy (and the wastebasket would be full of crumpled, rejected page seventy-ones and seventy-twos), but when the manuscript was finished, the *book* was finished, by gum. You could set it in type. Yet I think certain things hold true for most writers, and those are the ones I want to talk about now. If you've been writing awhile, you won't need me to help you much with this part; you'll have your own established routine. If you're a beginner, though, let me urge that you take your story through at least two drafts; the one you do with the study door closed and the one you do with it open.

With the door shut, downloading what's in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can and still remain comfortable. Writing fiction, especially a long work of fiction, can be a difficult, lonely job; it's like crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a bathtub. There's plenty of opportunity for self-doubt. If I write rapidly, putting down my story exactly as it comes into my mind, only looking back to check the names of my characters and the relevant parts of their back stories, I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and at the same time outrun the self-doubt that's always waiting to settle in.

This first draft—the All-Story Draft—should be written with no help (or interference) from anyone else. There may

come a point when you want to show what you're doing to a close friend (very often the close friend you think of first is the one who shares your bed), either because you're proud of what you're doing or because you're doubtful about it. My best advice is to resist this impulse. Keep the pressure on; don't lower it by exposing what you've written to the doubt, the praise, or even the well-meaning questions of someone from the Outside World. Let your hope of success (and your fear of failure) carry you on, difficult as that can be. There'll be time to show off what you've done when you finish . . . but even after finishing I think you must be cautious and give yourself a chance to think while the story is still like a field of freshly fallen snow, absent of any tracks save your own.

The great thing about writing with the door shut is that you find yourself forced to concentrate on story to the exclusion of practically everything else. No one can ask you "What were you trying to express with Garfield's dying words?" or "What's the significance of the green dress?" You may not have been trying to express *anything* with Garfield's dying words, and Maura could be wearing green only because that's what you saw when she came into sight in your mind's eye. On the other hand, perhaps those things *do* mean something (or will, when you get a chance to look at the forest instead of the trees). Either way, the first draft is the wrong place to think about it.

Here's something else—if no one says to you, "Oh Sam (or Amy)! This is *wonderful!*," you are a lot less apt to slack off or to start concentrating on the wrong thing . . . *being wonderful*, for instance, instead of *telling the goddam story*.

Now let's say you've finished your first draft. Congratulations! Good job! Have a glass of champagne, send out for pizza, do whatever it is you do when you've got something to

celebrate. If you have someone who has been impatiently waiting to read your novel—a spouse, let's say, someone who has perhaps been working nine to five and helping to pay the bills while you chase your dream—then this is the time to give up the goods . . . if, that is, your first reader or readers will promise not to talk to you about the book until *you* are ready to talk to *them* about it.

This may sound a little high-handed, but it's really not. You've done a lot of work and you need a period of time (how much or how little depends on the individual writer) to rest. Your mind and imagination—two things which are related, but not really the same—have to recycle themselves, at least in regard to this one particular work. My advice is that you take a couple of days off—go fishing, go kayaking, do a jigsaw puzzle—and then go to work on something else. Something shorter, preferably, and something that's a complete change of direction and pace from your newly finished book. (I wrote some pretty good novellas, "The Body" and "Apt Pupil" among them, between drafts of longer works like *The Dead Zone* and *The Dark Half*.)

How long you let your book rest—sort of like bread dough between kneadings—is entirely up to you, but I think it should be a minimum of six weeks. During this time your manuscript will be safely shut away in a desk drawer, aging and (one hopes) mellowing. Your thoughts will turn to it frequently, and you'll likely be tempted a dozen times or more to take it out, if only to re-read some passage that seems particularly fine in your memory, something you'd like to go back to so you can re-experience what a really excellent writer you are.

Resist temptation. If you don't, you'll very likely decide you didn't do as well on that passage as you thought and

you'd better retread it on the spot. This is bad. The only thing worse would be for you to decide the passage is even *better* than you remembered—why not drop everything and read the whole book over right then? Get back to work on it! Hell, you're ready! You're fuckin' Shakespeare!

You're not, though, and you're not ready to go back to the old project until you've gotten so involved in a new one (or re-involved in your day-to-day life) that you've almost forgotten the unreal estate that took up three hours of your every morning or afternoon for a period of three or five or seven months.

When you come to the correct evening (which you well may have marked on your office calendar), take your manuscript out of the drawer. If it looks like an alien relic bought at a junk-shop or yard sale where you can hardly remember stopping, you're ready. Sit down with your door shut (you'll be opening it to the world soon enough), a pencil in your hand, and a legal pad by your side. Then read your manuscript over.

Do it all in one sitting, if that's possible (it won't be, of course, if your book is a four- or five-hundred-pager). Make all the notes you want, but concentrate on the mundane housekeeping jobs, like fixing misspellings and picking up inconsistencies. There'll be plenty; only God gets it right the first time and only a slob says, "Oh well, let it go, that's what copyeditors are for."

If you've never done it before, you'll find reading your book over after a six-week layoff to be a strange, often exhilarating experience. It's yours, you'll recognize it as yours, even be able to remember what tune was on the stereo when you wrote certain lines, and yet it will also be like reading the work of someone else, a soul-twin, perhaps. This is the way it

should be, the reason you waited. It's always easier to kill someone else's darlings than it is to kill your own.

With six weeks' worth of recuperation time, you'll also be able to see any glaring holes in the plot or character development. I'm talking about holes big enough to drive a truck through. It's amazing how some of these things can elude the writer while he or she is occupied with the daily work of composition. And listen—if you spot a few of these big holes, you are *forbidden* to feel depressed about them or to beat up on yourself. Screw-ups happen to the best of us. There's a story that the architect of the Flatiron Building committed suicide when he realized, just before the ribbon-cutting ceremony, that he had neglected to put any men's rooms in his prototypical skyscraper. Probably not true, but remember this: someone *really did* design the *Titanic* and then label it unsinkable.

For me, the most glaring errors I find on the re-read have to do with character motivation (related to character development but not quite the same). I'll smack myself upside the head with the heel of my palm, then grab my legal pad and write something like p. 91: **Sandy Hunter filches a buck from Shirley's stash in the dispatch office. Why? God's sake, Sandy would NEVER do anything like this!** I also mark the page in the manuscript with a big *!* symbol, meaning that cuts and/or changes are needed on this page, and reminding myself to check my notes for the exact details if I don't remember them.

I love this part of the process (well, I love *all* the parts of the process, but this one is especially nice) because I'm rediscovering my own book, and usually liking it. That changes. By the time a book is actually in print, I've been over it a dozen times or more, can quote whole passages, and only

wish the damned old smelly thing would go away. That's later, though; the first read-through is usually pretty fine.

During that reading, the top part of my mind is concentrating on story and toolbox concerns: knocking out pronouns with unclear antecedents (I hate and mistrust pronouns, every one of them as slippery as a fly-by-night personal-injury lawyer), adding clarifying phrases where they seem necessary, and of course, deleting all the adverbs I can bear to part with (never all of them; never enough).

Underneath, however, I'm asking myself the Big Questions. The biggest: Is this story coherent? And if it is, what will turn coherence into a song? What are the recurring elements? Do they entwine and make a theme? I'm asking myself What's it all about, Stevie, in other words, and what I can do to make those underlying concerns even clearer. What I want most of all is *resonance*, something that will linger for a little while in Constant Reader's mind (and heart) after he or she has closed the book and put it up on the shelf. I'm looking for ways to do that without spoon-feeding the reader or selling my birthright for a plot of message. Take all those messages and those morals and stick em where the sun don't shine, all right? I want resonance. Most of all, *I'm looking for what I meant*, because in the second draft I'll want to add scenes and incidents that reinforce that meaning. I'll also want to delete stuff that goes in other directions. There's apt to be a lot of that stuff, especially near the beginning of a story, when I have a tendency to flail. All that thrashing around has to go if I am to achieve anything like a unified effect. When I've finished reading and making all my little anal-retentive revisions, it's time to open the door and show what I've written to four or five close friends who have indicated a willingness to look.

Someone—I can't remember who, for the life of me—once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person. As it happens, I believe this. I think that every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition of a story, the writer is thinking, "I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads *this* part?" For me that first reader is my wife, Tabitha.

She has always been an extremely sympathetic and supportive first reader. Her positive reaction to difficult books like *Bag of Bones* (my first novel with a new publisher after twenty good years with Viking that came to an end in a stupid squabble about money) and relatively controversial ones like *Gerald's Game* meant the world to me. But she's also unflinching when she sees something she thinks is wrong. When she does, she lets me know loud and clear.

In her role as critic and first reader, Tabby often makes me think of a story I read about Alfred Hitchcock's wife, Alma Reville. Ms. Reville was the equivalent of Hitch's first reader, a sharp-eyed critic who was totally unimpressed with the suspense-master's growing reputation as an *auteur*. Lucky for him. Hitch say he want to fly, Alma say, "First eat your eggs."

Not long after finishing *Psycho*, Hitchcock screened it for a few friends. They raved about it, declaring it to be a suspense masterpiece. Alma was quiet until they'd all had their say, then spoke very firmly: "You can't send it out like that."

There was a thunderstruck silence, except for Hitchcock himself, who only asked why not. "Because," his wife responded, "Janet Leigh swallows when she's supposed to be dead." It was true. Hitchcock didn't argue any more than I do when Tabby points out one of my lapses. She and I may argue about many aspects of a book, and there have been times when I've gone against her judgment on subjective matters,

but when she catches me in a goof, I know it, and thank God I've got someone around who'll tell me my fly's unzipped before I go out in public that way.

In addition to Tabby's first read, I usually send manuscripts to between four and eight other people who have critiqued my stories over the years. Many writing texts caution against asking friends to read your stuff, suggesting you're not apt to get a very unbiased opinion from folks who've eaten dinner at your house and sent their kids over to play with your kids in your backyard. It's unfair, according to this view, to put a pal in such a position. What happens if he/she feels he/she has to say, "I'm sorry, good buddy, you've written some great yarns in the past but this one sucks like a vacuum cleaner"?

The idea has some validity, but I don't think an unbiased opinion is exactly what I'm looking for. And I believe that most people smart enough to read a novel are also tactful enough to find a gentler mode of expression than "This sucks." (Although most of us know that "I think this has a few problems" actually means "This sucks," don't we?) Besides, if you really did write a stinker—it happens; as the author of *Maximum Overdrive* I'm qualified to say so—wouldn't you rather hear the news from a friend while the entire edition consists of a half-dozen Xerox copies?

When you give out six or eight copies of a book, you get back six or eight highly subjective opinions about what's good and what's bad in it. If all your readers think you did a pretty good job, you probably did. This sort of unanimity does happen, but it's rare, even with friends. More likely, they'll think that some parts are good and some parts are . . . well, not so good. Some will feel Character A works but Character B is far-fetched. If others feel that Character B is believable but Character A is overdrawn, it's a wash. You can safely

relax and leave things the way they are (in baseball, tie goes to the runner; for novelists, it goes to the writer). If some people love your ending and others hate it, same deal—it's a wash, and tie goes to the writer.

Some first readers specialize in pointing out factual errors, which are the easiest to deal with. One of my first-reader smart guys, the late Mac McCutcheon, a wonderful high school English teacher, knew a lot about guns. If I had a character totting a Winchester .330, Mac might jot in the margin that Winchester didn't make that caliber but Remington did. In such cases you've got two for the price of one—the error and the fix. It's a good deal, because you come off looking like you're an expert and your first reader will feel flattered to have been of help. And the best catch Mac ever made for me had nothing to do with guns. One day while reading a piece of a manuscript in the teachers' room, he burst out laughing—laughed so hard, in fact, that tears went rolling down his bearded cheeks. Because the story in question, *Salem's Lot*, had not been intended as a laff riot, I asked him what he had found. I had written a line that went something like this: **Although deer season doesn't start until November in Maine, the fields of October are often alive with gunshots; the locals are shooting as many peasants as they think their families will eat.** A copyeditor would no doubt have picked up the mistake, but Mac spared me that embarrassment.

Subjective evaluations are, as I say, a little harder to deal with, but listen: if everyone who reads your book says you have a problem (Connie comes back to her husband too easily, Hal's cheating on the big exam seems unrealistic given what we know about him, the novel's conclusion seems abrupt and arbitrary), you've got a problem and you better do something about it.

Plenty of writers resist this idea. They feel that revising a story according to the likes and dislikes of an audience is somehow akin to prostitution. If you really feel that way, I won't try to change your mind. You'll save on charges at Copy Cop, too, because you won't have to show anyone your story in the first place. In fact (he said snottily), if you *really* feel that way, why bother to publish at all? Just finish your books and then pop them in a safe-deposit box, as J. D. Salinger is reputed to have been doing in his later years.

And yes, I can relate, at least a bit, to that sort of resentment. In the film business, where I have had a quasi-professional life, first-draft showings are called "test screenings." These have become standard practice in the industry, and they drive most filmmakers absolutely bugshit. Maybe they should. The studio shells out somewhere between fifteen and a hundred million dollars to make a film, then asks the director to recut it based on the opinions of a Santa Barbara multiplex audience composed of hairdressers, meter maids, shoe-store clerks, and out-of-work pizza-delivery guys. And the worst, most maddening thing about it? If you get the demographic right, test screenings seem to work.

I'd hate to see novels revised on the basis of test audiences—a lot of good books would never see the light of day if it was done that way—but come on, we're talking about half a dozen people you know and respect. If you ask the right ones (and if they agree to read your book), they can tell you a lot.

Do all opinions weigh the same? Not for me. In the end I listen most closely to Tabby, because she's the one I write for, the one I want to wow. If you're writing primarily for one person besides yourself, I'd advise you to pay very close attention to that person's opinion (I know one fellow who says he writes mostly for someone who's been dead fifteen

years, but the majority of us aren't in that position). And if what you hear makes sense, then make the changes. You can't let the whole world into your story, but you can let in the ones that matter the most. And you should.

Call that one person you write for Ideal Reader. He or she is going to be in your writing room all the time: in the flesh once you open the door and let the world back in to shine on the bubble of your dream, in spirit during the sometimes troubling and often exhilarating days of the first draft, when the door is closed. And you know what? You'll find yourself bending the story even before Ideal Reader glimpses so much as the first sentence. I.R. will help you get outside yourself a little, to actually read your work in progress as an audience would while you're still working. This is perhaps the best way of all to make sure you stick to story, a way of playing to the audience even while there's no audience there and you're totally in charge.

When I write a scene that strikes me as funny (like the pie-eating contest in "The Body" or the execution rehearsal in *The Green Mile*), I am also imagining my I.R. finding it funny. I love it when Tabby laughs out of control—she puts her hands up as if to say *I surrender* and these big tears go rolling down her cheeks. I love it, that's all, fucking adore it, and when I get hold of something with that potential, I twist it as hard as I can. During the actual writing of such a scene (door closed), the thought of making her laugh—or cry—is in the back of my mind. During the rewrite (door open), the question—*is it funny enough yet? scary enough?*—is right up front. I try to watch her when she gets to a particular scene, hoping for at least a smile or—jackpot, baby!—that big belly-laugh with the hands up, waving in the air.

This isn't always easy on her. I gave her the manuscript of

my novella *Hearts in Atlantis* while we were in North Carolina, where we'd gone to see a Cleveland Rockers-Charlotte Sting WNBA game. We drove north to Virginia the following day, and it was during this drive that Tabby read my story. There are some funny parts in it—at least I thought so—and I kept peeking over at her to see if she was chuckling (or at least smiling). I didn't think she'd notice, but of course she did. On my eighth or ninth peek (I guess it *could* have been my fifteenth), she looked up and snapped: "Pay attention to your driving before you crack us up, will you? Stop being so goddam *needy*!"

I paid attention to my driving and stopped sneaking peeks (well . . . almost). About five minutes later, I heard a snort of laughter from my right. Just a little one, but it was enough for me. The truth is that most writers *are* needy. Especially between the first draft and the second, when the study door swings open and the light of the world shines in.

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Ideal Reader is also the best way for you to gauge whether or not your story is paced correctly and if you've handled the back story in satisfactory fashion.

Pace is the speed at which your narrative unfolds. There is a kind of unspoken (hence undefended and unexamined) belief in publishing circles that the most commercially successful stories and novels are fast-paced. I guess the underlying thought is that people have so many things to do today, and are so easily distracted from the printed word, that you'll lose them unless you become a kind of short-order cook, serving up sizzling burgers, fries, and eggs over easy just as fast as you can.

Like so many unexamined beliefs in the publishing business, this idea is largely bullshit . . . which is why, when books like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* or Charles Frasier's *Cold Mountain* suddenly break out of the pack and climb the best-seller lists, publishers and editors are astonished. I suspect that most of them ascribe these books' unexpected success to unpredictable and deplorable lapses into good taste on the part of the reading public.

Not that there's anything wrong with rapidly paced novels. Some pretty good writers—Nelson DeMille, Wilbur Smith, and Sue Grafton, to name just three—have made millions writing them. But you can overdo the speed thing. Move too fast and you risk leaving the reader behind, either by confusing or by wearing him/her out. And for myself, I like a slower pace and a bigger, higher build. The leisurely luxury-liner experience of a long, absorbing novel like *The Far Pavilions* or *A Suitable Boy* has been one of the form's chief attractions since the first examples—endless, multipart epistolary tales like *Clarissa*. I believe each story should be allowed to unfold at its own pace, and that pace is not always double time. Nevertheless, you need to beware—if you slow the pace down too much, even the most patient reader is apt to grow restive.

The best way to find the happy medium? Ideal Reader, of course. Try to imagine whether he or she will be bored by a certain scene—if you know the tastes of your I.R. even half as well as I know the tastes of mine, that shouldn't be too hard. Is I.R. going to feel there's too much pointless talk in this place or that? That you've underexplained a certain situation . . . or overexplained it, which is one of my chronic failings? That you forgot to resolve some important plot point? Forgot an entire *character*, as Raymond Chandler once did? (When asked about the murdered chauffeur in *The Big Sleep*,