



The acclaimed
New York Times
bestseller

STEPHEN KING

— A MEMOIR OF THE CRAFT —

On Writing

On Writing

By

Stephen King

— A Memoir of the Craft —



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

0523003

On Writing

The sale of this book without its cover is unauthorized. If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that it was reported to the publisher as "unsold and destroyed." Neither the author nor the publisher has received payment for the sale of this "stripped book."



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2000 by Stephen King

Originally published in hardcover in 2000 by Scribner

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce
this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.
For information address Scribner, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 0-7434-2104-3

Pocket Books Export Edition Printing June 2001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.

0523003

New York London Toronto

PRAISE FOR STEPHEN KING AND *ON WRITING: A Memoir of the Craft*

"[An] elegant volume. . . . *ON WRITING* opens with a mini-memoir so finely seasoned that it whets your appetite for a full-scale autobiography."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Wonderful moments."

—*USA Today*

"Monstrous as it was, [King's being struck by a car] turned *ON WRITING* into a much stronger, more meaningful book than it might have been. Halfway through this project, when he was hurt, Mr. King incorporated his revivifying return to work into this book's narrative in ways that will make readers realize just how vital it has been for him. And the accident is eloquently described here, as a sterling illustration of all the writing guidelines that have come before. For once, less is more in Mr. King's storytelling, and the horror needs no help from his imagination."

—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

"An unexpected gift to writers and readers."

—*Sunday Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA)

"Remarkable and revealing. . . . Memoir, style manual, autobiography—the inspiring *ON WRITING* seems almost unclassifiable."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“King imbues each snapshot with wisdom and advice for writers.”

—*Book magazine*

“King’s undeniably successful career lends a credibility to this volume that other books on writing frequently lack.”

—*Time Out New York*

“It is riveting, thanks to King’s customary flair for the vernacular and conversational tone, and to the fact that he flanks his advice with two memoirs. . . . Good advice and a good, ordinary life, relayed in a spunky, vivid prose . . . not at all the usual writer’s guide. King could write a phone book and make it not only a bestseller but also gripping reading.”

—*Booklist*

“Exerts a potent fascination and embodies important lessons and truths. . . . [A] triumphant vindication of the popular writer, including the genre author, as a *writer*. King refuses to draw, and makes a strong case for the abolition of, the usual critical lines between Carver and Chandler, Greene and Grisham, DeLillo and Dickens.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Generous, lucid, and passionate, King . . . offers lessons and encouragement to the beginning writer, along with a warts-and-all account of a less-than-carefree life. . . . A useful book for any young writer, and a must for fans, this is unmistakably King: friendly, sharply perceptive, cheerfully vulgar, sometimes adolescent in his humor, sometimes impatient with fools, but always sincere in his love of language and writing."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"We who climb aboard for this ride with the master spend a few pleasant hours under the impression that we know what it's like to think like Stephen King. Recommended for anyone who wants to write and everyone who loves to read."

—*Library Journal*

"King isn't just a writer, he's a true teacher."

—Amazon.com

"Stephen King talks about writing in a way that provides, for the novice and for those of us engaged already in the work, such a clear strong view of what story is and where it comes from that you find yourself catching fire once again with the whole mysterious process. With great generosity, Stephen King opens doors rather than slam them shut. It is possible, he tells us all, you can do this thing. *ON WRITING* is one of the most inspirational and useful books about writing I've ever read."

—Abigail Thomas, author of *Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life* and teacher of creative writing in the MFA program at the New School, New York

For orders other than by individual consumers, Pocket Books grants a discount on the purchase of **10 or more** copies of single titles for special markets or premium use. For further details, please write to the Vice President of Special Markets, Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10020-1586.

For information on how individual consumers can place orders, please write to Mail Order Department, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 100 Front Street, Riverside, NJ 08075.

★ DAVE'S RAG ★★

To Start the New Year Right: *Here you are.*
BIGGEST STORM OF YEAR
HITS MAINE

December 29, 1959
 For two days a hard time. Southern Maine got about 8 inches accompanied the storm 6-foot drifts. Shh were on the roads. And this probably next year in the snow weather before of snow at

Most of the Durham, including week vacation Brunswick school two weeks and Dave is enjoy them have a New Flaws

Mr. Christmas Mr. & joyed after

and from

As I leaned out the window through which he had climbed onto the ledge, he started, and looked down, down, down. An excited crowd gathered, but to me they looked like pinheads. Stepps regained his balance, and then saw me. He cackled. "Hello, Dr. Castle. I see you've come to see me jump." "Why do you want to jump?" "Why?" Robert said. "Why did I asked. Although we had been

4 Story 1 3 Parts by Steve K1 8
JUMPER
 Part 1

My name is Jeff Davis. I live and work in the city of New York. I'm a Police Counselor, or in simple terms, I try to determine what's wrong with people who try to do somebody else--or themselves--in.

Robert Stepps was a compulsive jumper. He had tried to jump off a building six times. He was committed, but showed ingenious escape abilities. Misguided genius.

He had escaped again, and was on a ledge above the street. 15 stories up the Chrysler Building, to be exact. Since I had been treating him, they took me there to try to coax him down.

As I leaned out the window through which he had climbed onto the ledge, he started, and looked down, down, down. An excited crowd gathered, but to me they looked like pinheads. Stepps regained his balance, and then saw me. He cackled. "Hello, Dr. Castle. I see you've come to see me jump." "Why do you want to jump?" "Why?" Robert said. "Why did I asked. Although we had been

A few Year or will come Would you please e letters once about your activities. these letters come.

giving Maine a while northerly hour winds causing people am.

lived. a, as was the Rain, ashman as also ring the mailman's

Permissions

There Is a Mountain words and music by Donovan Leitch. Copyright © 1967 by Donovan (Music) Ltd. Administered by Peer International Corporation. Copyright renewed. International copyright secured. Used by permission. All rights reserved. *Granpa Was a Carpenter* by John Prine © Walden Music, Inc. (ASCAP). All rights administered by WB Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Warner Bros. Publications U.S. Inc., Miami, FL 33014.

Author's Note

Unless otherwise attributed, all prose examples,
both good and evil,
were composed by the author.

Honesty is the best policy.

—Miguel de Cervantes

Liars prosper.

—Anonymous

First Foreword

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

The group was intended as a one-shot deal—we would play two shows at the American Booksellers Convention, get a few laughs, recapture our misspent youth for three or four 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, and with a couple of "ringer" musicians on sax and 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 Band prices, but maybe what the oldtimers call "roadhouse

Stephen King

money." We took the group on tour, wrote a book about it (my wife took the photos and danced whenever the spirit took her, which was quite often), and continue to play now and then, sometimes as The Remainders, sometimes as Raymond Burr's Legs. The personnel comes and goes—columnist Mitch Albom has replaced Barbara on keyboards, and Al doesn't play with the group anymore 'cause he and Kathi don't get along—but the core has remained Kathi, Amy, Ridley, Dave, Mitch Albom, and me . . . plus Josh Kelly on drums and Erasmo Paolo on sax.

We do it for the music, but we also do it for the companionship. We like each other, and 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, and we never ask one another where we get our ideas; we know we don't know.

One night while we were eating Chinese before a gig in Miami Beach, I asked Amy if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-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 and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, and 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?

On Writing

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—and those writers—on the market already, thanks.

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

Second 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.

One notable exception to the bullshit rule is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. (Of course it's short; at eighty-five 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.

Third Foreword

One 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 and 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

On Writing