

## The Ethics of Good Writing

Stephen King is a prolific author; his notable works are cherished by generations of fiction readers, both young and old. Like many notable authors, he has written a memoir, but unlike most memoirs, *On Writing* gives readers a more intimate look at the craft, rather than the man behind it. *On Writing* is a memoir that outlines the life of Stephen King and tells readers both what inspired him to write, and how he did so throughout his career. More importantly, however, it tells readers the most crucial things in a writer's life that can make them truly successful. Stephen King's, *On Writing*, gives aspiring writers a roadmap on the fundamentals of quality writing using his own life and career experiences as support.

*On Writing* is split into five parts: the summary of some momentous life events that led him to writing, "Curriculum Vitae"; a short description of the essential tools of the trade, "Toolbox"; the main text specifically addressing writing, "On Writing"; the appreciative account of King's accident and return to writing, "On Living: A Postscript"; and a short example of editing followed by a recommended booklist, "And Furthermore, Parts I and II". The main purpose of *On Writing* is to tell readers "how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done" (9). King provides a simplistic memoir, followed by a much more detailed series of tips that speaks directly to the craft of writing. According to King, most books about writing are overstuffed with unnecessary or incorrect information that does not address most of the realistic ways in which to write (11). *On Writing* has a clear goal, and is written in a fashion that speaks to readers and their desire to write rather than offer dry advice or rigid guidelines.

There are three watershed moments of King's life that are mentioned in the first section of *On Writing*. The first is his initial interest in writing. While having to stay home a significant amount of time his first grade year due to an escalation of Measles, King read and copied down various comics. His mother encouraged him to write his own stories after seeing the copied ones (28). After completing four short stories, his mother purchased them for twenty-five cents apiece: "She said it was good enough to be in a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier" (29). This propelled King into a childhood filled with perfecting his stories and sending them from magazine to magazine, looking for a way to get published. The second moment was his first major success in publishing. After King had been married and while he was teaching English in Hampden, Maine, he received a message of congratulations from Doubleday publishing company for his short book, *Carrie* (83). From then on, King picked up speed as an author and began his climb to fame and recognition in the world of fiction. King struggled with substance and alcohol abuse despite his massively successful career in writing (96), but the most important obstacle was when he was struck by a distracted driver in 1999 (249). The near-fatal accident pushed him from his craft for five weeks, and by the time he had returned to writing, he had figured out that "Writing isn't about making money... In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well" (269). The inspiration to write, the spark of success that lit up the fires of his career, and the near-death experience that gave King appreciation for life and writing are the core experiences that formed the prolific author known globally.

The ethics of writing are what every writer should and should not do when it comes to accurately and succinctly plying their trade. According to King, a writer that wants to work at the

best of their abilities should possess a figurative toolbox to use when on the job (114). The tools include: vocabulary, grammar, elements of style and form, and even the most basic structure of sentences that build the metaphorical “houses” of one’s stories (136). There are specific stylistic and personal preferences that King mentions in *On Writing*, for instance, that verbs should be used in the active tense over the passive tense (122), and that the adverb is “not your friend” (124). A writer creates stories of various settings, characters, seriousness, reality, and relevance using the aforementioned tools in conjunction with the most important trait a writer can have; honesty. Before the first forward in the memoir, there is a quote by sixteenth-century writer Miguel de Cervantes, “Honesty’s the best policy” (5). The meaning of this quote works its way throughout the memoir’s sections about writing.

Honesty is what writers need in order to write their stories in a way that conveys characters and events to readers convincingly. King states that writers are able to write about “Anything at all... *as long as you tell the truth*” (158). By implementing the truth as much as possible into each story, a writer can make certain that what they create is “*impossible not to believe*” (162). With the truth in mind, writers are given the freedom to write about anything they please, and, if they use the tools at their disposal properly, they will come away from the experience fulfilled: “Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. Drink and be filled up” (270). King conveys that he writes for the sake of joy in writing, not for money or fame, and he uses the very same principles of honesty and writing ethics in his own stories as he promotes in *On Writing*.

Honesty is a vital part of writing, regardless of one’s opinion on Stephen King and his suggestions. In an article in *The Journal of Higher Education*, honesty is the critical component

missing from a freshman writing program at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City (Christman 460). The article analyses the class in conjunction with the opinions of authors like John Fischer and F.L. Lucas, saying, "In literature, as in life, one of the fundamentals is to find, and be, one's true self" (Christman 460). The main focus of the article, while it addresses issues like clichés and mismatched tenses to a minor degree, is the paramount quality that honesty is to writing. Another article, "On Awareness and Attitude in Writers and Writing," addresses the importance of a writer being aware of the appeal, climate, and creative nature of the the environment they are publishing in, as well as the necessity of having a reasonable attachment to their work. The article also places emphasis on honesty, "The qualities I look for in writing include honesty and integrity, meaning that the writer has not set out to deceive or mislead the reader" (Woodhouse 56). Both articles support the main ethical pillar of writing established in *On Writing*; all three establish honesty as a necessary trait in quality writing and proficient writers.

Stephen King brings both serious life advice and serious writing advice to readers through his memoir on the craft, *On Writing*. The main quality found in good writing is honesty, a conclusion supported by other academic sources as well as being clearly established in King's memoir. King uses his history with regards to writing as well as his extensive experience in the field to contribute further to the literary community with *On Writing*, providing an ethical guide to creating one's own worlds through honest writing.

### Works Cited

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