

Sundays with Stephen King's "On Writing"

[Scott Myers](#)

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A series featuring reflections on writing from the famed author's memoir.



Stephen King

I had not read Stephen King's memoir *On Writing* for several years when it occurred to me to do so again. While at it, why not share reflections from the renowned writer in a weekly Sunday series at Go Into The Story?

King is a prolific author. Fair to say that is an understatement. One need only glance at a roster of his [written works](#) to determine that. If any contemporary

writer has earned the right to reflect on the craft, it would be King. However, that is not the motivation he had in writing his memoir. This excerpt from the 'First Foreword' of *On Writing* explains the genesis of the book, a fateful exchange with Amy Tan, fellow writer and member of an authors' charity rock music group [The Remainders](#).

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 miss said: "No one ever asks about the language."

I owe an immediate 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?

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 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.

My intention is similar to the [Sundays with Ray Bradbury series](#): Each week as I re-read King's memoir, print notable excerpts at Go Into The Story to inspire our creativity and conversation about the craft.

Today: From the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *On Writing*, an excerpt from pp. 44–46 in which King dismisses his older brother Dave's various interests to pursue something he is truly passionate about.

I wasn't much interested in the printing process, and I wasn't interested at all in the arcana of first developing and then reproducing photographs. I didn't care about

putting Hearst shifters in cars, making cider, or seeing if a certain formula would send a plastic rocket into the stratosphere (usually they didn't even make it over the house). What I cared about most between 1958 and 1966 was movies.

As the fifties gave way to the sixties, there were only two movie theaters in the area, both in Lewiston. The Empire was the first-run house, showing Disney pictures, Bible epics, and musicals in which widescreen ensembles of well-scrubbed folks danced and sang. I went to these if I had a ride — a movie was a movie, after all — but I didn't like them very much. They were boringly wholesome. They were predictable. During *The Parent Trap*, I kept hoping Hayley Mills would run into Vic Morrow from *The Blackboard Jungle*. That would've livened things up a little, by God. I felt that one look at Vic's switchblade knife and gimlet gaze would have put Hayley's piddling domestic problems in some kind of reasonable perspective. And when I lay in bed at night under my eave, listening to the wind in the trees or the rats in the attic, it was not Debbie Reynolds as Tammy or Sandra Dee as Gidget that I dreamed of, but Yvette Vickers from *Attack of the Giant Leeches* or Luana Anders from *Dementia 13*. Never mind sweet; never mind uplifting; never mind Snow White and the Seven Goddam Dwarfs. At thirteen I wanted monsters that ate whole cities, radioactive corpses that came out of the ocean and ate surfers, and girls in black bras who looked like trailer

trash.

Horror movies, science fiction movies, movies about teenage gangs on the prowl, movies about losers on motorcycles — that was the stuff that turned my dial up to ten. The place to get all of this was not at the Empire, or the upper end of the Lisbon Street, but at the Ritz, down at the lower end, amid the pawnshops and not far from Louie's Clothing, where in 1964 I bought my first pair of Beatle boots. The distance from my house to the Ritz was fourteen miles, and I hitchhiked there almost every weekend during the eight years between 1958 and 1966, when I finally got my drivers license... unless I was sick or something, I always went. It was at the Ritz that I saw *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, with Tom Tryon; *The Haunting*, with Claire Bloom and Julie Harris; *The Wild Angels*, with Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra. I saw Olivia de Havilland put out James Caan's eyes with makeshift knives in *Lady in a Cage*, saw Joseph Cotten come back from the dead in *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, and watched with held breath (and not a little prurient interest) to see if Allison Hayes we grow all the way out of her clothes in *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman*. At the Ritz, all the finer things in life were available . . . or *might be* available, if you only sat in the third row, paid close attention, and did not blink at the wrong moment.

One takeaway from this excerpt is pretty obvious: Find the type of stories which excite you... and write those. King made that discovery early in life, relatively speaking,

during his adolescence. Horror. Science Fiction. Monsters. Corpses. *That was the stuff that turned my dial up to ten.*

A key part of this process is to expose yourself to a variety of stories. Test out all of the genres: Action, Comedy, Drama, Family, Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction, Thriller. Even if you *don't* find yourself connecting with one story space — like King did while watching “boringly wholesome” movies at the Empire Theater — that is valuable for at least two reasons: (1) You now know you have no interest in writing *that* type of thing. (2) You will have acquired some tropes which you can play around with in a genre you **do** want to write... just like King wanting to bring Vic Morrow into a Hayley Mills movie.

If you discover a genre which you **do** resonate with, immerse yourself in it. Lean into your passion for those type of stories, then read, watch, study, and analyze everything about that space. For King, that meant hitchhiking fourteen miles almost every weekend. For you, it's as simple as clicking a few buttons on your remote to dial up movies on your streaming service... or purchasing books online which are delivered to your doorstep in a day or two.

In a way, what King is talking about here echoes the sentiment expressed by Joseph Campbell about the central theme of the hero's journey and its message to each of us: *Follow your bliss.*

Find that which enlivens you... brings you joy... which you have a passion for... a talent you can develop... something you can share with the world...

Find THAT... and DO that.

As you grow older, your interests may evolve. King's fascination with monsters, corpses, horror, and science fiction features in many of his books, but he also wrote *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* and *Stand By Me*... okay, the latter **does** feature a corpse, yet at its core, it's a coming-of-age drama.

But that's down the road. Think about right now. What type of stories ignite your imagination? What genres are you drawn toward? What turns YOUR dial up to ten?

Chances are THAT is the path of your creative bliss. Follow it... and see where it takes you.

Come back next week and many weeks thereafter for more in the *Sundays with Stephen King's "On Writing"* series.

[Stephen King's website](#)

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[*On Writing: A Memoir on the Craft* by Stephen King](#)

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