

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 and Molly, a.k.a. The Thing of Evil

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. 59–60 in which King recalls the summer he spent working at the Worumbo Mills and Weaving in Lisbon Falls just before he headed off to college in the fall:

During Fourth of July week, the Mill closed. Employees with five years or more at Worumbo got the week off with pay. Those with fewer than five years were offered work on a crew that was going to clean the mill from top to bottom, including the basement, which hadn't been touched in forty or fifty years. I probably would have agreed to work on the crew — it was time and a half — but all the positions were filled long before the foreman got down to the high school kids, who'd be gone in September. When I got back to work the following week, one of the dyehouse guys told me I should've been there, it was wild. "The rats down in the basement were big as cats," he said. "Some of them, goddam if they weren't as big as *dogs*."

Rats as big as dogs! Yow!

One day late in my final semester of college, finals over and at loose ends, I recalled the dyehouse guy's story about the rats under the mill — big as cats, goddam, some as big as *dogs* — and started writing a story called "Graveyard Shift." I was only passing the time on a late spring afternoon, but two months later *Cavalier* magazine bought the story for two hundred dollars. I had sold two other stories previous to this, but they had brought in a total of just sixty-five dollars. This was three times that, and in a single stroke. It took my breath away, it did. I was rich.

Think on that for a moment. The adolescent Stephen

King working at a job he did not like. Mid-summer probably already one metaphorical step toward college even as he logged hours at the mill to make money. A passing conversation with some co-worker he barely knew. *Rats as big as dogs.*

It would have been so easy for that tiny detail to simply vanish into the ether. Instead, it lodged in King's brain, only to surface out of nowhere years later, [just as he described in the book earlier](#).

It brings to mind the advice Phoebe Ephron gave to her four daughters, each of whom became writers (Phoebe and her husband Henry were noted playwrights and screenwriters). Here is how Nora Ephron described her mother's advice from a [wonderful HBO documentary](#):

'We all grew up with this thing that my mother said to us over and over, and over and over again, which is 'Everything is copy.' You'd come home with something that you thought was the tragedy of your life — someone hadn't asked you to dance, or the hem had fallen out of your dress, or whatever you thought was the worst thing that could ever happen to a human being — and my mother would say 'Everything is copy.'

Everything. Is. Copy. Reading the first sixty pages or so of King's memoir, it's clear he has a remarkable memory. Not just for major events, but tiny moments... [an anecdote from his mother](#)... [trashy movies he'd seen as a](#)

[youth](#)... a collage of visuals and conversation roiling around in his subconscious which suddenly and with no reason emerges into his conscious mind and he goes, "Hm. That might make an interesting story."

Rats as big as dogs. That qualifies as copy!

Perhaps King is unusual in that he has such mental storehouse stuffed with bits of whimsy which could inspire stories. I don't think so. Some writers may have a heightened ability in this regard — surely, King does — but I believe we can train ourselves by simply being more **aware**. As Nora Ephron wrote:

"Writers are cannibals...They are predators. And if you are friends with them and say something funny at dinner, or if anything good happens to you, you are in big trouble."

I tell my film school students, who have been raised to be multitaskers (for better or worse): "Imagine your mind is an eight-lane highway. Each lane is thinking about something different. Sometimes your focus is Lane One, what you're supposed to be doing, but then Lane Two takes over or Lane Three drifts into your consciousness. The point is, you are capable of having multiple things going on in your mind at all times. Make Lane Eight your writer's lane. As life moves along zipping by, keep Lane Eight laser-focused on potential story ideas... lines of dialogue... images for possible scenes. Train your brain to

be a Writer's Brain. Absorb everything, but be sure to lock down and remember bits of business which can feed your creativity."

Because you **never** know when a killer idea will come your way...

Like goddamn rats the size of dogs!

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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