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STEPHEN KING

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On Writing

A MEMOIR OF THE CRAFT

On Writing

-- A Memoir of the Craft --

Stephen King

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DAVE'S RAG

To Start the New Year Right: Here you are.

BIGGEST ST... M OF YEAR

HITS MAIN...

December 29, 1959

For two days a ...

JUMPER

A Story 1 3 Parts by Steve Ki g

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 Steppes was a compulsive jumper. He had tried to jump off a building six times. He was committed, but showed ingenious escape abilitys. 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 was gathering, but to me they looked like pinheads.

Steppes regained his balance, and then saw me. He cackled.

"Hello, Dr. Castle. I see you've come to see me jump."

"Why," Robert said, "Why did you come?"

"Why do you want to jump?" I asked. Although we had been

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Honesty’s 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 Remainders 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 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?

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 gas-bag 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

C.V.

I was stunned by Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liars' Club.* Not just by its ferocity, its beauty, and by her delightful grasp of the vernacular, but by its *totality*—she is a woman who remembers *everything* about her early years.

I'm not that way. I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years and who—I am not completely sure of this—may have farmed my brother and me out to one of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time. Perhaps she was only chasing our father, who piled up all sorts of bills and then did a runout when I was two and my brother David was four. If so, she never succeeded in finding him. My mom, Nellie Ruth Pills-bury King, was one of America's early liberated women, but not by choice.

Mary Karr presents her childhood in an almost unbroken panorama. Mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees … the kind that look as if they might like to grab and eat you.

What follows are some of those memories, plus assorted snapshots from the somewhat more coherent days of my adolescence and young manhood. This is not an autobiography. It is, rather, a kind of *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed. Not how one writer was *made;* I don't believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances or by self-will (although I did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package. Yet it is by no means unusual equipment; I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

This is how it was for me, that's all—a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, and a little talent all played a part. Don't bother trying to read between the lines, and don't look for a through-line. There are *no* lines—only snapshots, most out of focus.

– 1 –

My earliest memory is of imagining I was someone else—imagining that I was, in fact, the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy. This was at my Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren's house in Durham, Maine. My aunt remembers this quite clearly, and says I was two and a half or maybe three years old.

I had found a cement cinderblock in a corner of the garage and had

managed to pick it up. I carried it slowly across the garage's smooth cement floor, except in my mind I was dressed in an animal skin singlet (probably a leopard skin) and carrying the cinderblock across the center ring. The vast crowd was silent. A brilliant blue-white spotlight marked my remarkable progress. Their wondering faces told the story: never had they seen such an incredibly strong kid. "And he's only *two!*" someone muttered in disbelief.

Unknown to me, wasps had constructed a small nest in the lower half of the cinderblock. One of them, perhaps pissed off at being relocated, flew out and stung me on the ear. The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration. It was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my short life, but it only held the top spot for a few seconds. When I dropped the cinderblock on one bare foot, mashing all five toes, I forgot all about the wasp. I can't remember if I was taken to the doctor, and neither can my Aunt Ethelyn (Uncle Oren, to whom the Evil Cinderblock surely belonged, is almost twenty years dead), but she remembers the sting, the mashed toes, and my reaction. "How you howled, Stephen!" she said. "You were certainly in fine voice that day."

– 2 –

A year or so later, my mother, my brother, and I were in West De Pere, Wisconsin. I don't know why. Another of my mother's sisters, Cal (a WAAC beauty queen during World War II), lived in Wisconsin with her convivial beer-drinking husband, and maybe Mom had moved to be near them. If so, I don't remember seeing much of the Weimers. *Any* of them, actually. My mother was working, but I can't remember what her job was, either. I want to say it was a bakery she worked in, but I think that came later, when we moved to Connecticut to live near her sister Lois and *her* husband (no beer for Fred, and not much in the way of conviviality, either; he was a crewcut daddy who was proud of driving his convertible with the top *up*, God knows why).

There was a stream of babysitters during our Wisconsin period. I don't know if they left because David and I were a handful, or because they found better-paying jobs, or because my mother insisted on higher standards than they were willing to rise to; all I know is that there were a lot of them. The only one I remember with any clarity is Eula, or maybe she was Beulah. She was a teenager, she was as big as a house, and she laughed a lot. Eula-Beulah had a wonderful sense of humor, even at four I

could recognize that, but it was a *dangerous* sense of humor—there seemed to be a potential thunderclap hidden inside each hand-patting, butt-rocking, head-tossing outburst of glee. When I see those hidden-camera sequences where real-life babysitters and nannies just all of a sudden wind up and clout the kids, it's my days with Eula-Beulah I always think of.

Was she as hard on my brother David as she was on me? I don't know. He's not in any of these pictures. Besides, he would have been less at risk from Hurricane Eula-Beulah's dangerous winds; at six, he would have been in the first grade and off the gunnery range for most of the day.

Eula-Beulah would be on the phone, laughing with someone, and beckon me over. She would hug me, tickle me, get me laughing, and then, still laughing, go upside my head hard enough to knock me down. Then she would tickle me with her bare feet until we were both laughing again.

Eula-Beulah was prone to farts—the kind that are both loud and smelly. Sometimes when she was so afflicted, she would throw me on the couch, drop her wool-skirted butt on my face, and let loose. "Pow!" she'd cry in high glee. It was like being buried in marshgas fireworks. I remember the dark, the sense that I was suffocating, and I remember laughing. Because, while what was happening was sort of horrible, it was also sort of funny. In many ways, Eula-Beulah prepared me for literary criticism. After having a two-hundred-pound babysitter fart on your face and yell *Pow!*, *The Village Voice* holds few terrors.

I don't know what happened to the other sitters, but Eula-Beulah was fired. It was because of the eggs. One morning Eula-Beulah fried me an egg for breakfast. I ate it and asked for another one. Eula-Beulah fried me a second egg, then asked if I wanted another one. She had a look in her eye that said, "You don't *dare* eat another one, Stevie." So I asked for another one. And another one. And so on. I stopped after seven, I think—seven is the number that sticks in my mind, and quite clearly. Maybe we ran out of eggs. Maybe I cried off. Or maybe Eula-Beulah got scared. I don't know, but probably it was good that the game ended at seven. Seven eggs is quite a few for a four-year-old.

I felt all right for awhile, and then I yarked all over the floor. Eula-Beulah laughed, then went upside my head, then shoved me into the closet and locked the door. Pow. If she'd locked me in the bathroom, she might have saved her job, but she didn't. As for me, I didn't really mind being in the closet. It was dark, but it smelled of my mother's Coty perfume, and there was a comforting line of light under the door.

I crawled to the back of the closet, Mom's coats and dresses brushing

along my back. I began to belch—long loud belches that burned like fire. I don't remember being sick to my stomach but I must have been, because when I opened my mouth to let out another burning belch, I yarked again instead. All over my mother's shoes. That was the end for Eula-Beulah. When my mother came home from work that day, the babysitter was fast asleep on the couch and little Stevie was locked in the closet, fast asleep with half-digested fried eggs drying in his hair.

– 3 –

Our stay in West De Pere was neither long nor successful. We were evicted from our third-floor apartment when a neighbor spotted my six-year-old brother crawling around on the roof and called the police. I don't know where my mother was when this happened. I don't know where the babysitter of the week was, either. I only know that I was in the bathroom, standing with my bare feet on the heater, watching to see if my brother would fall off the roof or make it back into the bathroom okay. He made it back. He is now fifty-five and living in New Hampshire.

– 4 –

When I was five or six, I asked my mother if she had ever seen anyone die. Yes, she said, she had seen one person die and had heard another one. I asked how you could hear a person die and she told me that it was a girl who had drowned off Prout's Neck in the 1920s. She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn't get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day's rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back. In the end they could only stand around, tourists and townies, the teenager who became my mother among them, waiting for a rescue boat that never came and listening to that girl scream until her strength gave out and she went under. Her body washed up in New Hampshire, my mother said. I asked how old the girl was. Mom said she was fourteen, then read me a comic book and packed me off to bed. On some other day she told me about the one she saw—a sailor who jumped off the roof of the Graymore Hotel in Portland, Maine, and landed in the street.

"He splattered," my mother said in her most matter-of-fact tone. She paused, then added, "The stuff that came out of him was green. I have never forgotten it."

That makes two of us, Mom.

– 5 –

Most of the nine months I should have spent in the first grade I spent in bed. My problems started with the measles—a perfectly ordinary case—and then got steadily worse. I had bout after bout of what I mistakenly thought was called “stripe throat” I lay in bed drinking cold water and imagining my throat in alternating stripes of red and white (this was probably not so far wrong).

At some point my ears became involved, and one day my mother called a taxi (she did not drive) and took me to a doctor too important to make house calls—an ear specialist. (For some reason I got the idea that this sort of doctor was called an otiologist.) I didn’t care whether he specialized in ears or assholes. I had a fever of a hundred and four degrees, and each time I swallowed, pain lit up the sides of my face like a jukebox.

The doctor looked in my ears, spending most of his time (I think) on the left one. Then he laid me down on his examining table. “Lift up a minute, Stevie,” his nurse said, and put a large absorbent cloth—it might have been a diaper—under my head, so that my cheek rested on it when I lay back down. I should have guessed that something was rotten in Denmark. Who knows, maybe I did.

There was a sharp smell of alcohol. A clank as the ear doctor opened his sterilizer. I saw the needle in his hand—it looked as long as the ruler in my school pencil-box—and tensed. The ear doctor smiled reassuringly and spoke the lie for which doctors should be immediately jailed (time of incarceration to be doubled when the lie is told to a child): “Relax, Stevie, this won’t hurt.” I believed him.

He slid the needle into my ear and punctured my eardrum with it. The pain was beyond anything I have ever felt since—the only thing close was the first month of recovery after being struck by a van in the summer of 1999. That pain was longer in duration but not so intense. The puncturing of my eardrum was pain beyond the world. I screamed. There was a sound inside my head—a loud kissing sound. Hot fluid ran out of my ear—it was as if I had started to cry out of the wrong hole. God knows I was crying enough out of the right ones by then. I raised my streaming face and looked unbelieving at the ear doctor and the ear doctor’s nurse. Then I looked at the cloth the nurse had spread over the top third of the exam table. It had a big wet patch on it. There were fine tendrils of yellow pus on it as well.

“There,” the ear doctor said, patting my shoulder. “You were very brave, Stevie, and it’s all over.”

The next week my mother called another taxi, we went back to the ear doctor’s, and I found myself once more lying on my side with the absorbent square of cloth under my head. The ear doctor once again produced the smell of alcohol—a smell I still associate, as I suppose many people do, with pain and sickness and terror—and with it, the long needle. He once more assured me that it wouldn’t hurt, and I once more believed him. Not completely, but enough to be quiet while the needle slid into my ear.

It *did* hurt. Almost as much as the first time, in fact. The smooching sound in my head was louder, too; this time it was giants kissing (“suckin’ face and rotatin’ tongues,” as we used to say). “There,” the ear doctor’s nurse said when it was over and I lay there crying in a puddle of watery pus. “It only hurts a little, and you don’t want to be deaf, do you? Besides, it’s all over.”

I believed that for about five days, and then another taxi came. We went back to the ear doctor’s. I remember the cab driver telling my mother that he was going to pull over and let us out if she couldn’t shut that kid up.

Once again it was me on the exam table with the diaper under my head and my mom out in the waiting room with a magazine she was probably incapable of reading (or so I like to imagine). Once again the pungent smell of alcohol and the doctor turning to me with a needle that looked as long as my school ruler. Once more the smile, the approach, the assurance that *this* time it wouldn’t hurt.

Since the repeated eardrum-lancings when I was six, one of my life’s firmest principles has been this: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, shame on both of us. The third time on the ear doctor’s table I struggled and screamed and thrashed and fought. Each time the needle came near the side of my face, I knocked it away. Finally the nurse called my mother in from the waiting room, and the two of them managed to hold me long enough for the doctor to get his needle in. I screamed so long and so loud that I can still hear it. In fact, I think that in some deep valley of my head that last scream is still echoing.

– 6 –

In a dull cold month not too long after that—it would have been January or February of 1954, if I’ve got the sequence right—the taxi came again. This

time the specialist wasn't the ear doctor but a throat doctor. Once again my mother sat in the waiting room, once again I sat on the examining table with a nurse hovering nearby, and once again there was that sharp smell of alcohol, an aroma that still has the power to double my heartbeat in the space of five seconds.

All that appeared this time, however, was some sort of throat swab. It stung, and it tasted awful, but after the ear doctor's long needle it was a walk in the park. The throat doctor donned an interesting gadget that went around his head on a strap. It had a mirror in the middle, and a bright fierce light that shone out of it like a third eye. He looked down my gullet for a long time, urging me to open wider until my jaws creaked, but he did not put needles into me and so I loved him. After awhile he allowed me to close my mouth and summoned my mother.

"The problem is his tonsils," the doctor said. "They look like a cat clawed them. They'll have to come out."

At some point after that, I remember being wheeled under bright lights. A man in a white mask bent over me. He was standing at the head of the table I was lying on (1953 and 1954 were my years for lying on tables), and to me he looked upside down.

"Stephen," he said. "Can you hear me?"

I said I could.

"I want you to breathe deep," he said. "When you wake up, you can have all the ice cream you want."

He lowered a gadget over my face. In the eye of my memory, it looks like an outboard motor. I took a deep breath, and everything went black. When I woke up I was indeed allowed all the ice cream I wanted, which was a fine joke on me because I didn't want any. My throat felt swollen and fat. But it was better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Oh yes. *Anything* would have been better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Take my tonsils if you have to, put a steel birdcage on my leg if you must, but God save me from the otiologist.

– 7 –

That year my brother David jumped ahead to the fourth grade and I was pulled out of school entirely. I had missed too much of the first grade, my mother and the school agreed; I could start it fresh in the fall of the year, if my health was good.

Most of that year I spent either in bed or housebound. I read my way

through approximately six tons of comic books, progressed to Tom Swift and Dave Dawson (a heroic World War II pilot whose various planes were always “prop-clawing for altitude”), then moved on to Jack London’s bloodcurdling animal tales. At some point I began to write my own stories. Imitation preceded creation; I would copy *Combat Casey* comics word for word in my Blue Horse tablet, sometimes adding my own descriptions where they seemed appropriate. “They were camped in a big dratty farmhouse room,” I might write; it was another year or two before I discovered that *drat* and *draft* were different words. During that same period I remember believing that *details* were *dentals* and that a bitch was an extremely tall woman. A son of a bitch was apt to be a basketball player. When you’re six, most of your Bingo balls are still floating around in the draw-tank.

Eventually I showed one of these copycat hybrids to my mother, and she was charmed—I remember her slightly amazed smile, as if she was unable to believe a kid of hers could be so smart—practically a damned prodigy, for God’s sake. I had never seen that look on her face before—not on my account, anyway—and I absolutely loved it.

She asked me if I had made the story up myself, and I was forced to admit that I had copied most of it out of a funny-book. She seemed disappointed, and that drained away much of my pleasure. At last she handed back my tablet. “Write one of your own, Stevie,” she said. “Those *Combat Casey* funny-books are just junk—he’s always knocking someone’s teeth out. I bet you could do better. Write one of your own.”

– 8 –

I remember an immense feeling of *possibility* at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think).

I eventually wrote a story about four magic animals who rode around in an old car, helping out little kids. Their leader was a large white bunny named Mr. Rabbit Trick. He got to drive the car. The story was four pages long, laboriously printed in pencil. No one in it, so far as I can remember, jumped from the roof of the Graymore Hotel. When I finished, I gave it to my mother, who sat down in the living room, put her pocketbook on the floor beside her, and read it all at once. I could tell she liked it—she laughed in all the right places—but I couldn’t tell if that was because she liked me and wanted me to feel good or because it really *was* good.

“You didn’t copy this one?” she asked when she had finished. I said no, I hadn’t. She said it was good enough to be in a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier. I wrote four more stories about Mr. Rabbit Trick and his friends. She gave me a quarter apiece for them and sent them around to her four sisters, who pitied her a little, I think. *They* were all still married, after all; their men had stuck. It was true that Uncle Fred didn’t have much sense of humor and was stubborn about keeping the top of his convertible up, it was also true that Uncle Oren drank quite a bit and had dark theories about how the Jews were running the world, but they were *there.* Ruth, on the other hand, had been left holding the baby when Don ran out. She wanted them to see that he was a talented baby, at least.

Four stories. A quarter apiece. That was the first buck I made in this business.

– 9 –

We moved to Stratford, Connecticut. By then I was in the second grade and stone in love with the pretty teenage girl who lived next door. She never looked twice at me in the daytime, but at night, as I lay in bed and drifted toward sleep, we ran away from the cruel world of reality again and again. My new teacher was Mrs. Taylor, a kind lady with gray Elsa Lanchester—*Bride of Frankenstein* hair and protruding eyes. “When we’re talking I always want to cup my hands under Mrs. Taylor’s peepers in case they fall out,” my mom said.

Our new third-floor apartment was on West Broad Street. A block down the hill, not far from Teddy’s Market and across from Burrets Building Materials, was a huge tangled wilderness area with a junkyard on the far side and a train track running through the middle. This is one of the places I keep returning to in my imagination; it turns up in my books and stories again and again, under a variety of names. The kids in *It* called it the Barrens; we called it the jungle. Dave and I explored it for the first time not long after we had moved into our new place. It was summer. It was hot. It was great. We were deep into the green mysteries of this cool new playground when I was struck by an urgent need to move my bowels.

“Dave,” I said. “Take me home! I have to push!” (This was the word we were given for this particular function.)

David didn’t want to hear it. “Go do it in the woods,” he said. It would take at least half an hour to walk me home, and he had no intention of giving up such a shining stretch of time just because his little brother had