

Learning from the Greats

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Lessons on Writing, from the Great Writers

Billy O'Callaghan



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First published in 2014 by
Cork City Libraries
57-61 Grand Parade
Cork, Ireland

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ISBN 978-0-9549847-9-3

Design and typesetting by Stephen Leach, Cork City Libraries

Typeset in The Mix

Foreword

The urge to write seems as strong as ever. So is the urge to read good writing, and for very good reasons.

Last year we welcomed the renowned Slovenian writer Drago Jančar to the City Library. According to Jančar, literature is “at home wherever the fragile, vulnerable, finite human being is, enmeshed in misunderstandings with others, with the world, and with itself. And through this prism of multiple but individual human lives, it tells of human uncertainty, fear and courage, nobility and betrayal, joy and sorrow”.

Learning from the greats: lessons on writing, from the great writers started life as a talk given by Billy O’Callaghan to a creative writing class organized by Cork City Libraries staff under The Constant Reader banner. With this book we hope to provide insights for people in creative writing classes and groups, who want to improve their writing skills. But this book is not only for aspiring writers: Billy O’Callaghan’s insights will be a joy for the general reader interested in learning what makes great writing great.

Under the banner of The Constant Reader the staff of Cork City Libraries bring together everything we do to make Cork a reading city. The range of Constant Reader programmes and activities include:

- Promotions of particular genres of fiction and non-fiction topics, year-round;
- Support for the activities of book clubs in our libraries;
- Regular readings by local and international authors, and book launches throughout the year;
- Classes, workshops, resources and other supports for creative writing.

Billy O’Callaghan is a generous writer and generous teacher, generous with his time, his insights and his advice. We are delighted to bring this work to a wider audience.

Liam Ronayne
Cork City Librarian

Introduction

Winner of the 2013 Irish Book Award, author of *The Things We Lose, the Things We Leave Behind* (New Island Press), one writer and gifted teacher of writing, has assembled here all you need to know about the writer's task. Here is the *Baedeker* as you begin that long and mysterious journey. To misquote Kavanagh, you may step aboard this train and discover that it's your whole life. As Billy O'Callaghan says 'The bulk of our learning comes to us through the written word, and this is especially so for absorbing and developing the skills necessary to write fiction.' A writing teacher and workshop leader at our own City Libraries, O'Callaghan, the real McCoy, has allowed us to eavesdrop on his own creative thought processes and to come away with his own favourite motivational moments.

It is very difficult to begin without a good coach, or at least a trustworthy handbook. Here, you have a writer's arsenal in so many quotes, all linked through the teacher-writer's own recurring dialogue around the act of writing. Here you have Ray Bradbury's long line of nouns, Isaac Bachevis Singer's little notebook, Vargas Llosa's visits to the crucial scenes and Stephen King's 'situation first.' But it is Frank O'Connor's trenchant advice that has always most appealed to me: 'Get black on white' used to be Maupassant's advice – that's what I always do. (At the beginning) I don't give a hoot what the writing's like. It's the design of the story that to me is most important, the thing that tells you there's a bad gap in the narrative here and you really ought to fill that up in some way or another. I have to wait for the theme before I can do anything."

Excellent teacher that he is, Billy O'Callaghan has been acutely aware of the vulnerability of beginnings; of how tentative, nervous and exposed the new writer feels. In a public workshop situation the new writer is even more exposed than the writer in his or her garret. Now all eyes are on you as you rise to speak; a dozen judgements are made, depending not only upon your work but upon your hair, your accent, your hesitation or confidence as you decide whether to grip the table or the frail plastic chair. This is now the first public realm that a new writer endures, but it will be a less terrifying experience to anyone who reads this book of advice, this small package of literary coaching. O'Callaghan himself is perfectly aware that once you've begun to write your reading will take on a different quality –

And this is where such books of advice click in: here is the first sharp round of coaching, here is the masterful advice that will make you stronger as a writer. I am so grateful to Billy O'Callaghan that he has put these pages of wisdom together. Here, now, as you approach the blank page, here he has given us the long reach of the masters. Here is the advice you need to enlarge and enhance the story you are about to write.....

Thomas McCarthy

Billy O'Callaghan is the author of three short story collections: *In Exile* (2008) and *In Too Deep* (2009), both published by Mercier Press, and *The Things We Lose, the Things We Leave Behind* (2013), published by New Island Press.

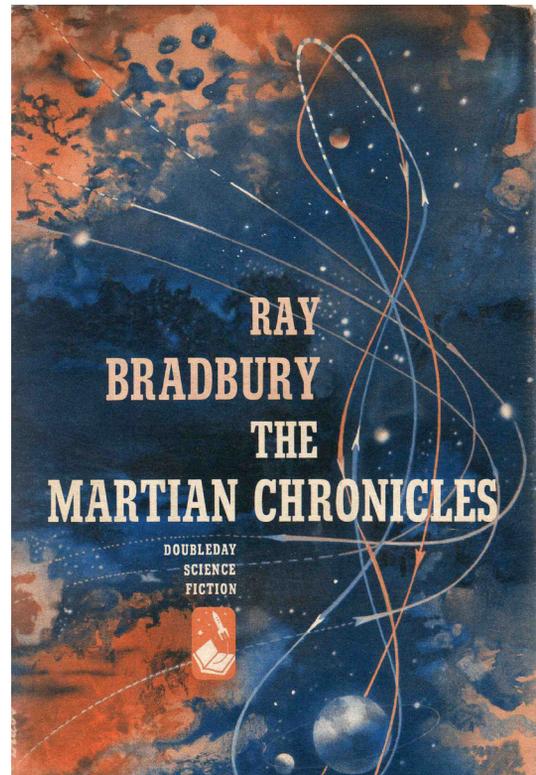
Winner of the 2013 Irish Book Award and a 2010 Arts Council Bursary for Literature, his fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Bliza*, *Confrontation*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Kyoto Journal*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Narrative*, *The Southeast Review*, *Southword*, *Versal* and numerous other magazines and journals around the world. He also regularly reviews books for *The Irish Examiner*.

Learning from the Greats

Writers write. That's a given, and one of the clear differences between them and those who 'want to write'. Getting your words down on the page is a whole world removed from talking about doing it. So we can take that, embolden and underline it: **Writers write**. But before, during and after, they read. A lot. And they read well. This is a key ingredient in the make-up of all writers, and its importance can never be overstated.

In the pages to come, I'll cite several of my favourite writers, and present their words of advice on various aspects of the writing craft, but I'd like to start here with **Ray Bradbury**, author of such classics as *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. In a 2001 Keynote Address at Point Loma Nazarene University's Writer's Symposium By the Sea, Bradbury said that as an aspiring writer, you need to fill your head in order to accumulate the necessary building blocks of fiction. He further expounds on this with a suggested course in bedtime reading:

“Every night before you go to bed, read one short story, one poem and one essay drawn from a diversity of fields, including archaeology, zoology, biology, philosophy, anthropology, politics and literature. At the end of a thousand nights you'll be full of stuff. You'll be full of ideas and metaphors, along with your perceptions of life. And you'll be well on your way to being more creative.”¹



This gives a clear sense of just how important reading is to a writer. If you have ambitions towards writing, you need to have an abiding hunger for books. As **Stephen King** puts it in his excellent part-memoir/part instruction-manual, *On Writing*:

“If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.”²

Now, I wanted to make this point clear right from the beginning, because I believe that it informs everything else. The bulk of our learning comes to us through the written word, and this is especially so for absorbing and developing the skills necessary to write fiction.

It’s something of a tangled web: what we read will influence us and shape our writing, so we owe it to ourselves to read the very best of what is out there in line with what we want to write. According to **William Maxwell**:

“(Would-be writers) should read to learn how it (writing) is done... in the hope that what they read will in some way make their own experience available to them.”³

Once you start to write, and once you allow yourself to really start thinking about what you’re doing and what you hope to do, your reading will take on a different quality. You’ll still read to be entertained or enlightened, and you’ll still be swept along and hopefully moved by a good story, but you’ll also start to notice other elements of what lives before you on the page. You’ll observe, often subconsciously, how different writers structure their sentences, how they use language to create vivid scenes and how they develop character through description and dialogue. You’ll also begin to notice how they pace their work for maximum effect, and how it is

often the things not written which hold the greatest impact. Don't expect it to happen overnight, but in time you'll find yourself absorbing lessons that will shape and permeate your writing and lead you to establishing a voice uniquely your own.

Crafting fiction is a subtle business, and one ripe with insecurity. Even the greats work by a process of trial and error. In the late '60s, **John Updike** spoke of his own struggles, and this even after he had written five novels, four collections of poetry and three collections of short stories:



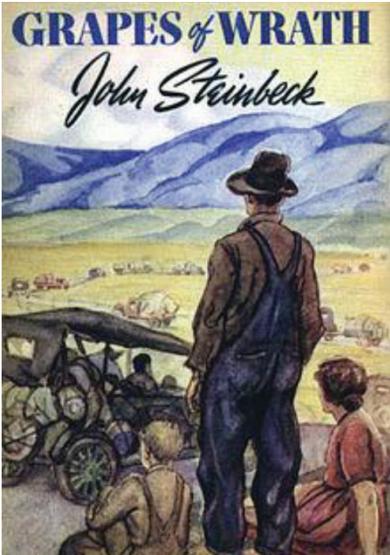
John Updike

“I write every weekday morning. I try to vary what I am doing, and my verse, or poetry, is a help here. Embarked on a long project, I try to stay with it even on dull days. For every novel, however, that I've published, there has been one left unfinished or scrapped. Some short stories... are fragments salvaged and reshaped.... In the execution there has

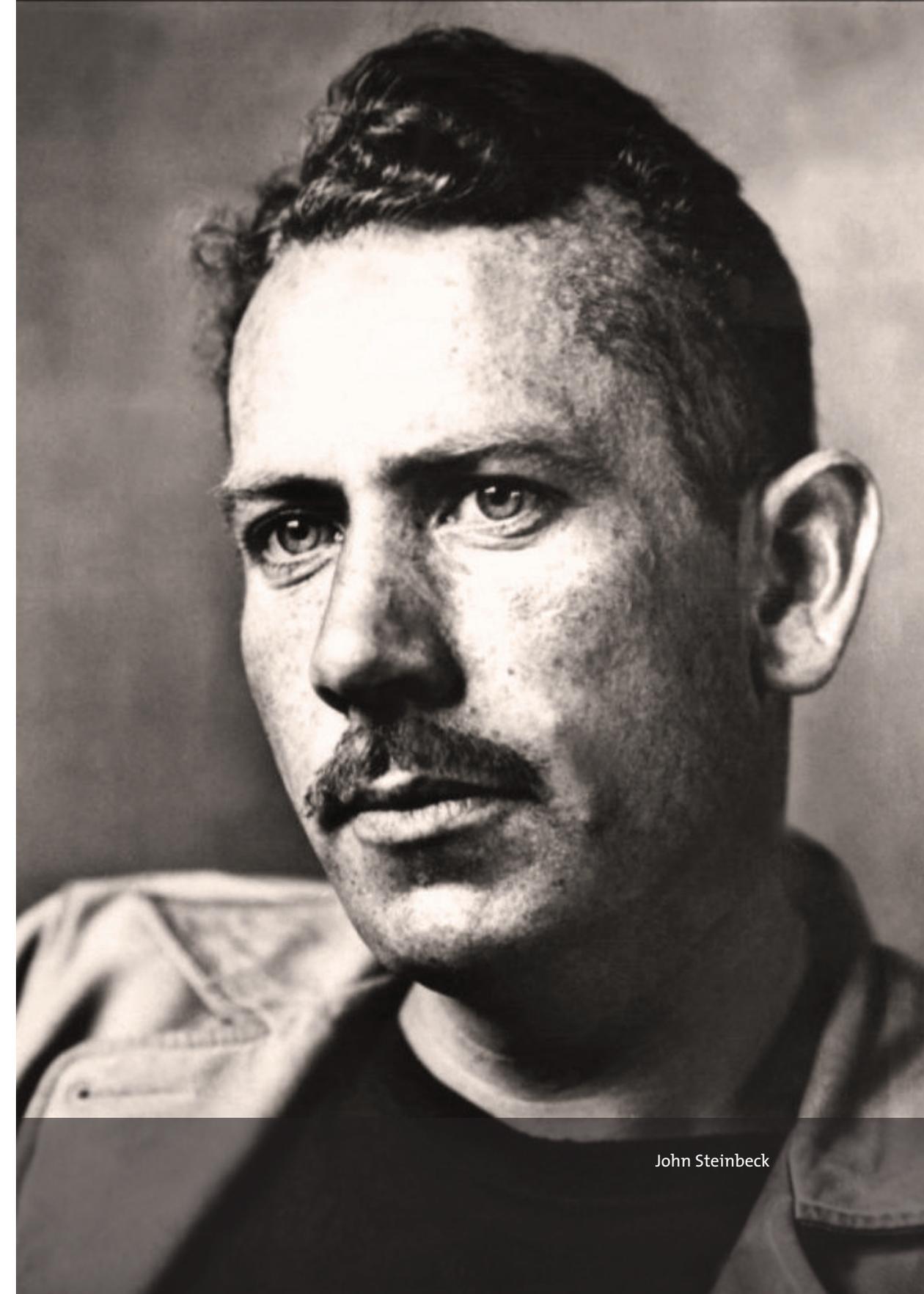
to be a 'happiness' that can't be willed or foreordained. It has to sing, click, something.”⁴

There are no absolutes or certainties; a guide or blueprint to writing the perfect story simply doesn't exist. **John Steinbeck**, author of such masterpieces as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* and *East of Eden*, summed up his approach and attitude to penning stories in a letter to an aspiring writer, a year after receiving the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature:

“Over the years I have written a great many stories and I still don't know how to go about it except to write it and take my chances. If there is a magic in story writing, and I am convinced there is, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula seems to lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels is important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes, but by no means always, find the way to do it. You must perceive



the excellence that makes a good story good or the errors that makes a bad story. For a bad story is only an ineffective story.” And on developing his own craft to a high standard, he put it this way, simply and truthfully: “It took a long time – a very long time. And it is still going on, and it has never gotten easier.”⁵



John Steinbeck

The only way to learn to write is to read a lot and write a lot. There are no short-cuts. That's not to say that Creative Writing courses have no value, because there are facets of writing which do need to be understood and a good course can and will help clarify the fundamentals. But the primary functions of such courses must always be to provide the aspiring writer with direction and to offer encouragement. The rest is up to the writers themselves, and how hard they are willing to work.

There is much that we can learn from reading the great writers, but it can also be useful to consider what they themselves have to say on the subject of writing. At its core, writing is possessed of a quality akin to alchemy. Even those who produce the work can't identify its exact ingredients or where, precisely, it comes from. In fact, most major writers have, at some point in their careers, spoken or written about the technical aspects of the craft, maybe in the hope that by discussing and articulating the details of what it is they do, they themselves will come to some greater understanding of the process. Some writers go so far as to offer entire tomes on the subject, among the best of these that I've read being Stephen King's

On Writing, Ray Bradbury's *Zen and the Art of Writing*, Elmore Leonard's *10 Rules for Writing*, Robert Olen Butler's *From Where You Dream* and, of course, Frank O'Connor's seminal treatise on a short story, *The Lonely Voice*. Others, like Kurt Vonnegut, Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac to name but a few, have expounded their theories in full-length essays and forewords to collections. Perhaps most insightful of all, though, are the sixty years' worth of in-depth 'Art of Fiction', 'Art of Nonfiction' and 'Art of Poetry' interviews undertaken by the Paris Review. The archive, which logs nearly 350 interviews and which can be accessed free

FRANK O'CONNOR



the lonely voice

a study of the short story

of charge through the journal's website, www.theparisreview.org, is an invaluable resource for anyone who is at all serious about writing.

The writers chosen for interview span the globe and rank among the luminaries of twentieth century literature, and occasional overlap aside, the fact that their accounts tend to vary so wildly proves that there are as many ways to write as there are things to write about. Everyone is different, everyone will have their own thoughts on the subject, and the "rules" of one will quite often directly contradict those of another. Which is really as it should be.

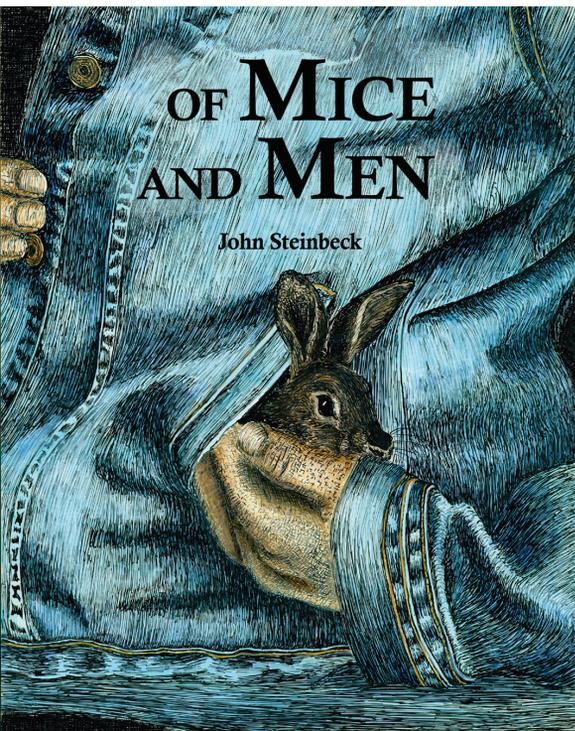
Also, rules are made to be broken. Consider, for example, what the world of literature might have been like if James Joyce had been made to follow the modern "easy on the adverbs" trend when writing the masterful final paragraph of 'The Dead'; or, what Star Trek would have done for a catchphrase if the writer hadn't been so tolerant of a split infinitive.

The best approach, I think, is to read as many viewpoints as you can, to be aware of what works and what doesn't, and hold onto whatever inspires you as you make your own way.

Since they went on-line, I've been steadily working my way through the collection. Based on the interviews I've read, all have something worthwhile to offer. One that stayed with me was the interview with **John Steinbeck**. For years he had resisted the idea of such a formal undertaking but changed his mind towards the end of his life. Unfortunately, he was too ill by then to grant it any serious attention so the interview as finally printed is something of an anomaly, pieced together from various letters and essays he'd previously written. Yet despite – or perhaps even because of – this unusual approach, the result is cohesive and well thought-out, with little room for grandeur or hyperbole, and from it emerge six clear and practical points of guidance for the aspiring writer, culled from a lifetime of hard-won experience:

1. **Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish.** Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page each day. It helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.
2. **Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper.** Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with **flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association** with the material.
3. **Forget your generalized audience.** In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the

theatre, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person – a real person you know, or an imagined person, and write to that one.



4. **If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it – bypass it and go on.** When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is that it didn't belong there.
5. **Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest.** It will usually be found that it is out of drawing.
6. **If you are using dialogue – say it aloud as you write it.** Only then will it have the sound of speech.⁶

Of course, Steinbeck is not the only writer to clarify his views in convenient list form. **Kurt Vonnegut**, a great writer and one of the most imaginative storytellers of the twentieth century, is probably best known as the author of *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. In the introductory essay to his book of short stories, *Bagombo Snuff Box*, he offered these eight rules for writing fiction, specifically a short story:

1. **Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.**
2. **Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.**



Kurt Vonnegut

3. **Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.**
4. **Every sentence must do one of two things - reveal character or advance the action.**
5. **Start as close to the end as possible.**
6. **Be a sadist.** No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. **Write to please just one person.** If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. **Give your readers as much information as possible, as soon as possible.** To hell with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves should cockroaches eat the last few pages.⁷

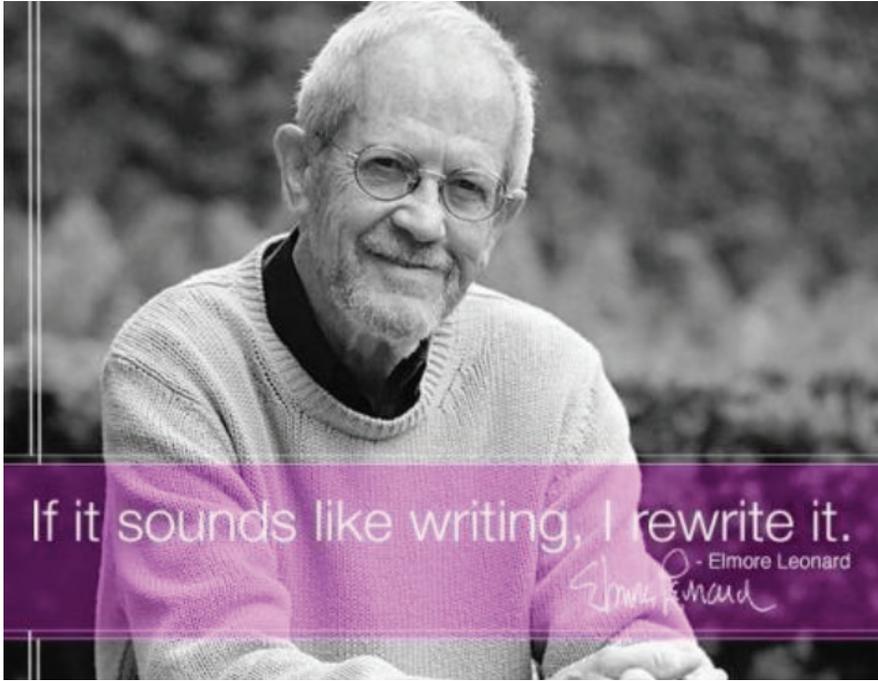
Vonnegut then goes on to acknowledge that the wonderful southern short story writer, Flannery O'Connor, broke all of these rules except the first. But before we can think of breaking these rules, it is necessary to master them.

And following on from these points, though quoting from an earlier essay, entitled 'How to Write With Style' – taken from a book called *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word* – I was struck by some comments he made with regard to focus and concision:

“Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style. And keep it simple. Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. ‘To be or not to be?’ asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred.”⁸

Traditionally, writers of genre fiction have been considered the second-class citizens of the literary world. **Elmore Leonard**, like writers such as Raymond Chandler, Jim Thompson, Georges Simenon and James M. Cain before him, is one of the voices who shatter this prejudice and prove that great writing can transcend genre. Over a span of sixty years and more than forty novels, Leonard forged a reputation as one of America’s most compelling writers. Lauded by the likes of Saul Bellow and Martin Amis, ‘the Dickens of Detroit’ was a stylist of considerable renown, blessed with an unerring and practically poetic ear for dialogue.

In a 2001 New York Times Writers on Writing-series essay, entitled ‘Easy on the adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hoopedoodle’



Elmore Leonard

(a piece that would later be expanded and published as a stand-alone book, 2007's *10 Rules for Writing*), he offers some sage advice on the practical aspects of the craft:

1. **Never open a book with weather.** If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people.
2. **Avoid prologues:** They can be annoying, especially a prologue following an introduction that comes after a foreword. A prologue in a novel is back-story, and you can drop it in anywhere you want.

3. **Never use a verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue.** The line of dialogue belongs to the character, the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But 'said' is far less intrusive than 'grumbled', 'gasped', 'cautioned', 'lied'.
4. **Never use an adverb to modify the verb 'said'... he admonished gravely.** To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange.
5. **Keep your exclamation points under control.** You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. If you have the knack of playing with exclamers the way Tom Wolfe does, you can throw them in by the handful.
6. **Never use the words 'suddenly' or 'all hell broke loose'.** This rule doesn't require an explanation.
7. **Use regional dialect sparingly.** Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop. Notice the way Annie Proulx captures the flavor of Wyoming voices in her book of short stories, 'Close Range'.

8. **Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.** In Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants', what do the 'American and the girl with him' look like? 'She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.' That's the only reference to a physical description in the story.
9. **Don't go into great detail describing places and things,** unless you're Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language. You don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.
10. **Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.** Think of what you skip when reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose that you can see have too many words in them.

And finally (he says), my most important rule is one that sums up the 10:

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it. ⁹

The more you look for lists of rules penned by great writers, the more you'll find. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion. I'd like to offer one final list of writing commandments for your consideration, as set down by one of my favourite living English-language writers, **V.S. Naipaul**. Winner the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature, author of such



V.S. Naipaul

essential and inventive novels as 'A House for Mr. Biswas', 'A Bend in the River' and the Booker Prize-winning 'In A Free State', he is as noted these days for his controversial opinions on women writers, religion and colonialism, as he is for his writing. But whether producing fiction or non-fiction, he is still, after half a century, among the best there is.

Several years ago, at the behest of an Indian website, Tehelka.com, Naipaul produced a set of rules for beginning writers, and they are notable in that, rather

than settling for abstraction and generality, they attend to elements of technique and offer strictly practical directions. On one level they seem fixated on limitation and discipline, but their real intent is to coax aspiring writers to a state of absolute focus, and for this reason these rules strike me as invaluable:

1. **Do not write long sentences.** A sentence should not have more than ten or twelve words.
2. **Each sentence should make a clear statement.** It should add to the statement that went before. A good paragraph is a series of clear, linked statements.

3. **Do not use big words.** If your computer tells you that your average word is more than five letters long, there is something wrong. The use of small words compels you to think about what you are writing. Even difficult ideas can be broken down into small words.
4. **Never use words whose meaning you are not sure of.** If you break this rule you should look for other work.
5. **The beginner should avoid using adjectives, except those of colour, size and number.** Also, use as few adverbs as possible.
6. **Avoid the abstract.** Always go for the concrete.
7. **Every day, for six months at least, practice writing in this way.** Small words; short, clear, concrete sentences. It may be awkward, but it's training you in the use of language. It may even be getting rid of the bad language habits you picked up at the university. You may go beyond these rules only after you have thoroughly understood and mastered them.¹⁰

These lists tend, by and large, to reflect the writers themselves, and tend to be opinions shaped by experience. The great Russian short story writer and playwright, **Anton Chekhov**, for example, in an 1886 letter to his brother, offered the following terse and very precise thoughts on what he considered to be the six principles of a good short story. It is a list that feels in no way at odds with his own writing:

1. **Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature;**
2. **Total objectivity;**
3. **Truthful descriptions of persons and objects;**
4. **Extreme brevity;**
5. **Audacity and originality (flee the stereotype);**
6. **Compassion.**"

Now, since the subject of this paper is 'lessons on writing from the great writers', I thought it would be a good idea to break down various aspects of the writing process under a series of clear headings and quote you some opinions from the masters.

On Life Experience:

Henry David Thoreau: "How vain it is to sit down and write when you have not stood up to live."¹²

Anais Nin: "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect."¹³

Virginia Woolf: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."¹⁴



Anton Chekhov

Flannery O'Connor: “Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.”¹⁵

Ernest Hemingway: “In going where you have to go, and doing what you have to do, and seeing what you have to see, you’ll dull and blunt the instrument you write with. But I would rather have it bent and dull and know I had to put it to the grindstone again and hammer it into shape and put a whetstone to it, and know that I had something to write about, than to have it bright and shining and nothing to say, or smooth and well-oiled in the closet, but unused.”¹⁶

On Beginning:

Stephen King: “The situation comes first. The characters – always flat and unfeatured to begin with – comes next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate.”¹⁷

Norman Mailer: “I always make a huge number of notes before I start. I tend to read a lot on collateral matters and think about it and brood... It takes me a half year to get into a novel.”¹⁸

Ray Bradbury (speaking of his formative writing years): “I began to make lists of titles, to put down long lines of nouns. These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my



Ernest Hemingway



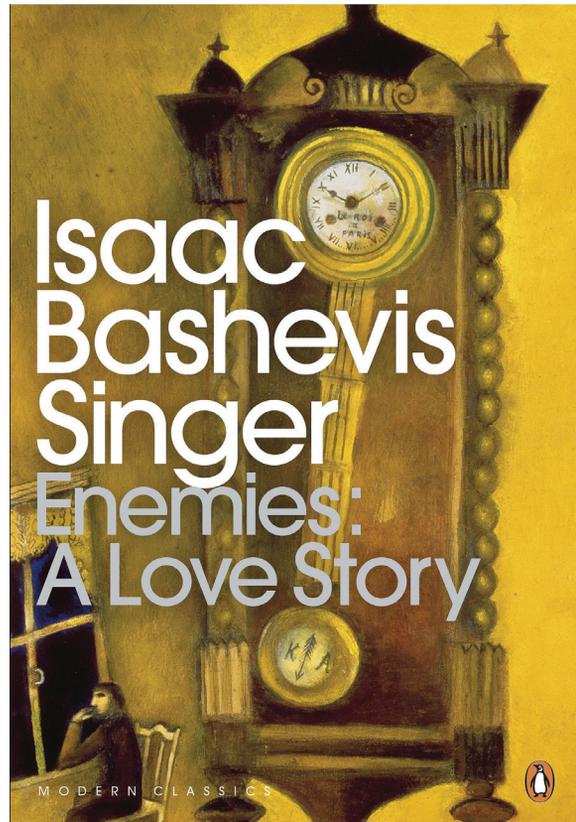
Frank O'Connor by Daniel Corkery, 1926

better stuff to surface. I was feeling my way towards being honest..."¹⁹

Frank O'Connor: "Get black on white' used to be Maupassant's advice – that's what I always do. (At the beginning) I don't give a hoot what the writing's like. It's the design of the story that to me is most important, the thing that tells you there's a bad gap in the narrative here and you really ought to fill that up in some way or another. I have to wait for the theme before I can do anything."²⁰

Mario Vargas Llosa: "In order to fabricate, I always have to start from a concrete reality. That's why I do research and visit the places where the action takes place."²¹

Isaac Bashevis Singer: "Stories come to me in life without my going out to look for them. But it must be a story with climax. When such an idea comes, I put it down in a little notebook I always carry around. Finally the story demands to be written, and then I write it."²²



On Routine, and the Necessity for Discipline:

Ernest Hemingway: “When I am working on a book or a story I write every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you and it is cool or cold and you come to your work and warm as you write. You read what you have written and, as you always stop when you know what is going to happen next, you go on from there... If you stopped when you knew what would happen next, you can go on. As long as you can start, you are all right. The juice will come.”²³

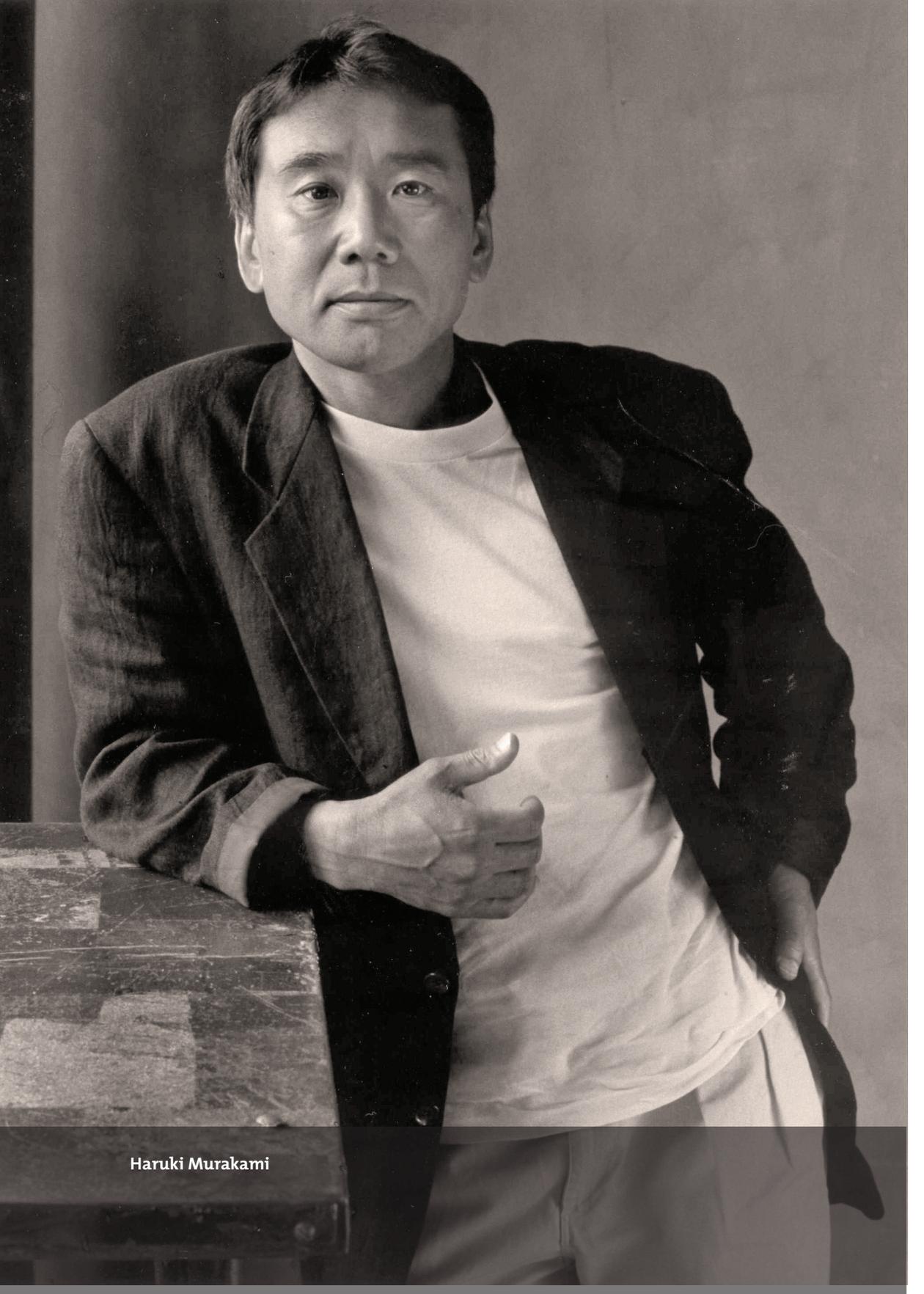
Alice Munro: “I write every morning, seven days a week. I write starting about eight o’clock and finish up around eleven... I am so compulsive that I have a quota of pages.”²⁴

Bernard Malamud: “You write by sitting down and writing. There’s no particular time or place – you suit yourself, your nature... Eventually everyone learns his or her own best way.”²⁵

Doris Lessing: “I’m compulsive. And I deeply think that it has to be something very neurotic... Suddenly it starts... This terrible feeling that I am just wasting my life, that I’m useless, I’m no good. Now, it’s a fact that if I spend a day busy as a little kitten, racing around. I do this, I do that. But I haven’t written, so it’s a wasted day, and I’m no good. How do you account for that nonsense?”²⁶



Doris Lessing



Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami: “When I’m in writing mode for a novel, I get up at four a.m. and write for five to six hours. In the afternoon, I run for ten kilometers or swim... then I read a bit and listen to some music. I go to bed at nine pm. I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it’s a form of mesmerism. I mesmerise myself to reach a deeper state of mind... Writing a long novel is like survival training. Physical strength is as necessary as artistic sensitivity.

On Plot:

John Cheever: “I don’t work with plots. I work with intuition, apprehension, dreams, concepts. Characters and events come simultaneously to me. Plot implies narrative and a lot of crap. It is a calculated attempt to hold the reader’s interest at the sacrifice of moral conviction. Of course, one doesn’t want to be boring... one needs an element of suspense. But a good narrative is a rudimentary structure, rather like a kidney.”²⁸

Stephen King: “I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plot-less... and second because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible. A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question: What if vampires invaded a small

His bite is worse
than his bark. Much,
much worse...

STEPHEN KING

CUJO

New England village? (Salem's Lot). What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo)."²⁹

Georges Simenon: "On the eve of the first day I know what will happen in the first chapter. Then, day after day, chapter after chapter, I find out what comes later. After I have started a novel I write a

chapter each day, without ever missing a day. Because it is a strain, I have to keep pace with the novel."³⁰

Isaac Bashevis Singer: "Story construction... is the most difficult part for me. How to construct the story so that it will be interesting. Once I have the construction set, the writing itself – the description and dialogue – simply flows along."³¹

Raymond Chandler: "I am having a hard time with the book. Have enough paper written to make it complete, but must do it all over again. I just didn't know where I was going and when I got there I saw that I had come to the wrong place. That's the hell of being the kind of writer who cannot explain anything, but has to make it up as he goes along and

then try to make sense out of it. If you gave me the best plot in the world all worked out I could not write it. It would be dead for me.”³²

On Character:

Ernest Hemingway: “If you describe someone, it is flat, as a photograph is, and from my standpoint a failure. If you make him up from what you know, there should be all the dimensions.”³³

Graham Greene: “One never knows enough about characters in real life to put them into novels... Major characters emerge; minor ones may be photographed.”³⁴

John Banville: “I wish I could say that I love my characters and that frequently they take over the book and run away with the plot and so on. But they don’t exist. They’re manikins made of words and they carry my rhythms. They have no autonomous life – surely that’s obvious? I distrust those writers who claim to have feeling for their characters. They’re liars or fools.”³⁵

Raymond Carver: “I think they (my characters) are trying (to do what matters). But trying and succeeding are two different matters... Most of my characters would like their actions to count for something. But at the same time they’ve reached the point – as so many people do – that they know it isn’t so... They’d like to

set things right, but they can't. And usually they know it, and after that they just do the best they can.”³⁶

William Trevor: “Heroes don't really belong in short stories. As Frank O'Connor said, 'Short stories are about little people,' and I agree. I find the unheroic side of people much richer and more entertaining than black and white success.”³⁷



William Trevor

On Theme:

Frank O'Connor: "If somebody tells me a good story, I'll write it down in four lines; that's the secret of theme. If it won't go into four lines, that means you haven't reduced it to its ultimate simplicity, reduced it to the fable."



Frank O'Connor

Elisabeth Bowen: “If a theme or idea is too near the surface, the novel becomes simply a tract illustrating an idea.”³⁹

Doris Lessing: “I do not think writers ought ever to sit down and think they must write about some cause, or theme, or something. If they write about their own experiences, something true is going to emerge.”⁴⁰

John O’Hara: “They say great themes make great novels... but what these young writers don’t understand is that there is no greater theme than men and women.”⁴¹

On Description:

Anton Chekhov: “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light broken glass.”⁴²

Stephen King: “In many cases when a reader puts a story aside because it ‘got boring,’ the boredom arose because the writer grew enchanted with his powers of description and lost sight of his priority, which is to keep the ball rolling... Good description is a learned skill, one of the prime reasons why you cannot succeed unless you read a lot and write a lot. It’s not just a question of how-to, you see; it’s also a question of how much to. Reading will help you answer how much, and only reams of writing will help you with the how. You can learn only by doing.”⁴³



Elizabeth Bowen



Margaret Atwood

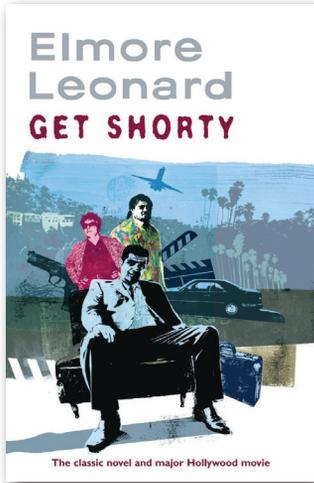
C.S. Lewis: “Don’t use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing... Don’t say it was delightful; make us say delightful when we’ve read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, ‘Please will you do the job for me.’”⁴⁴

On Pacing:

Ernest Hemingway: “Sometimes you know the story. Sometimes you make it up as you go along and have no idea how it will come out. Everything changes as it moves. That is what makes the movement which makes the story. Sometimes the movement is so slow it does not seem to be moving. But there is always change and always movement.”⁴⁵

Margaret Atwood: “Hold the reader’s attention. (This is likely to work better if you can hold your own) But you don’t know who the reader is, so it’s like shooting fish with a slingshot in the dark. What fascinates A will bore the pants off B.”⁴⁶

On Dialogue:



Elmore Leonard: “People ask me about my dialogue, I say, ‘Don’t you hear people talking?’ That’s all I do. You think of a certain character and you hear them talking. I’m always writing from their point of view, never from my own.”⁴⁷

Richard Price: “Realistic dialogue is interminable and goes nowhere. Good dialogue is about heightened reality, nudging it into a form that doesn’t really exist in the way people talk...

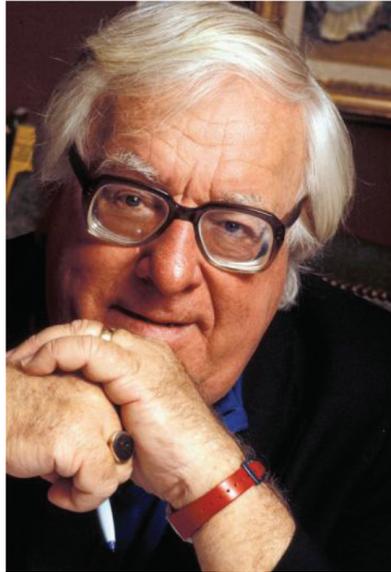
It’s pretty intuitive. When I’m writing I hear people. I’ll be out on the street and I’ll pick up the rhythm.”⁴⁸

David Mamet: “If you write enough of it and let it flow enough, you’ll probably come across something that will give you a key as to structure. I think the process of writing... is working back and forth between the moment and the whole... the fluidity of the dialogue and the necessity of strict construction.”⁴⁹

On Language:

Ray Bradbury: “Do you know why teachers use me? Because I speak in tongues. I write metaphors. Every one of my stories is a metaphor you can remember. The great religions are all metaphor. We appreciate

things like Daniel in the lion's den, and the Tower of Babel... Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne all wrote in metaphors. And all of them wrote for children. They may have pretended not to, but they did.”⁵⁰



Ray Bradbury

John Banville: “It all starts with rhythm for me... To sit all day long assembling these extraordinary strings of words is a marvellous thing. I couldn't ask for anything better. It's as close to godliness as I can get. But when I finish a sentence, after much labour, it's finished. A certain point comes at which you can't do any more work on it because you know it will kill the sentence. The rhythm is set. The meaning is set.”⁵¹

On How to Develop a Broken Story:

Stephen King: “Look in your files for a story that seems stuck... Next, write at the top of a separate sheet of paper the two words, ‘What If’. Now write five ways of continuing the story, not ending the story but continuing the story to the next event, scene, etc. Let your imagination go wild. Loosen up your thinking about the events in the story. Your what ifs can be as diverse as your imagination can make them. More likely, one of the what ifs will feel right, organic, to your story and that is the direction in which you should go. Sometimes you will have to do several groups of what ifs per story, but that’s okay as long as they keep you moving forward.”⁵²



Stephen King

Alice Munro: “Sometimes I’m uncertain, and I will do first person to third over and over again... I often write in the first person to get myself into a story and then feel that for some reason it isn’t working.”⁵³



Alice Munro

On Rewriting:

Ernest Hemingway: “I always rewrite each day up to the point where I stopped. When it is all finished, naturally you go over it. You get another chance to correct and rewrite when someone else types it, and you see it clean in type. The last chance is in the proofs. You’re grateful for these different chances.”⁵⁴

Joyce Carol Oates: “When I complete a novel I set it aside, and begin work on short stories and eventually another long work. When I complete that novel I return to the earlier novel and rewrite much of it. In the meantime, the second novel lies in a desk drawer... My reputation for writing quickly and effortlessly notwithstanding, I am strongly in favour of intelligent, even fastidious revision, which is, or certainly should be, an art in itself.”⁵⁵

James Baldwin: “Most of the rewrite... is cleaning. Don’t describe it, show it. That’s what I try to teach all young writers – take it out! Don’t describe a purple sunset, make me see that it is purple.”⁵⁶

Bernard Malamud: “First drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about. Revision is working with that knowledge to enlarge and enhance and idea, to re-form it. Revision is one of the true pleasures of writing.”⁵⁷



James Baldwin

Raymond Carver: “I’ve done as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story. Never less than ten or twelve drafts... (Tolstoy) went through and rewrote *War and Peace* eight times and was still making corrections in the galleys. Things like this should hearten every writer whose first drafts are dreadful, like mine are.”⁵⁸

On Editing:

Ernest Hemingway: “If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer has stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. However, any writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.”⁵⁹

William Trevor: “I write incidents and scenes over and over again until eventually they are completely clear to me. For a reader it would be boring to know all those detail, so the details in the end just wither away... But *you* know. And, of course, the bits that *aren’t* there are just as important as the bits that *are* there, because they’re deliberately left out.”⁶⁰

On Talent:

William Baldwin: “Talent is insignificant. I know a lot of talented ruins. Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.”⁶¹

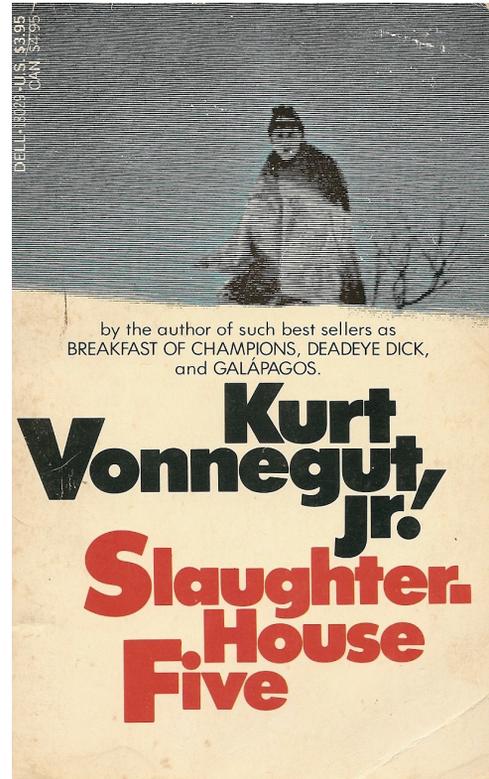
Kurt Vonnegut: “In a creative writing class of twenty people anywhere in this country, six students will be startlingly talented. Two of those might actually publish something by and by.”⁶²

On Observation:

Ray Bradbury: “Run fast, stand still. This the lesson from lizards, for all writers.”⁶³

Flannery O’Connor: “The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention.”⁶⁴

Ernest Hemingway: “If a writer stops observing he is finished. But he does not have to observe consciously nor think how it will be useful. Perhaps that would be true at the beginning. But later everything he sees goes into the great reserve of things he knows or has seen.”⁶⁵



Margaret Atwood: “There’s no way of knowing in advance what will get into your work. One collects all the shiny objects that catch the fancy – a great array of them. Some of them you think are utterly useless. I have a large collection of curios of that kind, and every once in a while I need one of them.”⁶⁶

On Writing for the Market (and coping with rejection):

Lawrence Block: “The less attention I pay to what people want and the more attention I pay to just writing the book I want to write, the better I do.”⁶⁷

J.D. Salinger: “Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I live to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure.”⁶⁸

William Maxwell, one-time fiction editor of the *New Yorker*: “I don’t think anybody can write decent fiction and at the same time try to match the requirements of a magazine. You do what your heart cries out to do.”⁶⁹

Saul Bellow: “I’ve discovered that rejections are not altogether a bad thing. They teach a writer to rely on his own judgement and to say in his heart of hearts, ‘To hell with you.’”⁷⁰

Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”⁷¹

And finally, I'd like to end with another quote from **John Steinbeck**:

“To finish is sadness to a writer – a little death. He puts the last word down and it is done. But it isn't really done. The story goes on and leaves the writer behind, for no story is ever done.”⁷²

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