

Writing by Bird

Fiction posits itself in a mechanical space that both adheres to formal written structures and augments them for rhetorical benefits. The fiction writer exists within that nebulous realm and must intuitively develop a process by which they can create literature which is simultaneously real and unreal. In this pursuit, only intuition guides the writer—no hard guidelines. But what if that intuition fails? It often has. And it will never cease to fail those who can not discover a process that suits them. Many authors have considered the “how” in fiction writing. Few saw the practicality of putting those considerations to paper. Fewer still agreed on those considerations. Two such individuals are Stephen King, author of *On Writing*, and Anne Lamott, author of *bird by bird*, both of whom littered their novels with strong autobiographical underpinnings. Despite this, both seem to ignore the degree to which personal circumstance may influence a writer’s productivity under certain conditions. King and Lamott provide relatively rigid guidelines for finding success as a writer, and while they disagree enough to highlight that there can’t be universal truths regarding how to be a better writer, neither expands their philosophy enough beyond their own personal experiences to account for readers for whom their books likely appeal most. I certainly can’t wholeheartedly support the prescriptions laid out by the aforementioned authors, least of all on matters of writing consistently and overcoming writer’s block. Like King, I began writing from a young age, and those who read my works readily acknowledged my aptitude. However, it was neither a structured schedule nor adherence to rules that supported the quality of work I produced. This essay will take a few of those rules as laid out in both King’s and Lamott’s writing and attempt to reconcile their prescriptions with a flexible reality. They insist on stringent regimens and calculated action. I don’t believe those are valuable medications for the ailing writer. What I do believe is that there are physical and psychological forces at work upon which every author’s process is dependent; there is an individuality to process that defies pigeonholing.

While Anne Lamott's *bird by bird* predates *On Writing* by nearly five years, there's little to suggest that King wrote with her work in hindsight; both pieces are incredibly personal. Lamott's book hinges on bridging life philosophy to writing philosophy, subtextually insisting that being a good writer has a direct correlation with one's self-awareness of the world at large. In that sense, her personal anecdotes serve to highlight larger-scale issues. On the other hand, King's narrative is built purely on his own experience. He refuses to extrapolate his personal experience as a model that will perfectly fit every author, and his own self-awareness leads him to consider this shortcoming at several junctions. However, he remains just as stern as Lamott in the prescriptions he provides. Both authors believe there are central tenants to success.

How does anyone manage to pen a novel, anyway? The answer is simple: they sit down, and they write. How long it takes from the first word of a manuscript to the full stop at the final sentence depends not only on the author's dedication to putting words to paper, but on their response to various mitigating factors. Prolificacy is what remains when mitigation subtracts from dedication. However, King and Lamott would disregard this and focus exclusively on dedication. Lamott considers some of the best writing advice to be that "writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way" (18). It delivers the message of consistency, to write every day regardless how one feels about pressing forward. Through dark and fog, the only way for a writer to succeed is to keep their foot on the gas. Her visibility at night is the one-inch picture frame to which she dedicates herself, at the very least, to "just one paragraph." One paragraph at a time, each of Lamott's books have reached their conclusion. *Bird by bird*. This doesn't necessarily conflict with the discipline King maintains in admitting that "once I start work on a project, I don't stop and I don't slow down unless I absolutely have to" (153). And to his defense, King doesn't believe all authors must drive their cars at the same speed. In his philosophy, those numbers vary from one writer to the next (151), but that is the closest he comes to addressing the individualized impediments to becoming a strong, consistent writer. Lamott may very well

disagree with this since success depends upon a writer being “really good, and very persistent,” (Lamott 10) a sentiment with which I agree. Even so, writing is comparable to working a muscle. If a writer wants to see real growth, they must know when to rest and recuperate; and apart from those scheduled breathers, consistency can easily derail on account of extraneous personal responsibilities. Taking care of family members, toiling away at a day job (with a rotating schedule or for enough hours a week that sleep supersedes writing), lack of a comfortable work space, attention disorders, and a slew of other circumstances, can each throw a wrench in the car’s spokes. Oftentimes, writers *do* need to pull onto the shoulder of the interstate to diagnose their vehicle. Other times, they require naps or caffeine. Lamott doesn’t offer an answer to how a writer should proceed when uncontrollable circumstances stand between them and completing their novel. Somewhere in the middle, King offers that “stopping a piece of work just because it’s hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don’t feel like it” (78). Though that advice may work well for him, it only provides a blanket answer to an issue too large to fit under that blanket.

While King and Lamott are both adamant that a writer must never stop moving forward, they diverge on this point when addressing an impediment specific to writers: writer’s block. For most writers I know, writer’s block is a period during which they either don’t feel inspired or are unsure how to proceed. They’re creatively drained and feel incapable of producing what they would consider acceptable work. The underlying causes of writer’s block cannot be isolated. Therefore, its remedy will be inconsistent at best and largely reflective of the ideology of the person prescribing it. Lamott puts it much more eloquently in the following passage:

“The word block suggests that you are constipated or stuck, when the truth is that you’re empty. As I said in the last chapter, this emptiness can destroy some writers, as do the shame and frustration that go with it. You felt that the writing gods gave you just so many good days, maybe even enough of them to write one good book and then part of another. But now you are having some days or weeks of emptiness, as if suddenly the writing gods are saying, “Enough! Don’t bother me! I have given to you until it hurts! Please. I’ve got problems of my own.” (178)

Figuratively, writer's block is the weapon of a higher power, be it god or muse. Lamott's solution to this is to accept that you aren't in a productive creative period, thereby freeing yourself to refill that creative energy (178). For her, this might mean writing whatever comes to mind without concern for quality, allowing yourself to practice composition independent of the weight of your project. King provides a similar, briefer outlook: "Don't wait for the muse" (157). Many writers refuse to work outside the bubble of inspiration, but King shifts the responsibility away from this muse. For him, it's the writer's responsibility to "make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon or seven 'til three" (157). Only then will the muse be prepared to sprinkle its creative dust, and only then will the writer experience productivity. Again, we see the focus on scheduling. Both authors believe a writer must produce work during creative dry spells. What separates King from Lamott is his belief that the work writers produce should still fall within the scope of their primary project. Lamott is more forgiving where that effort is directed, landing closer to a universal solution than King. Here, we can more clearly imagine the psychological underpinnings. For some writers, the act of writing itself during that period may very well just compound their stress. This brings us back to the question of what solution exists for those for whom continuing to work would only exasperate their creative exhaustion. By extension, we also return to the issue of dedication: must a writer write every day? I think not. For a good number of people, the flexibility of knowing they *don't* have to write every day and can *still* consider themselves a good writer is more inviting than the burden of believing they *must* write every day to be one. Beyond that, and perhaps most important, is the reality that everyone responds to stressors differently. Neither author examines potential underlying causes of writer's block to target them specifically. The broad strokes they paint around the issue undermine the psychological complexity of the issue, thereby rendering their solutions only minimally applicable. King and Lamott are targeting a symptom irrespective of its

cause, and that recklessness does not bode well for the population of writers who experience blocks for reasons dissimilar to them.

Both *bird by bird* and *On Writing* exist to provide frameworks for aspiring authors who may not have developed a working toolset. Earlier, I proposed that there are certain psychological factors at work in each individual writer that, to an extent, predetermines their capability to work around lapses in dedication and bouts of writer's block. There's an aversion in both authors' works to address this anomaly. While dictating in absolutes provides the illusion of greater ethos, it conversely provides a less all-inclusive framework. Neither King nor Lamott addresses this possibility—strange, considering the format both choose to express their ruminations on writing. This is especially puzzling in Lamott, who is incredibly open about the mental disorders, substance abuse, and poor quality of character that she equates with being a writer. Yet, she regards these things as inclusive in the package of being a writer rather than individualized, personal shortcomings that actively work *against* being a writer. This, as is evidenced by Lamott's anecdotes, arises exclusively from her personal experience. Her philosophy, and King's, is engrained within personal circumstance and treats that circumstance as a normative baseline against which to frame the reader.

In the introduction to *bird by bird*, Lamott describes her father who worked as a writer. He created a schedule for himself and followed it, waking up at 5:30 each morning to write. On his death, she notes that "he had lived on his own terms" (Lamott xii) and as an undeniable inspiration for her. Why shouldn't all writers, then, live on their own terms and exist freely within a spectrum only loosely defined by the hardlines suggested by Lamott and King, the latter of whom admits "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" (King ix)? That both these reflections are included before the main text of each author's publications speaks volumes to the underlying current I've attempted to draw attention to in my examination of their works. There is a beginning and an end: one road. However, each driver rolling along it must

reach their destination at the speed they feel safest, taking breaks when necessary. It's easy enough to suggest that a writer take their work bird by bird but for some writers, their birds must fly south for winter.