

Stephen King Excerpts from *On Writing*

“It’s about the day job; it’s about the language.” – Stephen King

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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.”

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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 laughing, and then, still laughing, go upside my head hard enough to knock me down. Then she would tickle me again 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. 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, 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 alright for a while, 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.

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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 to the bathroom okay. He made it back. He is now fifty-five and living in New Hampshire.

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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, Main, 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.

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[The year I got my tonsils out] 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 style, as if she was

unable to believe a kid of hers could be 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.”

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Let’s get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky: two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun. Your job isn’t to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.