

An excerpt from:

# A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Everything I Wish Someone Had Told Me When I Was Starting Out.

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is a simple one. It is to share with other writers, and with readers who would like to become writers or are merely curious about the process, the lessons I've learned over fifty years of both writing and being unable to write. It is the story of revelations and insights I gained from a personal journey over what felt at times like quicksand beneath my feet, or resembled a labyrinth in the gloom ahead. Although it covers many aspects of the craft, it does not purport to be exhaustive or complete. The reader may come up with questions I haven't considered, and may not even be able to answer. But what I have included is everything I wish someone had told me when I was starting out. My goal is to keep the careful reader of this book from making some of the mistakes I made, such as having writer's block for thirty-seven years.

Writer's block, like other less serious bumps in the road, which are too many to list, is something we do to ourselves, and it is within our power to undo it and move on. Because of my ordeal in working through that process, and finally reappearing on the other side as a productive writer, this book was written from the heart.

There are as many ways to write as there are writers. Only one of them is good for you, and that will be the one that enables you to work continuously and productively. I am not a guru—in fact, I disrespect most gurus—I am only a practical working writer of extensive experience. My way will not be the best way for you in its entirety, but it includes ideas and practices that can help you in critical ways. While many of them will help you avoid pitfalls, few of them are shortcuts.

Many of the insights in this book were obtained only at great cost. Your task in reading it is to approach these ideas with an open mind and try them out. Feel free to reject anything that doesn't feel right. Anything that *does* feel right will be like having the wind at your back and a clear view forward. I can only offer what I've learned after making what seemed like all the possible mistakes in this field more than once.

Today the world of publishing is in great flux, and will continue to be as new technologies and marketing systems contend with the old ways of printing and selling

books. Much of this is good news for both writers and readers, although from a distance it can look like a minefield, which it will easily become for the unwary or uninformed. I have included some chapters on the current state of self-publishing, and methods to get you started if that's the route you decide to take. Still, the reader will be wise to factor in the rapid pace of change and to verify any factual information of mine that he decides to act on to see that it is still current.

I am primarily a writer of fiction, specifically mysteries, although I write nonfiction in both book form and magazine articles, and other genres as well. I have framed this book, however, to apply to all types of fiction because the rules of the publishing business that require books be labeled as one genre or another gloss over the process of writing, which does not vary greatly from one species of book to another. Most of it will also be helpful in nonfiction, which may differ less from fiction than its name suggests. A writer in any genre can face the same problem of how to get started at the top of an intimidating blank page, or how to create settings that become active characters in the story. How to persuade his living characters stand up and speak. Every fiction book needs a savvy treatment of pace, plot and character to succeed. It must be sensitive to language and diction, which charts a route into the reader's mind. These are only a few of the issues I address in this book.

Like any of the arts, writing is essentially a journey over rugged terrain. If you are taking the proper degree of risk, much of this terrain will be uncharted on every project. Even with a reliable guide, it is mostly a solitary task, and the only competition you will encounter is the writer you were yesterday. The route travels through a world without external limits; you will never bump the edges, because there are none. You can go as far and as fast as your energy, drive, and imagination will take you. Any limits you discover in the process will be self-imposed, and part of the task must sometimes be to act as your own therapist. Fortunately, self-imposed limits are the easiest kind to remove, but you must be able to recognize what they are first. If you encounter a task you feel you cannot do, the first question to ask yourself is who is telling you that you can't.

We'll begin with a bit about my background, which may be unusual, but it illustrates some of the common pitfalls awaiting an incautious beginner, a condition for

which I was the poster child. You will also find issues in these first two chapters, and later, of course, that could have come from your own struggle.

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