

preface

Writing matters. Why? This is not a rhetorical question, and the fact we need to ask it may come as a surprise. But for reasons large and small it remains a question in contemporary culture, and one that should be answered in the pages of a book. That a book *has* pages, and that the pages contain words built out of letters, seems self-evident, a thing we take for granted—like electric light or running water or the need for heat in winter.

It was not always so. Writing is the junior sibling—the great-great-grandchild, even—of speech. Shouts and screams came first. Unnumbered eons passed before the sounds that men and women make became a sound transcribed. A murmur or a growl or pointed finger or chest-thump sufficed to beguile an intimate or to warn an enemy. Only long years later did the words *I love you*, or *Keep your distance, stranger*, take shape as articulate speech. And all of this was fleeting; before the invention of writing, spoken discourse could not last. For African griots or the Rig Veda or the epic poems of Homer, the mode of transmission was oral and

subject to forgetfulness or change. We have no way of knowing how much of the language is lost.

Writing matters. Why? Although symbolic expression has been with us as a species since the dawn of what we call “recorded” time, the practice of writing is much less ancient than that of pictorial art. More than thirty thousand years ago the clan in Altamira in the north of Spain learned to decorate their rock-roof with images of bison, but the letters *b-i-s-o-n* had not as yet been shaped. Indeed, our ability to picture a *boar* or *cow* or *boat* or *crow* because of an agreed-on arrangement of letters is a gift that keeps on giving; it’s imagination linked to knowledge and a central mode of growth. It’s one of the ways we preserve our shared culture, a signal to the future and a record of the past.

So somewhere in some distant place and time some someone made a mark on stone or wood or ice or clay or sand and somebody else understood it and the process of writing began. It’s been with us ever since. We may “read” the tides or clouds or tracks of game for what they say of water or weather or the likelihood of food. A pattern of hooves or alignment of rocks may tell the experienced hunter which way to look for sustenance or shelter, but a sign that reads “McDonald’s” or “Welcome to Kansas City” requires, of its witness, a different kind of skill. By now the gift of literacy is one we have come to rely on and, as a species, prize. The elders of the tribe still school their children carefully in *A*, then *B*, then *C* . . .



Writing and reading are, of course, two sides of the same coin. The latter depends on the former; the former makes no difference

where the latter ability does not exist. Those words describing its absence—*illiterate*, *analphabetic*, *abecedarian*—are terms of pity if not shame. Conjoined, however, the two skills herald learning, and it's no accident that burned or banned books assault the very notion of civilization itself. To hold an object in one's hand that forms a collection of symbols in recognized sequence, then to read those lines aloud or in attentive silence is—and has been long acknowledged as—a mark of education. It's one of the ways we distinguish ourselves from animals and plants. To paraphrase Descartes (or offer up a variation on his theme), "I write, therefore I am."

Like the carpenter or blacksmith, that member of a clan who could decipher writing had a particular function and was set apart. In the inner temple or the council house, the one who could read signs and portents was one who commanded respect. And ownership or stewardship of other people's written discourse was seen as doubly special, a mark of high-born status. To possess a text and be empowered to read it was, early on, a sign of privilege, of wealth and social standing. The "personal library" used to belong only to the chosen few: scholars or clerics or kings.

Now everyone who's anyone has—or is supposed to have—access to a book. What you hold here in your hand is neither a vanishing species nor a threatened rarity; though we may lament the loss of widespread bookishness, there are more volumes now in print and for sale than ever in our history before. And though the system of transcription may have altered—moving from hieroglyph to emoji, from an illuminated *Book of Hours* to a near-instantaneous tweet—the intention of it stays the same: language

composed to be looked at and by its witness absorbed. This isn't a function of whether we hold in our palm a book or digitally transmitted pixels; what counts are the words in prearranged sequence, the paragraphs and ideas . . .

Further, one of writing's crucial components is, in effect, that of outreach; it permits communication with someone far away or from another time. You don't have to know a person "in person" to benefit from their experience, or to take comfort from a page. A distant stranger or as-yet-unborn reader can profit from instruction, once it's written down. This is why, perhaps, the burning of the library in Alexandria (in 48 BCE) remains a scar in our collective consciousness and on the body politic; it heralded collapse. Five centuries thereafter, the so-called Dark Ages went dark in part because the few remaining books were hidden away, unavailable, and the "renaissance" or rebirth of European civilization came about in part because old texts were rediscovered and brought again to light.

Although oral traditions are central to the preservation of culture, it's also true that the oral tradition has been supplanted by print. Where once we passed on knowledge by reciting it, then memorizing what was said, we now have the additional resource of language in writing preserved. If—to take only a single example—our Constitution were a verbal agreement, and not set down on paper, it would have small present claim on our judiciary. Hammurabi's code (a codex in the Akkadian tongue inscribed in cuneiform for the sixth Babylonian king nearly four thousand years ago) established the kingdom-wide value of goods and penalties for bad behavior because it was marked on a 7.5-foot stone stele. The

Dead Sea Scrolls inform us of the mores of those who read them, just as they informed their readers of a system of belief. When Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, they were—or so the story goes—incised on a tablet; when Martin Luther objected to aspects of Catholic practice, he put those objections in writing and nailed them to the Wittenberg church doors.

The sacred scrolls and secret texts of almost every culture share the fact of being written, no matter with which symbols or in which alphabet. To nullify an oath or treaty is harder once the treaty or oath has been signed. When a word has been transcribed on paper or parchment or marble or slate, it lays claim to consequence. Written language has a gravitas only rarely accorded to speech.



These are sweeping assertions, brave claims. They need some spelling out. This book will be an effort to demonstrate, in writing, why writing does and should matter. I have spent my life engaged by it, as a writer of fiction and nonfiction. There are other forms of expression, of course (poetry, playwriting, history, biography, autobiography, etc.) and I have tried my hand at each, but my focus here will be on the genre of prose fiction. It's the creative mode with which I'm most familiar and for which my heartbeat beats.

This is not, in the strict sense, a scholarly text. A "Note on Sources" ends the book, but most of my citations are part of common parlance and readily available. Other authors have weighed

in elegantly and extensively on the history of language, the evolution of writing, the acquisition of reading, on vision and revision, the way words are coined or change. So though I look at the tradition, I do so only glancingly; I'm more concerned with where we find ourselves at the present moment than with where we've been.

Nor will this book be predictive; we cannot know for certain what the digital revolution entails. In 1455, the German blacksmith, goldsmith, printer, and publisher Johannes Gutenberg engendered (or at any rate facilitated) an enormous change in Western culture with his deployment of movable type and what became known as the Gutenberg Bible. Thereafter, copies could be multiple, and the "volume" of writing increased. But no matter how prescient, the printer could neither have guessed at nor imagined the desktop 3-D version of his printing press, a commonplace today. So we at the birth (or at most the infancy) of the computer age cannot predict what will come next; suffice it to say that the blog and tweet and viral posting and Snapchat and Kindle have altered the nature of language transmission as did Gutenberg before.

We live in the forest and can see only the trees.

Certain trees, however, reward close scrutiny. In the chapters that follow I plan to examine aspects of teaching and being a student, of several seminal texts in our culture, of imitation, originality, and the creative process writ both small and large. The "root" of writing is deep-buried and must be preserved. To continue with if not belabor the comparison, there are some trees now almost altogether extinct in America—the chestnut, the Dutch elm—that once were omnipresent. Yet the green canopy survives and, in some places, thrives.

Why Writing Matters, therefore, is intended both as explanation and an exhortation; the next time you pick up a pencil or pen—or turn on your cellphone or iPad—remember you join in a long-standing practice and a time-honored tradition. It will help to know a little more about the terms of that tradition—what the Palmer Method consists of, for example, and why it lost its currency, or what we mean when we “subscribe” to an idea or magazine or “underwrite” a loan. That “mark on stone or wood or ice or clay or sand” became a mark on paper, and the word “paper” derives from papyrus, a tall aquatic plant of the sedge family that grows in the Nile Valley. When pressed and rolled and written upon, it gave us this enduring thing: spoken language transcribed, a *lingua*, a tongue. And by another alchemy, that tongue when written down became the writer’s voice.

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