



Giving Useful Critiques and Being a Good Beta Reader

David Rodeback



Who is this guy?

- ▶ CMTO of a West Valley City manufacturing firm, where I write stuff: C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, policies, etc.
- ▶ Before Fiction (before 2014)
 - ▶ Academic writing, speech writing, editing (but never fiction), a few scripts for stage or screen (history, biography, and documentary but never fiction)
 - ▶ Taught writing at two large universities and one small college, but never creative writing
 - ▶ Lots of blogging, mostly on topics forbidden at many dinner tables
- ▶ Fiction (2014-)
 - ▶ Two collections of short fiction in print; short stories in several anthologies
 - ▶ Novel forthcoming in 2024(ish)
 - ▶ Mostly contemporary realism (friends, family, love, loss, romance, memory)



Cory Wride

Born September 28, 1969.
Raised in American Fork,
played in our community
parks, and attended our
churches and schools.



Boys play loudly at courage, conquering
imaginary enemies in glorious battle.
They do not know that, when they are
men and foes are real, their courage will
likely be quiet and their glory too often
found in ultimate sacrifice, willing
but unsought. In the shadow of such
sacrifice, it is for us, beyond our
weeping, to remember the boy, honor
the man, and forgive the foe.



Sgt. Cory Wride

Utah County Deputy Sheriff,
died January 30, 2014.
He gave the ultimate
sacrifice while serving
his community.





Demographics: who are you?

(I have questions.)



Assumptions & Disclaimers

- Critique groups differ. We'll assume yours gives you time to read and prepare outside the meetings.
- How to receive and use critiques of your own writing is a separate topic.
- So is how to find beta readers.
- We'll speak in generalities, but . . .
 - Every writer is different.
 - Every story is different.
 - Every critic is different.



One guy's definitions



Critical roles

- Critique group
- Alpha reader
- Critique partner
- Beta reader



Critique roles

- **Critique group**
- Alpha reader
- Critique partner
- **Beta reader**



The map

- My definitions (others may vary)
- Critiques in critique groups
- Q&A
- Things good beta readers do (and don't)
- Possible small detours
- Q&A
- Contact info and book bragging



Contrast

Critique Grouper

- ▶ Developmental editor (often)
- ▶ Early draft
- ▶ A chunk at a time (e.g. chapter or section, when it's ready)
- ▶ May read it twice

Beta Reader

- ▶ Reader, not editor; maybe a SME
- ▶ Finished manuscript (almost final)
- ▶ Often receives the whole thing (perhaps after a sample)
- ▶ Ordinarily read it only once

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Common themes

- ▶ Only candor is useful (positive and negative)
 - ▶ Mix it with people skills
 - ▶ Knowing what works well is important, not just for morale
 - ▶ “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Critique the writing, not the person.
- ▶ A story needs feedback from people who know the genre, but a story is a story, so critique and beta-reading across genres is helpful too.
- ▶ The author is the author. Help it to be the story it is, not the story you want.



Useful critiques in the group



Good AF Writers veterans
remember . . .



Karen and Gigi

Gigi (clean Regency romance):

“The first few times, I just watched. It took me a month or two before I gathered enough courage to read a sample of my work and ask for feedback. I no longer shake when I read, much.”

Karen (YA romance/adventure):

“I was scared, but everyone was super nice. I was surprised that not only was it easier to share my writing with others, but that they were accepting and had good things to say about it. People actually enjoyed what I had to say. The advice I got was invaluable.”

Gigi started 6 years ago. Now look at her.

Gigi Lynn > All Books

Following HOME ABOUT ALL BOOKS

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6 titles

The Masks We Wear (Illusions)
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★★★★★ 7
Kindle Edition
\$0.00 with Kindle Unlimited or \$4.99 to buy
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★★★★★ 7
Kindle Edition

The Secrets We Keep (Illusions)
Part of: Illusions (3 books)
★★★★★ 22
Kindle Edition

Smoke and Shadows (Illusions)
Related to: Illusions
★★★★★ 9
Kindle Edition



Read it twice, if you can

- ▶ First reading: Watch yourself reading.
 - ▶ What hooks you? How soon? How firmly?
 - ▶ What keeps you reading?
 - ▶ What bogs you down or bounces you out of the story?
 - ▶ If it's part of a longer work, how eager are you for the next part?
 - ▶ If it's a whole story or the end of a longer story, does the reading experience feel complete at the end?
 - ▶ If the author mentioned specific concerns, be sure to consider them.



Read it twice if you can, cont.

- ▶ Second reading: Put on your developmental editor cap
 - ▶ What's working? What's not working? Why?
 - ▶ Characters
 - ▶ Dialogue
 - ▶ Setting
 - ▶ Point of view
 - ▶ Blocking
 - ▶ Pacing
 - ▶ Conflict and potential for conflict
 - ▶ Language
 - ▶ Plausibility
 - ▶ Does it fit the genre and the intended audience?



Your work product

Often two of these three:

- ▶ Oral (in a group, maybe 1 minute, maybe several minutes)
- ▶ Written (you write it out)
- ▶ Markup (comments/suggestions and tracked changes in file)



Critique group pet peeves

- ▶ Including line edits or proofreading in oral critiques. (They go in the markup.)
- ▶ Forgetting you're not the author, trying to turn the author's story into the story you want it to be. (Not the same as: I saw this theme, but this other theme is here too, if you want to weave it in.)
- ▶ Not distinguishing between the impossible and the possible-but-unlikely.
- ▶ Not allowing for things to develop further in later chapters. (You want it all now.)
- ▶ Saying things just to say things – or to prove how fine a writer you are. (We're improving our writing here; stroke your ego on your own time.)
- ▶ Arguing with the author. (Disagreeing with other critics is fine.)
- ▶ Taking too much time, frequently interrupting, dominating the discussion.



Field trip

One meeting's critiques of my short story

Each bullet point is from a different critic. I'm partly paraphrasing, partly quoting, and I had asked specifically for thoughts about the mood I was setting.

- ▶ Strong writing. I like it. From the beginning the mood says something will go wrong. He [the first-person narrator] is a loser, but we like him.
- ▶ Fun read. By the middle I was guessing that one or the other was going to die. The comparison of the black rock to the dark sky is clumsy.
- ▶ Expected fantasy, not disappointed that it wasn't. Very satisfying twist at the end. Not sure the female character has the mental capacity to be a biochemist. We need more description [at a certain point]. I was a little disappointed that he [the loser/narrator] didn't get laid in the end.
- ▶ Set the tone really well. The stone fortress is essentially a character in the story, so it should be involved in the ending, but it's not. I'd like a little foreshadowing of the [spoiler omitted] at the end.
- ▶ I want to know the female character better. Would like to be shown, not just told about [a certain action]. Maybe she should drink the wine first, before he drinks."

Which of these are useful critiques?



A sampler of my oral critiques

(of several different authors' work; some are paraphrased)

- ▶ This description is superb – not just vivid, but wrenching.
- ▶ This is a newer usage of [a certain word]; it doesn't fit the period [two centuries ago in England].
- ▶ I like how it gradually grows on her what she just did, and what she's doing; her delayed emotional response feels quite human.
- ▶ You're giving us a fast-moving action scene in long paragraphs built of long, complex sentences and simply too many words – all of which gums up the action. (This is as far as I'll go toward a line edit, unless I've agreed to line-edit: I crossed out about one-third of the words, rearranged a few, suggested more active verb forms, and split up some sentences and paragraphs.)
- ▶ Your narrative is generally third-person limited, but we're a full page in before we're sure who is the viewpoint character in this chapter, and it turns out not to be who we thought. You also head-hopped for a couple of sentences [here], and [there] you slipped into third-person omniscient. (These sins, if committed, ought to be committed purposefully.)
- ▶ The hook at the end of this chapter is so good that I really don't want to wait a week for the next chapter.



Learning from critiques you give

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Remember Karen and Gigi?

Karen:

“As I critique other writers I become a better writer. Seeing faults and strengths in others’ work helps me see them in my own. I did not expect that.”

Gigi:

“Previously, when I’ve had to write about a piece of literature, I entered with the assumption that the writing is of the best quality. That’s all I was required to read critically — the very finest literature. I’d never really looked at the structure of novels, the pacing, the plot points ... but I’m learning as I listen to others critique my work and others’ work.”



If you feel inadequate to critique

A three-course meal



First course: comfort food

- ▶ Giving critiques is a scary step into the scary unknown, much like receiving them. It's okay to notice that.
- ▶ Positive notes aren't just welcome; they're useful.
- ▶ In many groups, you're welcome to observe until you feel ready to critique. For weeks or months, if necessary.
- ▶ The author is still the author, responsible to identify and keep the wheat and blow away the chaff, including yours.
- ▶ Critiquing outside a genre you don't know from your reading is useful to you and the writer; story is story. (Just be conscious that you don't know the genre; leave genre-specific matters to others; learn from the strengths of each genre.)
- ▶ You don't have to see everything anyone else sees when they critique. You just have to be you. You are a highly qualified reader and more of a writer than the mass of humanity. So gird up your loins, fresh courage take, and critique.
- ▶ Authors are people too. Imposter syndrome is real. And just because the author's last book succeeded doesn't mean they've figured out how to write this one.



Second course: reality sandwich

- As a critic, you will cause the author pain. You can do it humanely or cruelly (choose humanely), but you can't avoid it.
- If you hurt someone, fix it quickly.
- You may be tempted to wreak vengeance on a writer whose critique causes you pain. (Don't.)
- Often, as you listen to others' critiques, you'll see what you missed and what you got wrong. Others will see it too. Tomorrow is another day.

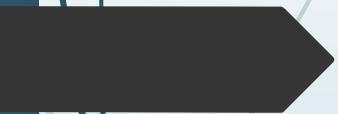
Dessert: some of my favorites

Ask me why.

You, at your level of reading and writing, can do at least some of these for your authors.

- In the margin of a chapter near the end of a novel:
 - “I’m crying now.”
 - A page or two later: “Now I’m really crying.”
 - End of scene: “I can’t stop crying.”
- “It’s a well written first chapter, but your heroine is passive. She needs to act, or we won’t care about her.”
Later revision, different critic: “A strong female lead with resilience, wit and a powerful mind.”
- Three of the best writers and critics in my group, critiquing my short story, debated for several minutes among themselves what it’s about.
- *Original: You could just forget all this online stuff and fall in love with me instead.*
Critique: I’d like her to avoid dropping the “L” word too soon – it feels a step too far when she’s already making herself extremely vulnerable.
Final version: You could just forget all this online stuff and date me instead.
- “I was much too captivated to take notes, the first time *and* the second time.”

Is this useful or just flattering? “I was too involved in the story to stop and analyze it.”



Q&A



Let's beta-read

A's, B's, C's, and D's



A is for **Ask** (if author doesn't tell you)

- If you'd like to beta-read, ask the author.
 - Even if it's not your genre. (Might be welcome anyway.)
 - Even if you're not the target audience. (Might be welcome anyway.)
 - Even if you've never done it before. (Everyone has a first time.)
- Ask about deadlines; take them seriously.
- Ask what format the author prefers for feedback. (Maybe the author will ask what you prefer.)
- Ask about expectations.
- Ask (at the end?): Does the author have any particular concerns?



B is for **Be**

- Be a reader, not an editor
 - What works really well, hooks you, keeps you reading, delights you?
 - Which characters draw you in? Which don't?
 - What bumps you out of the story? Which are the boring parts?
 - Mark your emotional reactions (the key ones, quickly in passing).
- Be yourself. Every reader is different anyway.
 - If you can be an authentic sensitivity reader for some aspect of the story, add that to your beta-reading.
- Be professional and respectful, not awestruck.
- Be willing to explain your notes (not defend them).



C is for big words that start with c

- Communicate (with the author)
 - If you realize you're the wrong beta reader, say so.
 - If the deadline starts to slip, say so.
 - If you have questions, ask.
 - Not unusual for beta readers to flake out (50%). Just communicate.
- Strict confidentiality.



D is for **Do** and **Don't**

- ▶ **Don't** try to do everything. **Do** you. There is no other reader exactly like you in the literary world. The author is lucky to have you.
- ▶ **Don't** try to have something to say beyond what you have to say. Bring what you bring. It's enough, and to the writer, it's a gift.
- ▶ **Do** mark a few proofreading things, when they stick out, but **don't** detour from your reading.

A variety of my comments on a forthcoming Regency epistolary novel by Gigi Lynn (These are bumps.)

After tying Brownie to the Hawthorne hedge, I made my way back and watched from the shadows of the verge. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but from the rolling gate of the other two men, I could tell that they were sailors.



David Rodeback

To this point, we know only that she has seen M. Hugo. We know nothing of these sailors.

in the Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa in particular.”

Rupert told him no such thing, since my brother doesn't know the focus of my study. I scowled but Lord Wycliffe darted a glance behind me and continued, “Since I briefly met



David Rodeback

I thought this came up in the initial reveal.

To: Cora
32 Portman Square
Sandgate, Kent



David Rodeback

Shouldn't this be London?

stalking prey than a bored gentleman doing his duty. I think—

No, I'm not going to think of him anymore.




David Rodeback


Perhaps: No, I will think of him no more. (As written, sounds too modern to my ear.)

A variety of my comments (Things that work well for me)


But then Mrs. Belsing came up and put her hand on his arm. You may not know of her. She is the widow of General Belsing, who is a much-celebrated veteran of the American wars.

Since that whole situation ended so poorly for England, I don't know why he is so well thought of. However, that has nothing to do with last night's ball where Mrs. Belsing smiled up at Lord Wycliffe with such adoration in her eyes. Then she leaned forward far enough that the whole of her late husband's company could have conducted maneuvers in the décolletage of her gown.

 **David Rodeback**
LOL. Not kidding.


 **David Rodeback**
Yeah, LOL here too.

Perhaps after this conflict ceases, we should tour the grand cities of the continent. You could bring your wife, perhaps your son as well. I've been thinking that I need to follow your example and start a family of my own. For me this is a sudden and unexpected impulse, even if I am nearly four and thirty. My desire to serve my country and to see the world has always in the past

 **David Rodeback**
Well timed and nicely played in passing.


Dear Georgie,

Lord Sutton came to call yesterday. My comments at Lady Carlyle's supper last week seem to have inspired him to a burst of careless research and a flurry of underdeveloped thought. He came prepared with new and, to his mind, stronger arguments in his defense.

 **David Rodeback**
Love it.

suck up in crumps.

And his clothes, you could not miss him in a crowd, they are so bright, and they seldom match. One day he wore a scarlet waistcoat with a lavender coat. I was almost blinded.

 **David Rodeback**
LOL

A variety of my beta-reader comments (a smorgasbord)



David Rodeback

It's not clear to me what help she's requesting. Is that intentional?



David Rodeback

Lost me. Who was it?



David Rodeback

Where is he? To her right or her left?



David Rodeback

I had lost track of the fact that she writes fiction. Perhaps that means a reminder or two would have been in order.



David Rodeback

Word choice – old meaning? – in the modern meaning the next clause contradicts it.



David Rodeback

The bear episode is clever, unexpected, and a nice little diversion, duly connected to the story by impeding her mission.



David Rodeback

Nice job making me wonder if he is the vicomte or isn't. Georgie was indiscreet, I think, and I wonder if it will pose problems later.



David Rodeback

Good time for this development, I think.



David Rodeback

Tee hee.



David Rodeback

I like how she is oblivious to his interest in her, even if the reader grows suspicious of it.



David Rodeback

I was worried a little about pacing, given where we are in the book and the pace at which things are developing, but this is well placed and I'm no longer worried.



David Rodeback

This crucial scene is well crafted.



David Rodeback

I'm reading this in the late evening, and I am happy (for your sake) to report it sufficiently engaging that I want ... to read ... just ... one ... more ... letter ...

Or maybe two. Or three.

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War stories (just two)

- “I read that conversation in the first chapter and decided this isn’t a book I want to read. Sorry.”
- Ex-girlfriend becomes superfan, 39 years after she Dear John’d me and married that guy at BYU.
 - Invited her to be one of my second-round beta readers.
 - Sent her a sample to gauge her interest: first two chapters.
 - She sent back a couple of excellent notes.
 - I made a revision, sent the first two chapters again.
 - Or so I thought . . .
 - (Human stuff happens. May as well enjoy it. At least roll with it.)




Raise your game

- ▶ If it's not your genre, learn. Work at it a little.
 - ▶ Ursula LeGuin: "If ... it's not a kind [of book] you're used to, you probably need to learn how to read it. You need to learn the genre."
(*"Genre: A Word Only a Frenchman Could Love,"* in *Words Are My Matter*, p. 11)
 - ▶ Regency and I
- ▶ I think my little sister would enjoy beta-reading this. May I share it?
- ▶ Beta-reading after you've alpha-read (or after critique group)
- ▶ Report what you're thinking, wondering, suspecting, foreseeing
- ▶ If you're beta-reading historical fiction and you wonder about anachronistic words, use Google's Ngram Viewer


A variety of my comments (what I'm thinking, plus two)

My dearest friend,


The days of adventure are over. Romance is dead. We were not waylaid by a highwayman on our way to London.

 **David Rodeback**
I still love this beginning.

has already begun establishing a new organization and is working with a group of local smugglers willing to transport French goods with discretion. Additionally, he has already managed to find a place to store the contraband until it can be suitably distributed.


 **David Rodeback**
A certain cellar, perhaps?


a different light. I have put off certain responsibilities, thinking I had all the time in the world. Now I find those very things I have avoided have grown in importance to me. I hope to live long enough to make changes.


 **David Rodeback**
Good potential.


nd myself differently because of them. They are unrequited, but they are mine, and I. My love may never bear the fruit I wish. In time it will wither and die, but for now,


 **David Rodeback**
First use of this word?



 **David Rodeback**
And I'm thinking, what could possibly go wrong? ☐

 **David Rodeback**
Aha. I think I know who this man is.

 **David Rodeback**
Yeah, this could go badly . . .

 **David Rodeback**
Okay, she's totally smitten now. Increases the tension!

 **David Rodeback**
The thought had crossed my mind.

 **David Rodeback** April 21, 2024 
It appears this world was rarely used in the period; it only became current toward the end of the 19th century.

Google Books Ngram Viewer

male bonding

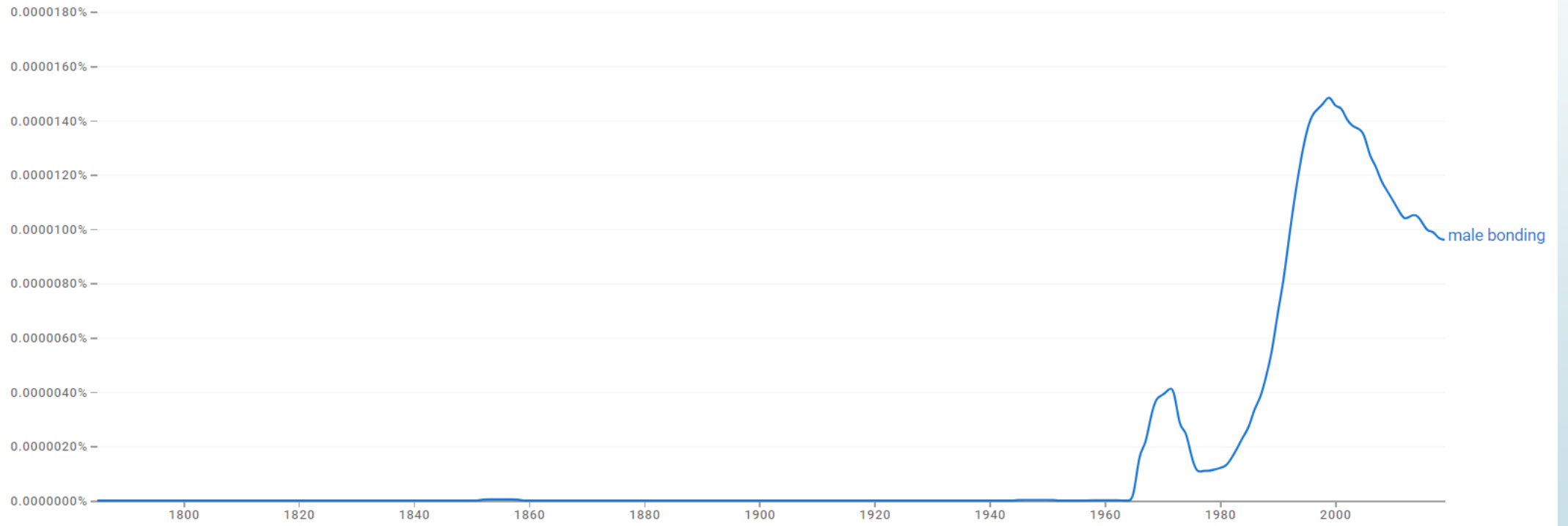
X ?

1785 - 2019

British English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing

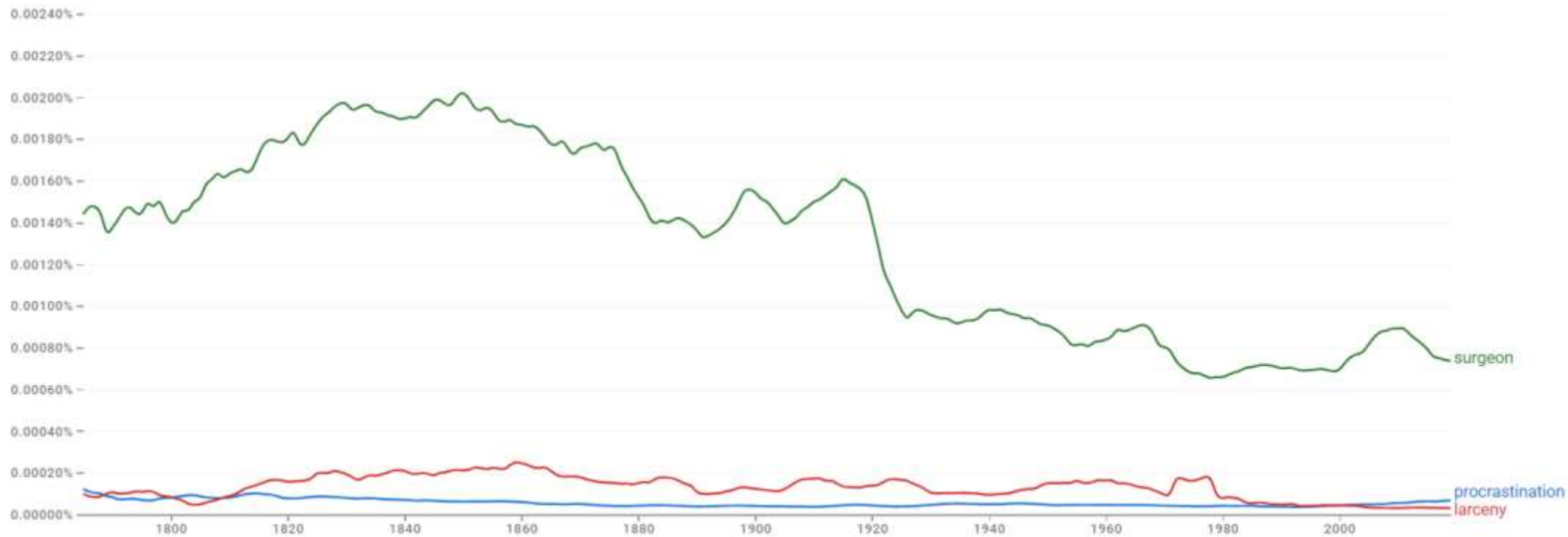


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Google Books Ngram Viewer

procrastination,larceny,surgeon

1785 - 2019 British English (2019) Case-Insensitive Smoothing



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What's in it for you, the critic or beta reader?

Nothing.

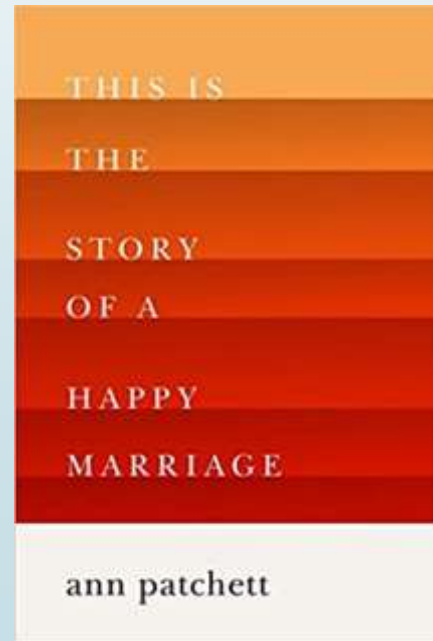
Unless you

- Want to be a better writer
- Want to help other writers do a difficult thing
- ... And thereby change the world

Ann Patchett

Imagine running over a butterfly with an SUV. Everything that was beautiful about this living thing — all the color, the light and movement — is gone. What I'm left with is the dry husk of my friend, the broken body chipped, dismantled, and poorly reassembled. Dead. That's my book.

“The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life”



George Saunders

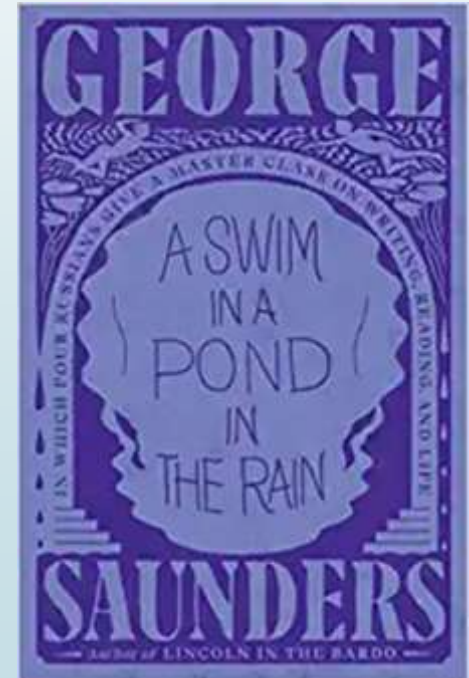
To write a story that works, that moves the reader, is difficult, and most of us can't do it. Even among those who have done it, it mostly can't be done. ... There's intuition involved, and stretching – trying things that are at the limit of our abilities, that may cause mistakes.

...

It's hard to get any beauty at all into a story. If and when we do, it might not be the type of beauty we've always dreamed of making. But we have to take whatever beauty we can get, however we can get it.

That's the kind of story I want to write, the kind that stops being writing and starts being life.

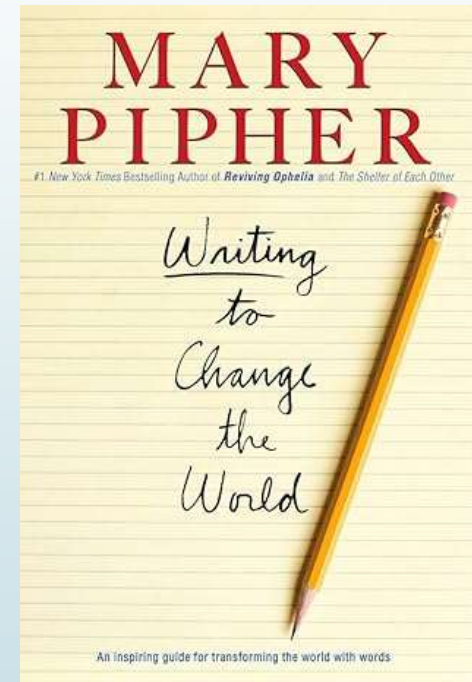
But, Lord, it's harder than it looks.



Mary Pipher

I am not interested in weapons, whether words or guns. I want to be part of the rescue team. . . . The rescuers will be those people who help other people to think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded. They will be an antidote to those people who disconnect us. They will de-objectify, re-humanize, and make others more understandable and sympathetic. (p. 5)

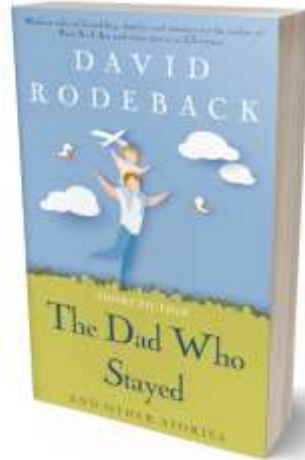
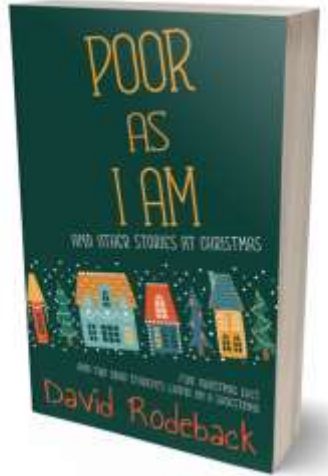
Any form of writing can change the world. Your goal is to find the form that allows you to use every one of your talents in the service of what you consider to be your most important goals. You want to search for what you alone can say and then how you can say it most effectively. (p. 27)





Thank you!

Where to find me and my books



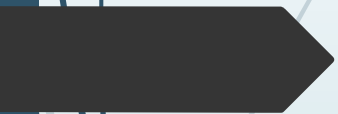
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Q&A