

ROBERT BENSON

THE PRACTICE
of a WRITING LIFE

Dancing
on the
Head of a Pen



Praise for
Dancing on the Head of a Pen

“Robert Benson’s *Dancing on the Head of a Pen* is a gem. It is wise, witty, and inspiring—a trifecta seldom achieved by a book on the writing life.”

—JAMES SCOTT BELL, best-selling author of
Plot & Structure

“With deceptive simplicity and a kind of almost-seductive easiness in his voice, Robert Benson lays open before us the filigreed mystique of the writing life in all its beauty, its unmitigated angst, and its inescapable vocation. This one is a classic.”

—PHYLLIS TICKLE, author of *The Divine Hours*

“I needed this book. And I need to read it again—and probably again. Thank goodness, it’s a pure delight to read. Encouraging, honest, practical, and important. If you’re a writer—or have any aspirations to become one—Robert Benson’s words will resonate deeply within you. I will highly recommend this to all my writer friends and even the writer friends I haven’t yet met.”

—MELODY CARLSON, author of more than 200 books, including *Finding Alice* and *Diary of a Teenage Girl* series

“There is little more enjoyable for a writer than to read about the craft, especially when the book is fashioned with the grace and style of Robert Benson’s prose. You don’t even have to be a writer to savor this delicacy. Just do yourself a favor and settle in for a treat that goes down like dessert but is also full of nutrition. I read everything I can find on writing, and I loved this.”

—JERRY B. JENKINS, novelist and biographer

“I love reading and spending time with what Robert Benson writes. I think it is because his words and God’s Spirit meet and dance on each page. In this book Benson generously shares how writing becomes art. *Dancing on the Head of a Pen* is direction for struggling writers and balm for the bruised writer’s heart.”

—SHARON EWELL FOSTER, author of the Christy Award–winner *Passing by Samaria* and Shaara Prize–winner *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*

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on the
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ROBERT BENSON

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*This book is for
Ms. Jones of Merigold,
who first suggested I write these things down.*

*It is for
Messrs. Grady, Fotinos, Major, and Cobb,
Mmes. Mao, Copan, Lind, and Clements,
who kept giving me chances.*

*And it is for all those
who hear the call to wrestle with words and
have the courage to tell the stories
that are the salvation of us all.*

*And as always,
it is for the Friends of Silence and of the Poor,
whoever and wherever you may be.*

To condense from one's memories and fantasies and small discoveries dark marks on paper which become handsomely reproducible many times over still seems to me, after nearly thirty years concerned with the making of books, a magical act.... To distribute oneself thus, as a kind of confetti shower falling upon the heads and shoulders of mankind out of bookstores and the pages of magazines, is surely a great privilege and a defiance of the usual earthbound laws whereby human beings make themselves known to one another.

—JOHN UPDIKE, *Odd Jobs*

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I

Dark Marks on a Page

On a Book About Making a Book

Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating.... It is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself.

—ANNIE DILLARD, *The Writing Life*

“I THINK I HAVE A STORY TO TELL. I JUST DO NOT KNOW how to begin. Can you tell me how to write a book?”

Most often I hear such a comment during the question-and-answer session after I have given a reading or a talk. The question also appears in some of the letters from people who are kind enough to read my books and kind enough to write me after they have read them.

The question comes up more and more these days. The digital age has changed so many things about the way writers and publishers find each other and ferret out access to sales and media outlets. And more and more the writer must not only make the art but deliver the audience as well. The whole process can seem a little daunting.

I always take the question seriously. I was once in the same spot and grateful for any help that might move me along toward learning to get a story down on paper.

Henri Nouwen was right when he said, “As long as we have stories to tell to each other there is hope.”

Sharing the things I know about how a person goes about telling his story seems only right. Perhaps it is even, as the old prayer book says, a good and joyful thing.



My father came into my office one day at the publishing business the family owned and handed me a stack of cassette tapes and a stack of manuscript pages, and then he gave me an assignment. “I met this young woman in Canada,” he said. “I liked the things she was saying when she was speaking onstage, and I told her we would help her make a book out of it. I have been working on it some, but I cannot seem to capture it somehow. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

The book I helped the young woman make in those

early days of my wordsmithing career is considerably different from the books now published under my own name. But it was the first chance given to me to learn how to make the only art I ever wanted to make—a book.

It was my first ghostwriting assignment. I was nineteen years old.

Many years and many books later, I found myself leaning on my best friend's doorjamb on a warm afternoon. I was half conversing about writing a book and half watching the roses blooming in our back garden. Out of one eye I was also watching the fountain beside the path that leads to the studio where I write.

I always enjoy conversations about writing and writers. To be sure, the first joy of keeping such a conversation going is rooted in the fact that any conversation that keeps a particular writer from the burden of trudging back to the studio and back to writing sentences is a welcome conversation. The subject hardly matters. What counts is the ability to put enough words into the air to delay the inevitable.

My friend told me about her recent conversation with a

sweet woman we both know. Our mutual friend had been thinking she might try to write a book. The two of them thought a book might be down in there somewhere, hidden in one of the stories of her life, but the one who aspired to be the teller of the tale did not know how to begin.

“What should I tell her?” my friend asked. “What does she do to begin? How does one go about writing a book?”



The summer sun dropped down another little bit, and to get it out of my eyes, I shifted from the left doorjamb to the right and went into my best artist-as-teacher pose.

“This is the first thing I would tell someone who wants to make a book.”

And then I began to expound, and the first thing and the other nine or so went on for a bit. I am a writer. Embellishing is one of my gifts. I also know how to stall when my own writing is not going well.

I described the steps I take when I begin to make a book.

Some of them are habits stolen from other writers, writers far better than I am. Some of them are practices discovered on my own after years of dancing on the head of a pen. Some are disciplines I stumbled upon to feed both the caliber of the writing and the work of being a writer.

After some forty years and nearly twenty books, I have learned I do not know a lot about a lot of things, but I do know how to write a book.

At the end of the conversation with my friend, the speaker in me went for the cheap joke as always.

“Here endeth the lesson.”

After the appropriate groan with the complimentary grin, she said, “Write all that down, and I will pass it along. I think it can help anyone who has a story and does not know how to begin. I think it might even help people who have been writing for a long time.”

She has been in publishing for almost as long as I have

been writing. If she says an idea or two of mine might help someone, I say, with a proper nod to the legendary songwriter Paul Simon, “Who am I to blow against the wind?”

Hence, this book.



Sometimes the people who ask the question go on to say they are not sure they can be creative on paper every day. I tell them with all seriousness I am not sure I can be creative on paper each day either. Most of the time, writing a book more closely resembles digging a ditch than participating in some transcendent creative experience.

A pen and a keyboard and paper and ink are nothing more or less than the tools of a writer. They are to be regarded the way a construction worker regards a well-worn set of boots and a well-loved shovel. The tools simply remind the worker to get up each day and go back to work no matter how much or little progress was made the day before. I became better at the craft of writing sentences on the day I

finally understood I was engaged in a construction project as much as an artistic pursuit.

Writing a book is nowhere near as easy as it looks and heaven knows not as easy as some claim. Writing a book is seldom easy, even for those who have written some of them.

Fellow writers still ask the “how do you write” question too.

Most of us who write are curious about, if not downright fascinated by, how other writers go about their work, especially those writers whose work we admire. We each have our own way of going about the work, a way we have figured out through trial and error over the years. But listening to someone else describe the tricks she uses to keep herself digging every day reminds us of what works for us, and what does not, and helps us remember to be attentive to the things we already know to do.

My friend who writes historical novels set in Scotland told me she plays Scottish music on the stereo while she

writes. Her trick reminded me I need silence in order to write. The next afternoon I removed the radio from my studio.

Another writer told me he works best late at night, reminding me which time of day works best for me to put new words on blank pages. I went home and rearranged my calendar to protect those hours each day, the hours best suited to my taking up a pen and working along a few more words' worth in the ditch.

I know writers who work in hotel rooms and coffee-houses, in the hours between public appearances, and in the poorly lit seats on red-eye flights. They call it writing in the cracks.

I know writers who write first drafts by hand, writers who dictate first drafts, writers who type the first draft on old manual typewriters even though the *e* and *s* keys have been stuck for years.

I know writers who write three books in a series every year. I know writers for whom a book a year is the norm. And I know writers who sometimes go five or six years between manuscripts.

I know a writer who used to make notes and scribble sentences and ideas on the back of business cards and napkins. At the end of the day, he would put them in a drawer in his bathroom, along with his spare change. A full drawer signified the time had come to move the bits of paper to a grocery bag and put them under the sink. When he had two bags full of stuff, the time had come to try to make a new book out of the mess.

There are lots of tricks to writing a book. The ones I know best are the ones I use in my studio.

Any of us—writer, designer, potter, painter, sculptor, architect, and on and on—wisely studies the habits practiced by the artists who inspire us in the first place. Those habits can guide us as we try to learn to do the work ourselves.

I have done this as I have gone along, so my answers to questions about how to write a book are bound by certain limitations. The most obvious: I only know how Robert

Benson writes a book. My way has been cobbled together over the years as I've borrowed a practice from one writer, incorporated a discipline from another, listened to others as they described the way they do their work.

The way I write a book promises to work for only one writer—Robert Benson. Whether or not this way will work for someone else remains to be seen. In the end each writer will have to find his own way. Anything I offer is merely a starting point at best.

But knowing how to begin the writing can often be the hardest part, whether one is talking about a day's work or a week's worth, a sentence or a paragraph, a story or a chapter, the first book or a sequel.

The only thing that may be harder than beginning is continuing to write. To write every day, week in and week out, guided by some vision you know you may not be writer enough to reproduce anyway, is very hard. Painters say that the art on the canvas is never the vision that was in their minds when they began. It is the same for writers more

often than not. What writers hear in their heads is not always what they manage to put on the page.

While I am not certain exactly how you come to these pages, how you get up in the morning to dig in the ditch you are currently digging, I can tell you what I do when the time comes to pick up my tools, pull on my boots, and go to work.

And maybe it can help.



My hope for this little book is that it will help you write one of your own.

If you are not sure whether or not you can write a book, this one will not answer the question. You will have to write a book before you will know. I do hope these pages will give you a way to begin to make dark marks on pages of your own.

If you already write and have habits and practices and

disciplines that have worked for you before, your practices may be very different from mine. These practices that keep me working may do little more than remind you of how your way of working suits you.

But if they remind you to practice more faithfully, more rigorously, more diligently, I will count the dark marks on these pages worthwhile.



May they be at least a place to begin. Or begin again.

“O begin,” writes the famous preacher and author John Wesley about starting out on another mysterious journey of faith, a journey not dissimilar to writing a book. “O begin.”

And now we shall.



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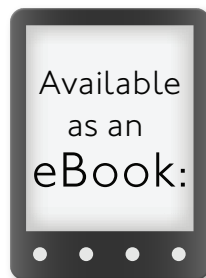
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