



Why Write?: A Master Class on the Art of Writing and Why it Matters

Mark Edmundson

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Why write?

Why write when it sometimes feels that so few people really read--read as if their lives might be changed by what they're reading? Why write, when the world wants to be informed, not enlightened; to be entertained, not inspired? Writing is backbreaking, mindbreaking, lonely work. So why?

Because writing, as celebrated professor Mark Edmundson explains, is one of the greatest human goods. Real writing can do what critic R. P. Blackmur said it could: add to the stock of available reality. Writing teaches us to think; it can bring our minds to birth. And once we're at home with words, there are few more pleasurable human activities than writing. Because this is something he believes everyone ought to know, Edmundson offers us *Why Write?*, essential reading--both practical and inspiring--for anyone who yearns to be a writer, anyone who simply needs to know how to get an idea across, and anyone in between--in short, everyone.

Why Write?: A Master Class on the Art of Writing and Why it Matters Details

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From Reader Review Why Write?: A Master Class on the Art of Writing and Why it Matters for online ebook

J.j. says

Star One: Accessibility and book length.

Star Two: Chapter Titles

Star Three: Sweet sayings sprinkled throughout this dessert of words such as an Ann Marlowe quote of, "...If I had to offer up a one-sentence definition of addiction, I'd call it a form of mourning for the irrecoverable glories of the first time."

Star Four: The gold nugget simply stated on page 120: "Writing is its own reward."

(absent) Star Five: In order to access these pages to the point where a typical aspiring hack can stumble upon enough kindle to light the fire under his ass, a reader must protect his head. That is from all of the literary names dropping down from the sky, enough pompous precipitation to make for another dead bookmark, buried forever in an unfinished manuscript. But if the less-well-read-than-a-professor reader can humble himself to reach the end, many tasty word vittles will be enjoyed. Hi-lighted even. Encouraging memoir writing in old age may be serving for the log in whatever little flame may arise from this reader being educated and coached through this book.

Aurora Dimitre says

This is, without a doubt, the most pretentious thing I've read in my entire life. Oh dear God is it pretentious. Hence the lower rating. *However* I did like some of the ideas that Edmundson put forth--there were a couple of chapters that I didn't mind for a while, and I think someone that had a grand idea of what a magic life-changer writing is would get a lot more out of this than I did. But I'm in the "dude, writing is so much fun that's why I do it" camp, so this book for me? Didn't quite do it all of the time.

Sometimes. Sometimes I could nod and be like, "Yeah, that's a good idea/set of words/view on this subject" but that was greatly outnumbered by the times I would just have to *laugh* at how pretentious and like... *elevated* most of his diction and his ideas were.

Marion says

At times inspiring, at others comical, Mark Edmundson manages to cover an array of motivations, reasons, and benefits connected with writing. Each chapter reads almost like an independent essay, so this is a book that you can take your time with, reading a bit here and there.

He relies a bit too heavily on European classics. Obviously he has a preference that limits his appreciation for contemporary and diverse writers. However, he only uses these as examples or to highlight his points, so adding in more diversity would enrich rather than significantly alter the book. He does make some efforts in this regard, but there is more to be said by more authors than the ones he repeatedly turns to.

Overall, however, this book is inspiring for anyone who wants to live a writing life. Edmundson makes a case that writing is a worthy endeavour in its own right. Publishing and all the things that come along with

writing (or not) are not his focus. He doesn't ignore the realities and challenges of writing, but it's not an advice book. It's a book that transcends the material reality of writing to delve into what we gain on a personal, "spiritual" level (for lack of a better word).

Gaylord Dold says

Why Write? A Master Class on the Art of Writing and Why it Matters by Mark Edmundson (Bloomsbury, New York 2016)

Mark Edmundson is a professor at the University of Virginia with books to his credit like *Why Teach?* and *Why Read?* *Why Write?* un-limbers the old cliché that the mind is a muscle and then cobbles together a hyperbolic set of examples that demonstrate the truth of the cliché by reference to "writing" as psychological, moral and spiritual weight-lifting. Not only has modern neuroscience and cognitive psychology begun to give a frame to what philosophers used to call "mind", but the frame itself has come to fruition in works by Nobel prize winners like Daniel Kahnemann and serious philosopher/scientists like Daniel Dennett, Stephen Pinker, Jeremy Rifkin, Antonio Damasio and many others. Edmundson makes explicit his claim that "the mind is a muscle"; then, he continues to pile error on error by claiming that the muscled-up mind produces a muscled-up memory. Modern science now knows that, at best, memory is a hit-and-miss proposition, though certain feats of memory can be produced with training of a specific sort. Even taken as "metaphor", the "mind as muscle" idea is false.

Edmundson claims that he's examining the "art" of writing, but almost nothing about the "art" itself is mentioned. Short chapters explore why writers write (for revenge, to get the last word, for money, etc.) and a section or two explores revision and related items. However, the "art" of writing is pretty much untouched, either as a theory of creative cognition or as aesthetics. Here again modern neuroscience and cognitive psychology ride to the rescue: If one wants to understand the relation between creativity and aesthetics there are modern scientific masters at work like the pioneering Howard Gardner and Eric Kandel (among many others).

One thing Edmundson says rankles: Writing is not about publishing, he says. Writing is about writing. Sadly, this is untrue. Writing to be read is about the only thing worthwhile about real writing. If you do not wish to present your work for publication, then consort with your "daily diary" for a few minutes a day, then keep it hidden under lock and key.

This chatty, banal book has Kafka spinning in his grave.

Sara says

Yeah, this is about as white and male as you can get. The women are a bit of an afterthought; in fact, very often, he'll add "and women" and you can practically see him blinking at his desk and hurriedly scrawling that in. He mentions Mary Shelley, he mentions Woolf, and retells Rebecca Solnit's "idiot in Aspen" story very obviously without naming her (why?!) because he then tries to imply that she was exaggerating. Rebecca Solnit is a far better writer than Edmundson, although I did like "Teacher." Oh, and he likes Franzen. All that aside, he says exactly what you need to feel a bit better (realistically) about what you're

doing and why you're doing it. I'm glad I read it.

Laura Luzzi says

I like reading about writers and books about books. I all just fascinates me. I felt right at home with this book, certainly kept my interest throughout. I like how this man writes, so now I'm on to Why Read and Why Teach and I don't think I'll regret it.

Roben says

This is the very class that I needed. Enjoyed every word

David says

I've got to be careful because apparently bad reviews can cause physical ailments in writers. According to Edmundson, Keats died earlier than necessary because of the insensitive reviews of his poetry. I've always suspected this was the case, that's why I never give less than 5 stars. (4 stars if I know for a fact the author is in rude health) However, I do have some slightly negative things to say, so may cause Edmundson to develop some mild cold symptoms. For this I apologise.

This book starts off great. I loved the chapter "To Catch a Dream". It was really good on the importance and inevitability of the initial rubbish-stage of creation.

He was also genuinely and charmingly self-deprecating. Later his self-deprecation becomes a coy false-modesty. In the chapter about failure he discusses a book of his that was so popular, it got universally positive reviews. Great, right? No, apparently this was a failure because it meant that the book was too popular, not challenging enough. Don't worry, eventually the book got a few bad reviews. This reassured him that his book was still sufficiently literary enough to give the insensitive shmucks (the general audience) some problems.

He has that annoying 1960's folk-music idea that popularity equals emptiness.

Where does that come from? Does it derive from modernism, that contempt for the masses and popular entertainment? Wherever it comes from, it seems very dated now.

Edmundson could have written this in the 1950/60's. He's slightly ironic about Hemmingway's macho thing, but essentially believes in it. There's lots of athletic comparisons. Writing is like going to the gym, etc. No pain, no gain. Alcohol is also great. He stops short of saying that starving in a garret is good too.

Although he has a chapter on money, he really completely ignores economics in a way that only a teacher of Creative Writing could do.

It might more accurately have been called Why Write (while having the financial security of teaching Creative Writing).

He quotes Schopenhauer in a high-minded way in the chapter on money, but neglects to point out that Schopenhauer had a private income (Schopenhauer also insisted that no one could find happiness unless they had a private income).

You get the sense that Edmundson believes everything he's saying, and it's certainly a pleasure to read (he can certainly write – I gave it 5 stars), but I was left feeling that this 'high-art', literary model of writing is out-dated, and a bit of a scam.

Staci says

I received this book for free through Goodreads Giveaways

This is a 3.5 star book.

"In general there are no great reviews and there are no great reviewers...Too many reviews are studies in resentment. They condense the rancor of the reviewer who cannot write and calm the envy of those who wish to write and cannot." Well then, this review must be taken with a grain of salt (or two, or three). I am not a writer nor do I wish to write but, rather like the friend of the author mentioned in an early chapter, I do at times wish "to have written".

The "To Get Even" chapter is not as good as some of the others but that may reflect the author's feeling towards the topic: after all, even if revenge is the driving force for some writers, they would probably be somewhat reticent to admit to such a base motivation, as Edmundson himself appears reticent. Most of the other chapters are better although the reader can be excused for feeling that he or she is not really a *real* reader since Edmundson, like most of those who write about writing or reading or "letters" will happily name drop writers left and right, though--thankfully--not to the level of superfluity that some do. However, the "To Read as a Writer" chapter is wonderful, though that may be more because, having loved reading since I was young myself, I fully connect with Edmundson when he talks about the joys of early reading. There was such appreciativeness of and clear love for reading in that chapter that now I want to read Edmundson's other book, *Why Read?*. (And this despite the fact that Edmundson loses some major points in my book by calling *Sense and Sensibility* "not quite readable...though almost". I know lots of readers prefer *Emma* over *Sense and Sensibility* and I have long since accepted that they and I will have to agree to disagree but *Mansfield Park*?! Over *Sense and Sensibility*? "Not quite readable"?! Compared to *Mansfield Park*? Don't get me wrong, I like *Mansfield Park* just fine and think it's better than *Persuasion* and most definitely better than *Northanger Abbey* but there's no way I would rate it over *Sense and Sensibility*. The fact that Edmundson does so makes me wonder if he has "not quite" taken leave of his senses.)

It should be noted that the subtitle of this book is a bit deceptive; this is not really "A Master Class on the Art of Writing", that is, this book will not tell you *how* to write, it simply (and only) talks about *why* to write, or rather, why (some) people do write. It may be a good book if you are a writer who has perhaps hit writer's block and you're thinking to yourself "Why am I putting myself through this torture again?" Or, if like me, you have or have had grand notions of "having written" but without ever putting pen to paper (or in this day and age, fingers to keyboard) and no sign or clear notion that you ever will. It's a good look into the motivations behind writing but that by itself is not enough to make you a writer. It's a bit like reading books-about-books or adding every book that's ever been recommended, directly or indirectly, to your to-read list or deciding to follow a famous booklist such as *The New Lifetime Reading Plan: The Classic Guide to World Literature, Revised and Expanded* or *Great Books of the Western World* -- the intention may be there and you may feel a bit better about yourself afterwards but you've not actually made any progress towards the end goal whatsoever.

David Kent says

The subtitle billing the book as a "master class" is misleading, at best. In reality the book is a series of essays ruminating on various aspects of writing. The book is a mix of memoir, writing insight, and life insight, along with occasional writing advice, interspersed with voluminous asides (parenthetically presented, of course). I didn't really learn much about writing from it, though I did enjoy reading it, or at least parts of it. Still, it's worth reading if you're a writer (or aspire to be). The stream of consciousness laced with subtle humor (and parentheses) is a pleasant enough read.

Janelle Hanchett says

Enjoyed this. Reminded me of so many of my college professors. Very smart. Very well written. Also very white and male, and a touch elitist. Women - both the authors he cited and the writers he was addressing - seem like an afterthought. Still, he got me. Would have given it 3.5 stars if that was an option, but couldn't stomach 3.

I enjoyed it too much. Damn these professors and their wily ways.

Jessica Manuel says

This is my fourth Mark Edmundson book. Each is better than the last. Why Write? is definitely not a gimmicky how-to book. This is a sort of love-hate letter to writing as a discipline. Edmundson acknowledges the ups and downs, the neurotic tendencies, the glory, the nonsense, the magic, and all the irrationality that goes into the craft of writing. Short chapters keep things interesting and moving. It's a delightful read and a book I highlighted up and down.

Bo Sørensen says

Will read it again!

Lily says

This is a thorough and meditative look at writing and its purposes, written incredibly well and with lots of consideration of the purposes and reasons of writing. You can tell Edmundson is a teacher, and likely a very good one, with interesting, humorous lectures. He is definitely a man of his era and of the canon, using examples of mid-century postmodernists (mostly those tome writing white men like Mailer, Bellow, etc.) and those classic romantics (Keats, Whitman, Yeats, etc.).

Christine says

Despite the chapter on reviews, perhaps designed to discourage reviewing, I will share some thoughts about this book. Overall, it encourages anyone to write though some of the reasons that serve as chapter titles are more small-minded than others (or than I would choose). I did wonder if the subtitle was the publisher's idea (although it's so academic to have the obligatory colon: subtitle), because it reminded me more of the trend in clickbait titles that never really live up to the promise--it didn't seem like a Master Class on the Art of Writing. Aside from Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf, not many women writers were mentioned or given much time or seen as funny, etc, the way white male English-writing authors were. It was kind of fun to realize he might have gone to Tufts with his discussion of "azul azul" learned in the Hillside section of Medford; Ronna Johnson could learn a thing or two about Melville from this book. Oh wait, is that my own [small-minded] wish for "revenge" creeping in, wink wink? Anyway, the book gets better as it goes on. I'm self-conscious again of reviewing it--and the chapter does consider the idea of saving one's time/money, reminding me of the only two movies I'd ever seen and been appalled at having wasted the time/money (one with good reviews), so I should say simply, though parts of the middle were rather sleep-inducing, in the end it was a plus to have read this book.
