



Violence: A Writer's Guide

Rory Miller

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This is not about writing technique. It is an introduction to the world of violence. To the parts that people don't understand. The parts that books and movies get wrong. Not just the mechanics, but how people who live in a violent world think and feel about what they do and what they see done.

Violence: A Writer's Guide Details

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From Reader Review Violence: A Writer's Guide for online ebook

Brent Weeks says

Novelists need to be experts on storytelling. For everything else we need to fake it convincingly. If you want to become a real expert on violence, you can spend years in a dojo, and in a jail, and on the street, and in Iraq, and in conferences and libraries analyzing your real-world experiences. Or you can borrow the expertise of someone who's done all that. Clear, concise, invaluable. Sgt. Rory Miller has written the best book on violence I've read.

Carl says

Very interesting detail. Plus a nice bonus snippet of the problem with crawling through air ducts even if they're large enough.

Highly recommended to anyone interesting in writing violent fiction, or anyone interested in violence but not so much that they want to go out and get first-hand experience.

Therese says

Though it kind of reads like a powerpoint presentation at some points, this is a really interesting and useful guide to the realities of violence for writers who (God willing) will never experience anything close to some of the darker things they have the impulse to explore in writing. I don't think my writing - or reading of literary scenes of violence - will ever be quite the same again after reading this, and that's a good thing.

An unassuming self-published book written in very unassuming, direct, and non-literary prose that nevertheless is a worldview-changer (along with confirming some things about violence that I've long suspected). The author's voice also feels very trustworthy because of his unadorned, no-bullsh*t approach.

I would love to see an expanded, more polished, traditionally published version of this book. I also would have liked a nice long solid bibliography or list of books for further reading at the end of it, and an expansion of the firearms chapter, particularly more depth about gun wounds since they are so abused as a narrative device both in movies and literature - since the author notes that firearms are a huge topic and he is leaving a lot of information out.

The chapter on historical and cultural issues ("violence in other places and times") was a little rough and weak, and I would have loved to see a much more in-depth treatment of historical violence, though I realize that might go beyond the author's expertise. It's easy enough to grasp the basic point that if your social/cultural/historical norms are different, you might have an easier time accepting or participating in certain kinds of violence - but to what degree are there "universals" that persist through time and culture? As a historical novelist I'm very interested in making characters relatable to modern-day readers, so the universals, if there are any, or the aspects of human psychology that are relatively resistant to change across time and cultures, are extremely important. You want to strike a balance between historical accuracy in getting into the "mentality" as well as the factual world of your characters, and still make their reactions like

enough to those of modern-day readers that the reader can identify with them.

In George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series, his characters engage in levels of violence so extreme and ubiquitous - presumably in an effort to capture some realities of the medieval world, despite the fact that it's a fantasy series - that I personally struggled with whether any world that took place on our earth peopled with real human beings could be so non-stop brutal and merciless. My own theory is that even in other times and cultures, the majority of people at base just want to go about their business in friendly peace with each other, and human impulses to avoid violence and show compassion are persistent, even in societies where the cultural norms and external circumstances are very conducive to violence, and individuals' peacable impulses may be in conflict with the society's overall violence. But I guess it would take a very big book and maybe several Ph.D.s in anthropology and psychology and history to really get a good handle on the degree to which that might be true.

Edited to add: I keep think of more items to put on my wishlist for this book. I would have also loved to see more discussion of how being under the influence of alcohol or drugs affects the various kinds of fighting and violence he discusses.

Sonya Lano says

For writers who use any sort of violence in their stories, this book is hands down an excellent resource. Regardless of what time period you write about, regardless of whether your character is on the receiving end of violence or whether s/he should know how to fight (in any way, shape or form), and regardless of whether you yourself have had any kind of weapons training, martial arts, or self-defense course, I would highly recommend this book -- especially if you haven't had any personal experience with violence in real life (or even if you have but haven't had experience with the type of violence your character encounters or uses).

In this book, Rory discusses the physical aspects of violence and the logistics of it, which are essential to know when thinking about how a character would realistically fight in a given setting. He also expounds upon the levels of violence and the interaction between those levels, which is helpful in measuring what level of violence your characters fall under and are comfortable with (and which ones they're not). He describes various types of violence, so you'll understand exactly what type of violence your character is involved in, and he shows the motivations and mentalities involved in perpetrating those types of violence, which will help when giving your character a reason for entering into violence (as well as a reason for avoiding it if at all possible). He also explains what types of mentalities are needed for the use of particular weapons, which is a factor in deciding what kind of weapon your character's personality type would be likely to choose and wield. And it could present some interesting conflicts, too, if the character is forced to wield a weapon s/he has problems using!

He doesn't leave out cultural or social aspects of violence, either, including war and varying outlooks in different cultures. This is great when giving a group or an individual motivation (and justification) for killing in wartime AND in peacetime, depending on the attitudes of a particular culture.

Also (and this I gather is his real motivation for writing the book), he deflates many of the common tropes used in action films and books today, which form the extent of many writers' knowledge of violence. Unfortunately, when used as a basis for fight scenes in books, it may leave them sounding unrealistic and unintentionally slapstick. If for no other reason than that you don't want people rolling their eyes at your kick-butt character's awesome fight scenes, you should really check this book out (It's why I did!).

The writing itself is also easy to read, almost as if you can hear him talking, filled with fascinating (at least for me) facts, and I even laughed out loud a few times (and, yes, there are a few typos but honestly? I'm reading the book for information, not to mark off points for bad editing). Moreover, Rory is open and honest about what he has experience with and what he doesn't, and he provides practical advice on how to find out some things for yourself (for example, if you want to find out what different types of sword swings / thrusts, etc. will do to a person's body, try it on a sausage - not necessarily an appealing afternoon's activity, but it's a better alternative to doing a Google search that might get you on various security agencies' watch lists!).

Additionally, he delves into gender differences (behaviors, views on violence, etc.), different types of weapons (people themselves, guns, knives, swords, axes, blunt weapons, less lethal weapons such as pepper spray...), habits of professionals, relationships between professionals and civilians, what a professional would look for (and at) when entering a potentially violent situation (or even just when entering a room), and what s/he would notice. He writes about the types of wounds received by certain weapons, what parts of the body professionals proficient in certain types of weapons go for, what people experience when they're in the middle of a violent situation, what they feel (and what they don't feel), what they hear (or don't), how certain wounds feel (or don't feel)...

This is just what comes to mind off the top of my head.

In summary, I would definitely recommend this book as an excellent resource for anyone writing anything pertaining to violence (or also, I would venture to say, for anyone wanting to understand the nature of violence in and of itself, because for those who don't understand it, this book can be a real eye-opener).

*****Dave Hill says**

This is an excellent resource toward more realistically (or at least thoughtfully) depicting violence in your writing -- looking at weapons, social interactions, what goes on inside the mind and body before and during and after a violent situation, how wounds and trauma actually work, things like that. It's dark and depressing and cynically pragmatic in places, but also fascinating, combining personal anecdotes, scientific study, and demonstrations of why you don't want your kid wandering on YouTube without a content filter.

If I've any criticism to the book is that its organization is a bit scattershot. The book screams for an index, and even with topical chapters certain material seems to be difficult to track down. Copious dog-earing is definitely in order.

Actually writing violence realistically would likely make for very short stories, but knowing the truth, vs. common tropes, can only be helpful in deciding how realistic you want to be, and what that means for your characters.

Douglas says

This is actually probably a good book for writers to consider reading, as it is written by someone who has experience in actual violence, in contrast to almost all the writers out there writing violent scenes in fiction. The thing is, the book desperately needs a ghost-writer or collaborator. Despite that, there is some good information in here. It's just hard to read a poorly-written writer's guide to anything.

Gwyn Haller says

This writing reference book is painful, shocking and at times very, very dark. It is graphic and contains links to videos that are films of heinous crimes being or having been executed on real people. I believe that this book puts, the writer, inside the body when facing a physical assault or executing one. The information in this book is not sugar coated--take graphic violence seriously. Still, I know that my writing will be solid, gut-wrenching, realistic and drastically improved. So, yes, I recommend this book to writers. *Raising my glass to Rory Miller* Excellent book on a tough, tough subject.

Noel Coughlan says

This is an introduction to the world of violence for Writers. It's not a book on writing technique. It's really about the mechanics and psychology of violence. The writer has twenty years experience as a correctional professional and worked in Iraq as an adviser. Combined with thirty years of martial arts training, this gives him an insight into the nature of violence which any writer dealing with the subject would find priceless.

I can't say I enjoyed the book, but I found it eye opening and fascinating. It's definitely a book I could see myself rereading. Writers, I'm sure, will pick out of it what they want, or rather what their readership will let them. The writer of the foreword said that he didn't agree with everything that Miller wrote, and I could see others agreeing with that sentiment especially with regard to some of the macro-historical points. However, you can't disagree with Miller's experience and knowledge of the subject.

The information is presented in a concise, matter-of-fact fashion. There are links to real word examples of violence which I skipped. I simply have no interest in watching other people's suffering to further my knowledge. I know some writers like morgues and dead bodies but I'm not one of them.

Matt Posner says

This book really blew me away with its impressive depictions of not only how to be violent, but also how to think like a violent person. Rory Miller's framework for analyzing human beings by what they may be willing to do is perhaps chilling, but also very thorough and persuasive.

I highly recommend this book for writers who deal with violence because most of us are probably getting it wrong. I also recommend it for general readers as a good introduction to the subject -- Rory is not a novelist and doesn't deal with novelistic or fiction issues specifically, preferring to focus on general information.

Rory is an author whose books I will continue to read. As a result of enjoying his book, I contacted him and invited him to do an interview with me as well -- and his answers are similarly eloquent and complex. Great stuff! It's a reference I will go back to again and again for an understanding of how to write combat and manage the psychology of dangerous characters.

I interviewed Rory Miller here: <http://schooloftheages.webs.com/apps/...>

James says

Highly recc this to anyone who writes characters or stories that involve any level of violence, even if it's not physical violence. Lots of great info by a guy who has done a fuckton of different shit in the violent professions, and a pleasure to read.

Adam Smith says

Those that say 'violence is never a solution' have most likely never been in a position to use it. Violence is often a very effective solution, which is why so many people rely on it.

This book is not so much about writing as it is an explanation on the nature of violence and how the world really works. There are a lot of factors that people underestimate due to having never experienced it themselves. As a result, many stories will come across as blatantly false to those that do. This is a guide to understanding those factors and in turn write a more realistic story.

This book was amazing. There was a lot I did not know or had the wrong idea about. While I don't imagine writing about soldiers or professional lawmen in the near future, there was still a lot to take away from it. The breakdown of the mechanics of fighting differ greatly from how it is usually portrayed. What tends to be portrayed may look pretty, but it is a far cry from how it should play out. I found the section on how the different genders respond to violence particularly enlightening. So much of this is beyond what I've known in my life. I can only imagine how grating fiction could be to those with actual experience.

Violence is a more complicated concept than most people would imagine. The basic levels outlined at the start of this book reveal just how difficult it is to imagine yourself in the shoes of someone elsewhere on the chain. Most people tend to think anything one step beyond where they are on the ladder are the violent ones. When writing a character of a different level, it is easy to make mistakes and assumptions based on how you'd imagine that person would act as opposed to how they really would.

This book is an excellent guide to the world of violence. I recommend everyone give it a read, even if they have no intention of ever being a writer themselves. Very informative.

Isabel Cushey says

Very helpful resource when it comes to its primary subject matter, but had an odd and distracting tendency to wander into minimally related tangents and soapboxing. Often took up a tone that seemed to itself as an ultimate authority on topics that are more for debate than it seems to acknowledge. The book provided interesting opinions and viewpoints on a lot of the matters it meandered on about, but the meandering nature and occasionally condensing tone given to those topics made most of the author's rants feeling misplaced and unasked for.

Typos and awkward style choices were common enough to be noticeable and made the book feel less professional than it had the potential to be. The book overall felt like it could have benefitted from another

editing pass.

The useful material here did outweigh the weird, distracting material however. This book not only covered a ton of stuff I hoped to learn about writing about action and violent professions, it covered ground I wouldn't have thought to research. The highly personal examples given were particularly helpful, and kept the book consistently pretty engaging for a reference manual.

Overall, this guide could have been handled with a bit more professionalism, but it's a very helpful resource on violence, particularly in a professional context. It accomplishes what it set out to do well, just with a noticeable number of unnecessary distractions on the way.

Maria V. Snyder says

This is an EXCELLENT resource for writers who write about crime, violence, fighting, etc... The man knows his stuff and it's been eye-opening for me. The book is all about realism and realistic fights, etc... however, fiction is fiction for a reason - it's not as brutal as real life and I think a writer has to balance the amount of realism with the needs of the story since most people read to escape "real life." I'm a stickler for "realistic" action scenes, but my protagonists do engage in fights and win - even when ambushed :)

Eric Plume says

Excellent resource for writers of all genres. Miller gives a no-nonsense breakdown of how fighting happens in the real world (along with some historical information geared toward speculative writers) as well as weapons and how they work. There's an extensive section on injury, as well as information on police culture and activity.

If you write and your writing has violence of any sort in it, this book needs to be on your reference shelf.

Darren says

I really enjoyed the first half of this, and found it revelatory, even, but after that it became very repetitive, with a lot of the same phrases and points used in every chapter. Perhaps one is not meant to read it cover to cover, as I did, but rather flip to given sections in a writing bind. Miller is clearly biased to what he calls infighting, but he admits this early. It remains a valuable read, though I found his story asides to using his goats to test swords disturbing.
