

## Writing the Australian Crawl

*William Stafford*

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Stafford's advice to beginning poets has become a favorite text in writing programs

## **Writing the Australian Crawl Details**


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Author : William Stafford

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# From Reader Review Writing the Australian Crawl for online ebook

## Patricia says

I put William Stafford's book on my to be re-read list for this year having first read it 10 years ago. The book is inspirational, practical, consumable, and provocative. I was pleased to realize that I had actually internalized some of Stafford's guidance though I would not have attributed it to him had someone asked where I got certain ideas, say for instance the practice of writing first thing in the morning when the mind is at ease and thoughts flow "out from the center, the condition of stillness." The book now floats a dozen or more little post-it flags and lots of pencil squiggles, and I enjoy opening and re-reading statements like "that's the way ideas come about for me . . . through a willing acceptance of sub-ideas that aren't really dignified enough for most people to pay attention to. . . ." This a book I can return to again and again

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## Lind says

As a former competitive swimmer as well as someone who dabbles in writing poetry, I have to say that I love the title of this book. I am also a big fan of William Stafford poetry, so reading about his writing process is fascinating. This book is a must-read for all of you aspiring poets out there. These essays and articles about the writing of poetry are absolute gems.

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## Elizabeth Andrew says

I enjoy Stafford's down-to-earth approach to writing: Let the language take you where it wills. If you're having trouble, lower your standards. If it occurs to you, it must be justified. "A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them." "I am often baffled about what "skill" has to do with the precious little area of confusion when I do not know what I am going to say and then I find out what I am going to say." We all need a dose of this realism. Why is it that writers get swept away by the mystique around writing? It's so ordinary.

Otherwise, there's not much practical advice in this book. But it's fun to experience Stafford's humble, open-ended thinking.

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## Julene says

I have internalized his basic concepts, starting with what is in front of you and pulling the threads from the air. I love his approach. I love how he wrote and sent out and wrote more and more, not going back so much as keeping the practice of writing alive.

I'm adding some quotes from the book to this review:

"A poem is anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite the hearer or reader a

certain kind of attention. The kind of attention that is invited will appear—sort of—in what follows."

"A writer is not trying for a product, but accepting sequential signals and adjustments toward an always-arriving present."

"Writing is a reckless encounter with whatever comes along."

"All particulars reflect something, if looked at alertly enough. The job in writing is the repeated encounter with particulars. It maybe that you hit on a succession of particulars that reinforce each other—and in that case you have a poem."

"All you have to do is get a little more alert to see that even your best moves are compromises—and complicated. You get some consequences you were aiming for —and some that you weren't."

"Multifaceted possibilities of life that a poem might capture if it is successful—"

"For me, poetry is not like the jeweler's craft...polishing, polishing, always rubbing it more and more. It's like the exhilaration of getting somewhere. It is like running fast and your elbows and knees may not always be exactly right...but you're really getting somewhere.

You can run across a log pond—you know, where they're floating the logs at a sawmill—by stepping on one log at a time. And if you don't step on a given log very long, you can go hopping clear across the pond on the logs. But if you stop on one, it'll sink...sometimes I feel a writer should be like this—that you need your bad poems. You shouldn't inhibit yourself. You need to have your dreams; you need to have your poems. If you begin to keep from dreaming or from trying to write your poems, you could be in trouble. You have to learn to say "Welcome..welcome." Welcome dreams. Welcome poems. And then if somebody says, "I don't like that poem." you; can say, "Well it's my life That poem was in the way, so I wrote it."

"Just as we don't choose our dreams—they choose us—I have this feeling that if we can get with ourselves somehow, and let the thing that we're doing at the moment when we are writing unfold, like a dream, with as little guidance as a dream has, it will somehow be, there will be more of ourselves in it than if we have a made a prior comittment to some particular kind of poem or story or novel."

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## **Nathan Albright says**

"Quiet in the earth a drop of water came,  
and the little seed spoke: "Sequoia is my name."

from B.C., by William Stafford (p. 25)

This particular book is the second book I have reviewed by William Stafford [1], and it is a less polished work than its successor (which was the third volume of writing about writing). That said, even if it is less polished a bit more repetitive, it is still a worthwhile work in its contents as well as its wrestling with the process of creating art, which is the dominant concern that Stafford returns to again and again in poems, interviews, and short essays. Stafford seeks here, as elsewhere, to balance between his own strong and sincere perspective and a strong desire to avoid making definitive statements that cannot be fully supported, a tension that is common between the insistent individuality and also the disinclination for moral firmness that one finds commonly among postmodern thinkers.

There is some paradox here, as might be expected, between the author's denial that artists are necessarily more sensitive than others, and his statement on page 39 that "the artist is not so much a person endowed with the luck of vivid, eventful days, as a person for whom any immediate encounter leads by little degrees to the implications always present for anyone anywhere." It is the universality of the insights that people can

have even if only a few people are responsive to them that cuts strongly against the postmodern dislike of the author for the moral clarity of the Old Testament, or the neurotic anxiety of so many contemporary artists. Stafford has his beliefs, and a fair amount of serenity, but he seems to dislike imposing his beliefs on others, which account for his characteristic ambiguity but also his essentially likeable attitude that makes his writing so humane and gentle, if sometimes startling.

This particular book also explores, in several different pieces, some of the more fascinating elements of Stafford's thoughts [2] on the desirability of resistance but the disinclination for violence, the fact that the creation of art is a subtle task that often involves small and incremental decisions that lead to the crystalization of insight without prior intentionality, and the fact that writing often involves playful experimentation that may not suggest the worldview or beliefs of the writer himself (or herself) but that simply takes a slight push in a direction and runs with it as long as the thread last. In defending the legitimacy of art, Stafford points to art as not being the domain of a small cultural elite but everyone, and he celebrates the universality of art and its practice as the way in which that art which is the best may ultimately be sifted from its contemporaries, to the place of a Dickinson or Austen.

Of particular interest as well is the way in which Stafford manages to handle two disputes for writers. On the one hand, Stafford manages to avoid antagonism against readers and editors, with whom writers can sometimes be impatient, saying on page 12: "A writer is a person who enters into sustained relations with the language for experiment and experience not available in any other way. An editor is a friend who helps keep a writer from publishing what should not be published. A reader is a person who picks up signals and enters a world in language under the guidance of an earlier entry made by a writer. Literature is not a picture of life, but is a separate experience with its own kind of flow and enhancement. Anyone enters that world of writing or literature by writing or reading, venturing forward part by part, unpredictable part by unpredictable part." Additionally, Stafford points out something very flattering about the appreciation of art, and that is that what we are able to appreciate and enjoy speaks about our own excellence as well as the excellence of others. We cannot appreciate something without being on its level and being able to see it more or less as a peer. That which we cannot relate to, we cannot appreciate. This is a wise insight, and one with many implications.

So, even though this particular book is a bit rambling and repetitive (some poems, including B.C, are mentioned twice), it is a book that is full of interesting commentary that is worthy of reading and reflection. In many ways, it is like the poetry of Stafford itself, full of words, often traveling over the same ground and dealing with the same small related set of concerns, and also coming up with occasionally startling and immensely beautiful insights. I suppose, if we are fortunate, that the same may be said about all of us who write or create at all. We may not always create well, but we cannot create well unless we keep at it. There is something to be said for persistence, for walking the Australian crawl across the outback.

[1] <https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

[2] Previously remarked upon here:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

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## **Casey Hampton says**

This book really resonated with me. William Stafford's views on writing are intuitive, unpretentious, and void of academic hyperbole. He draws an intriguing comparison between writing and swimming. Stafford notes, "Just as the swimmer does not have a succession of handholds hidden in the water, but instead simply sweeps that yielding medium and finds it hurrying him along, so the writer passes his attention through what is at hand, and is propelled by a medium too thin and all-pervasive for the perceptions of nonbelievers who try to stay on the bank and fathom his accomplishment" (Stafford 25-26).

His insight on writer's block is wondrous. First I laughed out loud. Then I laughed at myself. Lastly, in silence I paused, recognizing the gravity and wisdom behind Stafford's sentiments. Basically Stafford says that if you're suffering from writer's block, you should lower your standards until forward momentum is regained, continuing the writing process. While this may not be groundbreaking territory, I've never encountered it put quite like this before.

Stafford uses his own work to discuss various elements of the creative and poetic process. The writing in this book is quite comprehensive and only occasionally flirts with philosophical abstracts that may pose a challenge to some readers.

Transcripts of interviews appear at the end of the book. This was like butter on fresh baked biscuits. Yes, biscuits are awesome in themselves, but add butter, allow time for partial melting to occur, and, well, "Stand back said the elephant..."

While this book is generally aimed at poetry, there's a great deal of writerly advice possessing universal practicality. If you are interested in William Stafford, this is a great window to his thoughts on life and writing.

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## **D Dina Friedman says**

I do resonate with Stafford's contention on how poems derive. The book got ponderous in places, but the poems in it are gems.

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## **Ann Michael says**

I'm re-reading this book, actually. I recall loving it when I was first working on poetry seriously--Stafford seemed reassuring to me. I took to heart some of the lessons of these brief (mostly, and some VERY brief) essays. It did me good then and does me good to re-read them. The resonances remain, though I filter them through experience now.

I recently gave this book to a young person (25 years old) who wanted to know how one goes about writing poetry. Stafford's study at Iowa in the 40s may be "dated," but his insights on literary criticism and, most of all, on the writing process, remain clear, useful, and consoling.

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## **B.A. says**

Gosh, I thought so much about this. I've taken away a lot, but the things that stick in my mind are his conviction that we just have to turn up for poetry. If we turn up and if we're willing to write bad poetry when it wants to be written, everything will follow on as it should. I like his definition of poetry as being writing that demands "a certain kind of attention." The interview section is great. The interviews serve to pull together his essays on craft and his poetry. It's like reading recipes and then seeing the chef make the dishes. I am very interested in his take on influences. My department is very hot on influences in terms of literary influences. And while I'm there with them on that point too, I are very taken with Stafford's recurring point that his mother was his main influence. That these influences exist around us all the time. Great book.(less)

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## **Jennifer says**

Fascinating look into a writer's process and attitudes toward writing. Some favorite quotes:

~A writer must write bad poems, as they come, among the better, and not scorn the "bad" ones. Finicky ways can dry up the sources.

~The correct attitude to take about anything you write is "Welcome! Welcome!"

~...you don't realize how good something is until you are worthy of it.

~Intention endangers creation.

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## **Bob says**

The first in a series of several books about William Stafford in the Poets on Poetry series. Being the oldest and in a drab cover, it wouldn't be my recommendation for the first one for someone to read, but worth getting around to eventually.

Included are interviews with Stafford, and articles by him on the craft of poetry, along with a few of his poems. Reading this book is like listening to your poetry grandpa.

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## **Diane says**

I first read *Writing the Australian Crawl* in the mid-80s when I was working on an MFA degree. William Stafford, a native Kansan, has a deceptively easy-going approach to writing poetry. His first rule is that one must write. In his case, he writes every morning before anyone in his house awakes. Stafford, a conscientious objector during WWII and a Quaker, has a peaceful demeanor that comes across in his poetry. I had the privilege to meet him when he came to the Butler Community College creative writing workshop several times to speak to students and look at their poetry. Since he grew up in El Dorado, it was a sort of homecoming for him.

One thing that struck me when I read the book this time was that, when an interviewer asked him who was the most important influence on his writing, he answered, "My mother." He said hers was the voice he heard when he wrote, and made the point that most people are more influenced by the voices they heard when they were children than by any other voice. These are the voices that are engrained in our consciousness from day one and the language that we carry within us.

Stafford, who died a few years ago, had a moral purpose in his life, but he never seemed to take himself too seriously. This is the tone that comes through the book. Any time I get stuck when I'm writing something, I return to this book as a way to get my bearings. It may not work for everyone, but it works for me.

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### **Tim Cox says**

I think this book changed my life forever. What a beautiful outlook on how to write and who we are and how we mature.

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### **Timothy Schneider says**

For this review of a collection of William Stafford's essays, interviews, and so on, related to the writer's vocation, I'll just invoke a couple of quotes:

From Stafford's poem, "Vocation":

"Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."

And from an interview in the latter part of the book:

"I mean in life sometimes the wind is blowing in the same direction you're going, and sometimes it's blowing in another direction, and apparently it doesn't make a lot of difference to the wind, but it makes a difference to you."

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### **Tyler Sheldon says**

William Stafford is one of my all-time favorite poets! He influenced the work of my Master's thesis (a treatment on Kansas poetry) and my poetry-writing style in great measure. Writing the Australian Crawl has been immensely useful to me, and it continues to be so. Stafford's maxim "keep writing and lower your expectations" is one that I even pass on to my English Composition students: we need not be hung up on making everything perfect right out of the gate, and Stafford reminds us of that multiple times throughout this book. I'll be returning to it again soon.

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