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Self-Help

Courage & Craft: Writing Your Life Into Story
Barbara Abercrombie
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"You will always, *always* teeter between believing you have all these wonderful stories to write and worrying that the wonderful stories will not be very interesting," the author writes. In *Courage & Craft*, Abercrombie provides both support and instruction for overcoming the fears inherent in opening one's personal life—literal or emotional—up to the public.

Abercrombie uses her experience as an instructor in the UCLA Extension Writer's Program and as the author of adult fiction (*Good Riddance*), nonfiction (*Writing Out the Storm*), and children's books (*Charlie Anderson*), to write a guide that is both engaging and informative. Each chapter multitasks by explaining a specific form of writing and using that foundation to discuss everything from the psychology of writing (overcoming fear, creating a muse) to the mechanics of writing (using different points of view, writing around the constraints of a physical location), to the common denominators in each writer's life (editing work, getting published).

While many prose writers are tempted to skip the poetry chapter in a writing book, that would be a mistake here. Abercrombie uses poetry as a springboard for improving all types of writing; it forces one to focus on imagery and economize words. As one of the many exercises provided throughout the book, she recommends trying "found poems": take an existing piece, such as a newspaper article and edit out words until a poem is formed from what's left.

One of the features that makes this book enjoyable is the use of personal anecdotes. Abercrombie shares a moment of melodrama she experienced when a writer friend told her to lop off the first fifty pages of a novel she was working on. Though she teaches her students that this is often necessary, she acknowledges that even she balks at the notion of cutting so much work. It wasn't until another friend told her his agent said the same thing to him that she relaxed, suddenly feeling part of a writers' club. These personal stories serve the same function for Abercrombie's readers; the tone is that of an experienced friend sharing her insights into the

common path that writers travel.

Courage & Craft is an excellent resource not only for individual writers of all levels, but especially for a creative writing class aiming to introduce many forms of writing, since Abercrombie demonstrates how each form can influence and improve the others. She encourages writers to explore all areas of their life for story material, and above all, take risks: "Courage doesn't mean sudden miraculous strength of character: it means doing something difficult despite the fear."