

Book Review: Warm and Chatty Writing about Writing

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Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction. Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd (New York: Random House, 2013). 195 pp. \$16.95 paper.

Most journalists have heard of Tracy Kidder or read some of his books, which include *Soul of a New Machine* (which won the Pulitzer Prize), *Among Schoolchildren*, *Old Friends*, *House*, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, and *Strength in What Remains*. Richard Todd was Kidder's editor at *The Atlantic Monthly* when Kidder began writing for the magazine in 1973. Todd has since edited many of Kidder's articles and books, and they have remained lifelong friends. Together, they have written this entertaining book on writing, which offers how-to-write advice, how-to-think about writing ideas, and a memoir of their experiences together as a writer and an editor. Each co-author has bylined chapters, so you always know who is doing the talking.

Their first three chapters on narratives, memoirs, and essays contain practical tips and advice on writing these types of articles. Their ideas and thoughts are both original and helpful. For example, their distinction between "first-person major" and "first-person minor" is a useful way of assessing when to use the first-person point of view. The "first-person major" is when the writer spills himself all over the pages, which may be appropriate in some pieces, but not in most. They recommend "first-person minor" which is the point of view *The New Yorker* uses in most of its features.

In the chapter on narratives, they explain the limitations and issues involved in using a strict chronological structure. In general, it's a good idea; in reality, it's not always possible. Sometimes you have to use flashbacks to fully explain the current character or scene. Sometimes you need a few explanatory paragraphs to give context to a current character or scene.

Memoirs and essays have overlapping boundaries, but both use the first-person point of view. A memoir is a way of telling a story about a particular episode or events in one's life. Unlike autobiographies, a memoir focuses on a particular theme that connects with the wider audience. An essay is a way of addressing an issue of public interest, but it permits a first-person view to make an argument, often on controversial issues.

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Other chapters address factual accuracy, the “problem of style,” and “being edited and editing.” Todd and Kidder discuss many of the issues—and challenges—involved in the editor-writer relationship. I like what Scott Stossel, editor of *The Atlantic*, said in his review of the book:

I've worked as a magazine editor for 20 years and done some writing on the side, and I'd say that the relationship you have with your editor should be like the one you have with your urologist—you should feel comfortable showing him unspeakable, embarrassing things and trust that he will not recoil but endeavor straightforwardly and discreetly to help.

Kidder and Todd reveal this kind of frankness, along with many entertaining anecdotes and stories about their editor-writer relationship.

Many textbooks about writing are too technical, too pedagogical, or too boring. Kidder and Todd's *Good Prose* is warm and chatty. They never write as condescending professors who talk down to their students. Rather, their style is more like “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” I have adopted this book for an advanced class in feature writing and recommend its consideration by other professors.