



How to Write Like Tolstoy: A Journey into the Minds of Our Greatest Writers

By Richard Cohen

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For anyone who has ever identified with a hero or heroine, been seduced by a strong opening sentence, or been powerfully moved by a story's end, *How to Write Like Tolstoy* is a thought-provoking journey inside the minds of the world's most accomplished storytellers, from Shakespeare to Stephen King.

“I have tried, as far as possible using the words of the authors themselves, to explain their craft, aiming to take readers on a journey into the concerns, techniques, tricks, flaws, and, occasionally, obsessions of our most luminous writers.”—from the Preface

Behind every acclaimed work of literature is a trove of heartfelt decisions. The best authors put painstaking—sometimes obsessive—effort into each element of their stories, from plot and character development to dialogue and point of view.

What made Nabokov choose the name *Lolita*? Why did Fitzgerald use first-person narration in *The Great Gatsby*? How did Kerouac, who raged against revision, finally come to revise *On the Road*? Veteran editor and teacher Richard Cohen draws on his vast reservoir of a lifetime's reading and his insight into what makes good prose soar. Here are Gabriel García Márquez's thoughts on how to start a novel (“In the first paragraph you solve most of the problems with your book”); Virginia Woolf offering her definition of style (“It is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words”); and Vladimir Nabokov on the nature of fiction (“All great novels are great fairy tales”).

Cohen has researched the published works and private utterances of our greatest authors to discover the elements that made their prose memorable. The result is a unique exploration of the act and art of writing that enriches our experience of reading both the classics and the best modern fiction. Evoking the marvelous, the famous, and the irreverent, he reveals the challenges that even the greatest writers faced—and shows us how they surmounted them.

Praise for *How to Write Like Tolstoy*

“The highest compliment one can pay *How to Write Like Tolstoy* is that it provokes an overwhelming urge to read and write, to be in dialogue or even doomed competition with the greatest creative minds That Mr. Cohen is an editor, that his love of literature comes in large part from awe in the presence of better writers than he, is no small matter. His love is infectious, and regardless of how well he ends up teaching us to write, that is miracle enough.”—*Wall Street Journal*

“[A] perfect tasting menu . . . the homage of a passionate reader to the writers who have provided his ‘main pastime.’ ”—*The Sunday Times (U.K.)*

“This book is a wry, critical friend to both writer and reader. It is filled with cogent examples and provoking statements. You will agree or quarrel with each page, and be a sharper writer and reader by the end.”—**Hilary Mantel**

“These twelve essays are like twelve perfect university lectures on the craft of writing fiction. The professor—or, in this case, author—succeeds in being not only knowledgeable but also interesting, charming, and engaging.”—*Library Journal (starred review)*

“Insightful . . . [Cohen] escorts his readers to Iris Murdoch for sage counsel on launching a novel, to Salman Rushdie for shrewd guidance on developing an unreliable narrator, to Rudyard Kipling for a cagey hint on creating memorable minor characters, and to Leo Tolstoy for a master’s help in transforming personal experience into fictional art.”—*Booklist*

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Editorial Review

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About the Author

Richard Cohen is the former publishing director of Hutchinson and Hodder & Stoughton and the founder of Richard Cohen Books. Works that he has edited have gone on to win the Pulitzer, Booker, and

Whitbread/Costa prizes, and more than twenty have been #1 bestsellers. The author of *By the Sword*, an award-winning history of swordplay, and *Chasing the Sun*, a wide-ranging narrative account of the star that gives us life, he was for two years program director of the Cheltenham Festival of Literature and for seven years a visiting professor in creative writing at the University of Kingston-upon-Thames. He has written for *The New York Times* and most leading London newspapers, and is currently at work on a history of historians. He lives in New York City.

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