

Disciplined Development

Better writing through better thinking

A WRITER'S COACH: An Editor's Guide to Words That Work by Jack Hart. Pantheon Books, 2006. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Jack Hart's practical writing guide drives home the value of an unpretentious, well-structured writing style. Highly readable, succinct and information-packed, *A Writer's Coach* reveals practices that help struggling writers with writing problems and craft tips for experienced writers seeking mastery.

"I like to remind people that Dorothy Parker said she hated writing but loved having written," Hart says. "Writing is the most disciplined form of thought."

Hart's more than 30 years as a writer and award-winning newspaper and magazine editor impelled him to create a book that would make writing less painful, he says.

Working for *The Oregonian* as a managing editor has given him an "advantageous perspective," he says. "I'm very lucky. I've been exposed to so much good writing for so many years." I reached Hart by phone in his Portland office. As the only senior editor present that Friday, he was busy running the second-largest daily newspaper in the Pacific Northwest.

Hart earlier served as the paper's writing coach, staff development director, editor of its Sunday magazine and as a general as-

signment reporter. He has edited four Pulitzer Prize finalists, two of them winners of the coveted award.

As a self-described "Portland downtown type," Hart wears a suit and tie for work. From his fourth floor window he views the ever-changing cityscape. In the distance, two brand new buildings rise up, while close by an old, empty apartment building awaits demolition.

Hart crossed the room to read a quote from President John Kennedy posted on his office door. "In a democratic society, the highest duty of the writer, the composer and the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may." Nearby, a cartoon St. Peter addresses a man detained at heaven's gates with, "We've been taking a little harder look at journalists these days."

Hart's desk is "very neat," he says. Not cluttered. Orderly. Photographs of his grown children and only granddaughter and of him hunting and fishing grace his personal space.

Hart wrote *A Writer's Coach* sitting at this desk between 8 and 9 every workday morning for three years. An orderly collec-



Jack Hart

tion garnered from experience, the book verges on selling out its first printing. Vintage Press will issue it as a trade paperback this summer. Hart characterizes the book's affirmative critical response as "fabulous."

At readings, writers sometimes question his notion that a story's first draft should be free, easy and fast, Hart says. He advises writers to leave polishing until the last draft and then to "question everything." All the book's tips and suggestions "have been tested in the real world," he says. "They work."

Although Hart presents his ideas in chapters with abstract titles such as "Structure," "Force," "Brevity," "Clarity" and "Rhythm," don't be misled. The content is specific and the goals realistic, not theoretic. Detailed examples jump out, while constructive "Cheat Sheets" summarize chapters' most important points.

As a former editor, I'm drawn to share Hart's advice on the force of a potent syntax. "All it takes to make a sentence is what's called a 'basic statement,' a subject-verb combination that describes someone — or something — performing an action," he writes.

A deceptively simple concept, its integral significance is that the basic statement "tells a story." Linguist Noam Chomsky calls the basic statement "the core of human

thought," Hart notes. Such clarity opposes the "bastard form of English we call journalese," he writes, in which long, convoluted opening sentences "back into the main thought" with extraneous clauses and phrases.

Hart shares tips to achieve livelier writing through active voice and action verbs. Abstain from passive sentence construction, he urges. I laughed at his colorful, clever admonition against "verbicide, the killing of live verbs," for example, by burying verbs such as "support" in "supportive" or "use" in "usage."

A frequent writing consultant and speaker for news organizations, Hart holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. He wrote a national newsletter for years and was a regular columnist for *Editors and Writers* magazine. He's taught at six universities, including the UO, where he was named 1988 Ruhl Distinguished Professor of Journalism. He has also taught at the Poynter Institute and Harvard's Nieman Program on Narrative Journalism, and he served as a juror for the 2002 and 2003 Pulitzer Prizes.

If you're a serious writer, this master editor's guidebook can bolster your confidence and motivate you to be both more careful and more joyous in your writing life. I heartily recommend Hart's book and his only scheduled Eugene reading for writers of all ages and persuasions. **EW**

Jack Hart will read from and talk about *A Writer's Coach* at 7 pm on Thursday, Feb. 15 in Eugene's Borders.

THEY FOUND THE
e
JOIN US TONIGHT!
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8 from 10:00 pm - midnight
AT THE INDIGO DISTRICT
WIN FREE LIFT TICKETS, DINNER & A MOVIE,
PLUS A TON O' SHWAG: T-SHIRTS, SHOT GLASSES & MORE

Chaopraya
Thai Cuisine

BEST OF EUGENE
—2005-06—

- ★ BEST THAI RESTAURANT 2005-2006
- ★ BEST NEW RESTAURANT 2003-2004
- ★ BEST SOUTHEAST ASIAN 2004-2005
- ★ BEST TAKE OUT 2004-2005

26 Lunch Specials • Lunch & Dinner, Dine In or Take Out
Huge Vegetarian Selections • Family Owned & Operated.

580 ADAMS ST., EUGENE (ACROSS FROM RED APPLE) • 344-1706
MON-FRI LUNCH: 11AM-3PM, DINNER: 4:30-9PM • SAT 12-9PM • SUN 4-9PM
FOR DELIVERY CALL PONY EXPRESS 485-2090

February 14th, 2007
ALENTINE'S BALL
SEAN LOVE ORCHESTRA

Valley River Inn
Doors at 6:30pm, Show at 8:00pm
21 & Over Show

Best of Eugene 2005-06

Sponsors: Dunkin' Donuts, Oakway Wine & Deli, Cascade Land, Life, FOX KLSR-TV Eugene, Oregon Heart Vascular, Juice Lemon, Dutch Bros.

Purchase Your Tickets at any
In Eugene or Springfield

Sponsors: KUGN 590, ROCK 71.9 NRQ, 98.3 THE MOOSE, ESPN RADIO 1320, STAR 102.3, K-EL 96.1