

The Writer's Book of Hope by Ralph Keyes

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The Writer's Book of Hope by Ralph Keyes should be in every writer's book collection. Keyes has written several other books, but this one is specifically aimed at writers looking to be published. Keyes does an exceptional job of giving every writer hope. His book is well-written, easy to read, and full of numerous examples of famous writers who have overcome rejection to become published authors. The book is well-organized and divided into three main sections: *Looking In*, *Looking Out* and *Beyond Frustration*. Within each of these sections, Keyes has further categories in which he discusses different factors that influence writers' hope. This book offers hope to writers by examining the many phases surrounding and within writing and publishing.

In the first section, *Looking In*, Keyes starts off with a strong example of why writers should never give up hope. John Grisham, who wrote books such as *The Pelican Brief* and *The Firm*, went through several rejections before being published. Keyes further discusses why hope is necessary and details the personal issues, which make giving up so easy. This section gives great examples of famous authors, such as Sue Grafton and Alice Munro who overcame difficulty of one kind or another to become published.

Keyes also discusses the anxiety, frustration and despair (AFD syndrome), that writers feel. This is normal as writing is both challenging and done alone. Keyes states, "The hardest part of being a writer is not getting your commas in the right place, but getting your head in the right place" (Ch.1). Fortunately, Keyes points out that AFD can help writers create great pieces of writing. From a state of depression J.K. Rowling created the 'Dementor' characters, who drain happy memories from people.

Looking In ends with a discussion about the discouragers whom writers have to deal with — from teachers and colleagues to friends and family, who mostly feel envy. It is important to remember that many writers take words of discouragement and use them as motivation to keep writing. Perhaps the worst discourager is oneself, who finds many excuses for not writing or gives up hope of becoming published. Keyes tackles common excuses such as not having enough time, not feeling good enough, and fear of failure. Keyes points out, "Success? Failure? In writing, as in life, these two can be hard to tell apart" (Ch. 2).

Section two, *Looking Out*, examines external forces that affect a writer's hope, such as rejection, publishing and the unpredictability of the publishing business. Again, Keyes offers personal stories of rejection along with examples of famous novels that were rejected several times before being published. Notable examples are *Dune*, *The Exorcist*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Here, Keyes also notes the downfall of having a piece published too early and having to wait many years before the next piece is published. There is also the situation of authors, such as Harper Lee, Malcolm Lowry and Margaret Mitchell who only published one book. Keyes offers food for thought when he states, "Early acclaim makes it that much harder to develop the skill, range, and tenacity to be a writer of books rather than the author of a book" (Ch. 2).

Keyes also reminds us of the vastly different lives of writers and publishers. Most publishers live in big cities such as New York, while writers may live in smaller cities. Often publishers live in a bubble and only associate with similar people, which can make it more difficult for them to identify with the contents of some books. This leads to Keyes' final assessment in this section — dealing with the unpredictability of the publishing business. Keyes offers more examples of difficult-to-categorize books that were published best sellers, namely J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*.

In the final section, *Beyond Frustration*, Keyes offers further hope and probably the most valuable examples and assessments for any writer looking to be published. Keyes supplies more examples of writers and their various encouragers, such as family, colleagues, teachers, agents, editors and readers. In addition to stories about encouragers, Keyes gives advice about keeping hope alive by employing useful tools — creating consolation files of famous authors who have had their work rejected several times,

attending courses and conferences, joining a group of writers, learning about the publishing business, being professional when contacting editors and agents, and going easy on yourself.

Perhaps Keyes' most hopeful advice comes in his discussion about changes in the publishing world with changing technology. Nowadays it is possible for a writer to publish his or her own book as an e-book or to print at a more affordable cost than previous times. The Internet is a great vehicle for writers to get their books to the public.

Even though Keyes' focus of the book is on keeping alive a writer's hope that they will be published one day, he ends the book with an interesting story of a man who has written many short stories but has no interest in the fame or money associated with wanting to become published. Instead he writes for the pure joy. Keyes states, "Some write for their own eyes only, or perhaps those of a few confidants. This could be the purest form of writing: at their own behest, for their own satisfaction, without regard for publishers they fear and readers they don't know" (Ch. 3).

Keyes' book is inspirational as it offers hope from a ground level and keeps building with each chapter. Any writer, on any given day when they are having troubles or feeling full of despair, can take this book from the shelf and flip to any page and find some story of encouragement, reminding him or her that they are not alone in their struggles and to maintain hope. The only downfall of Keyes' book might be that it contains too much hope, like that of a motivational speaker who makes you believe you really can succeed if you have the proper attitude.

References

Keyes, Ralph. *The Writer's Book of Hope*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2003. Kindle file.
