



Writers Should Be Helping Writers

By Howard Mark Hines

I've been around long enough to see this old world turn itself upside down more than once. I remember when hardly anybody had a computer, and the telephone hung on the kitchen wall with a cord you could stretch about as far as the screen door. If you'd told me back then that cars would run on electricity, I'd have figured you'd been out in the sun too long.

Now all of that is just everyday life. Yet here we go again, fussing over a new piece of technology like hollering at it will make it go away. This time it's artificial intelligence, and nobody seems to be fussing louder than writers.

Spend five minutes in one of those online writing groups and you'll see what I mean. Folks are calling each other names and arguing over who's a real author and who isn't. It wears me out. I don't need everybody to agree with me, but I hate seeing so much time spent knocking other writers down instead of helping them up.

I've written more than twenty books, so I know a little about this business. I know what it's like to dig through old records half the night, wrestle with a chapter that won't behave, and wonder if anybody will ever read the thing. Writing can feel mighty good, but it can also be mighty lonesome. Every writer, brand new or old as dirt like me, needs somebody in their corner.

Instead, a lot of these conversations have turned into a contest over who's the purest. Somebody says they used AI to help think up a title, and all of a sudden every book they ever wrote is under suspicion. Somebody uses a computer program to fix a clumsy sentence, and a bunch of strangers decide

they cheated. I have to ask what good that does anybody. All it really does is make writers scared to talk honestly about how they work.

Here's where I stand. A writer ought to answer for every word that goes out under their name. No tool can give you your own memories, your own imagination or the feelings that make a story worth reading. Readers deserve honest work from us, whether we write with a pencil, a typewriter, a computer or some help from AI. The tool might change, but the responsibility stays with the author.

Now, I understand why some folks are worried. Some are afraid machine-made books will flood the market. Others worry about copyright, jobs and people's work being used without permission. Those are fair worries, and they deserve serious talk and some good common sense. Still, there's a big difference between asking hard questions and jumping on a fellow writer just because they wanted to learn how something new works. We can stand up for good writing without going to war with each other.

Think back to the typewriter for a minute. When I made a mistake, out came the little bottle of white-out, or I yanked the page and started over. Then along came the computer with spellcheck, and nobody today says you have to use carbon paper to prove you're a real writer. Not every new gadget turns out to be worth a hoot, but technology keeps rolling along whether we like it or not. AI won't be any different. We can question it, set limits on it and decide when to leave it alone, but wishing it away isn't a plan.

What bothers me most is the chance we're wasting. Imagine if writers spent even half the time they spend arguing on actually helping each other. They could review a fellow author's book, share somebody's launch, or point a new writer toward a local bookstore. A kind review can keep somebody writing. One good word to a friend can put a book in the hands of a reader who never would have found it.

There are plenty of simple ways to help. Read books by independent authors, and when you like one, tell folks why. Share another writer's news without expecting anything back. Answer a beginner's question without making them feel foolish. If you've got criticism, give it privately and kindly, because there's a real person behind every manuscript. When somebody else

does well, be glad for them. Their success doesn't take a thing away from yours.

Those of us who publish on our own already have plenty on our plates. We write the book, fix it, format it, design it, publish it and then try to sell it, usually while figuring out some new computer system along the way. Most of us don't have a big publisher or a publicist behind us. All we've got is grit, our stories and whatever help we find. So why make that road any rougher for each other?

I love stories that come from history, from a place and from people's memories. A machine has never stood on the beach at Jupiter and smelled the salt air coming off the ocean. It never sat on a porch listening to the old folks tell stories, and it doesn't know why a forgotten name on a headstone matters. That human part is the heart of any good story. No tool is ever going to take it away.

So I don't see this as writers against technology. I see it as using our own good sense or giving it up. A good writer still has to pay attention, ask hard questions, check the facts and keep rewriting until the story says what they mean. AI might help with some jobs and be dead wrong for others. Each writer ought to be free to decide for themselves and stand behind what they put out.

I'd rather be remembered as somebody who helped another writer than somebody who won an argument on the internet. If I can pass along something I've learned or help another author find a new reader, that's time well spent. I hope other writers will do the same, whatever they think about AI. We don't all have to work the same way to treat each other with respect.

Our love of telling stories ought to be bigger than any argument. AI isn't going anywhere, and neither is the need for good, honest stories told by real people. So let's quit policing each other and spend that time making our books better and our writing groups kinder. The next writer you encourage just might write a book that changes somebody's life. To this old Florida boy, that beats arguing over a tool any day of the week.

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