

INSIDE THE KORYTA WRITING CAVE

My writing space is detached from the rest of the house, a room above the garage accessed through a dedicated staircase. Personal email, internet browsing, etc. I do at another desk in the house. This space is for work. I'd always liked the idea of a space that was essentially "at home" but also removed, and it was interesting – and mildly disturbing – to see how enthusiastically my wife supported the endeavor. She gets confused at times, though, always leaving things in the wrong places, like putting my sleeping bag and car keys up here and changing the alarm passcode to the house. There's really no telling what she is thinking.



When I first enter, there's a little nook with nothing in it but a double closet and a large corkboard. This is one of two corkboards, and holds what I consider the macro reminders. They

change less frequently, but I want to see them the first thing in, and the last thing out, big-picture reminders of where my head should be during the writing. The second corkboard is right beside my desk, and it involves reminders about the work in progress, and therefore I refuse to take pictures of it for fear of stealing its soul.



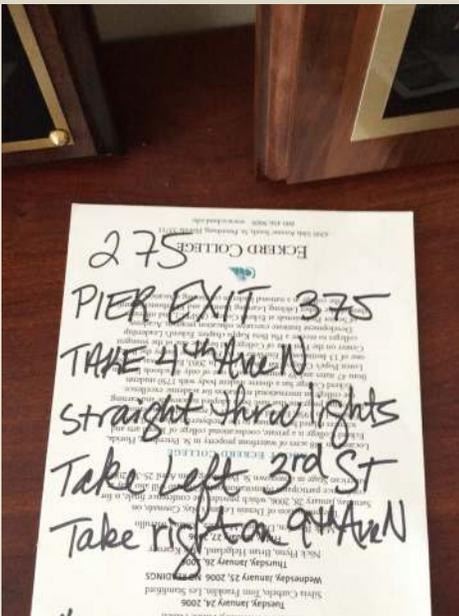
Step farther into the room and there are bookshelves on the left and some shelves holding awards on the right. There's a little bit of psychology to the award shelves. They're built low, just off the floor, and positioned fully behind my desk, so they're always out of sight. I appreciate all of them and I think they deserve to be displayed, but they should always be below and behind the desk, like the wake of a boat.

Also on these shelves are a few sentimental items. I'm an incredibly superstitious writer. When good things are happening, I attach talisman objects to the work, and then I keep them around. On this shelf, for example, I have photos of my grandmother and grandfather, both deceased, that I had lying on my desk out of mere disorganization when I wrote "Sorrow's Anthem." I became

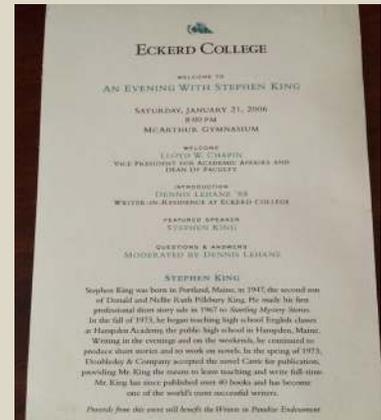




convinced that the photos were helping me tap into the old Cleveland neighborhoods I was writing about, and so I kept them up. The writing went well, and I haven't let them out of sight since. There's also a scrap of paper with Chris Columbus's email and cell number scrawled on it from the first lunch I ever had with a director who wanted to make a movie from my work. For Chris's sake, I went ahead and cropped his number out. The movie remains unmade, but I absolutely love the script Chris wrote for *The Cypress House*, and I'm hopeful for it. Some day...



Then we have directions scrawled over a flier from "A Night With Stephen King" at Eckerd College's writing conference in St. Petersburg. That was the first time I ever saw King, a writer of great importance to me, and it was at a conference founded by Dennis Lehane, another writer of great impact, but it is the handwritten portion that really matters: my wife scribbled directions to her house down on that paper when she invited me to join some of her friends after the event. We were dating not long after that, and then I moved to St. Pete, and now we're married. I've lost everything from a wallet to an iPad to a Social Security card, but I managed to keep that piece of paper intact and always present through six moves in two states.



To the left, and at proper shelf height, are bookshelves. One set holds books about writing, from style manuals and dictionaries to King's "On Writing" and Lamott's "Bird by Bird." The next holds hardcovers of my most recent books for give-aways and the like. The final set holds children's books, all of the favorite stories that made me want to be a writer, by my favorite authors – Keith Robertson, August Derleth, John Bellairs, Lois Duncan, Frank Crisp, Jim Kjelgaard. This one is my inspiration shelf, and the tokens on top also reflect that. There's a photo of my writing mentor, Bob Hammel, in his office downstairs at the newspaper where I first was paid for writing. I spent countless hours down there listening to Bob, asking questions, and asking him to spill more red ink on my amateur efforts. Bob was not paid for his time at this task, and any price quote he might have offered would have been too low. Tucked in the frame is a note he sent me on the night of my first booksigning, at a great independent store that is now closed. That book, "Tonight I Said Goodbye," is dedicated to Bob.





Next to Bob Hammel is a lion, the painting done by the wife of one of the Exotic Feline Rescue Center's employees. The lion is named Simba. It's not his fault. The EFRC is a source of continued inspiration, lasting well beyond the pages of "The Ridge." Above is a John Muir quote, "the mountains are calling and I must go," which feels true enough most of the time. I listen to it only occasionally. For now.

To the right, now in a beautiful framed presentation, signed by Josh Ritter, are the lyrics that I once had on a simple print-out, lyrics I read all the time for perspective. Taken from Josh's brilliant song "Snow is Gone," the lyrics read: "I sang in exultation, pulled the stops, you always looked a little bored. But I'm singing for the love of it, have mercy on the man who sings to be adored." If anyone ever said anything better about the approach you should take to an artistic craft, I don't know what it is.



Farther right, a cross-stitch gift from my publicist of the past five years, the great Sabrina Callahan, a fellow Seinfeld fan. "It's not a lie if you believe it." From the philosopher George Costanza.



Those who have read *So Cold The River* will recognize the importance of this little artifact – an actual bottle of Pluto water, never opened. It was a generous gift from Bill Cook, who financed and oversaw the remarkable restoration of the West Baden Springs and French Lick resorts. Mr. Cook had great attention to detail – even though he was in the latter years of his life when the book came out, and in failing health, he made the walk down to Wesley Chapel Gulf to check it out. He proclaimed it "a spooky spot" to me during a lunch. I agree. He also gave me this bottle, which was discovered during the restoration, and told me not to drink it unless I really needed it. So far, it has remained unopened. But if it ever starts to mysteriously chill...



On the wall by the desk is a flow-chart of fiction genres showing how famous titles are linked to those who came before them. (Zoom in and you'll see Michael Connelly's "The Black Echo" in the mix). A gift from a friend, I really love this, as it inspires me both as a dismissal of the supposed limits of genre and as a reminder of all the shoulders you're standing on when you write a novel.



There's also an ancient neon Genesee Beer sign with a 1937 Packard, a relic from a bar my grandfather owned on the shores of Lake Erie outside of Cleveland called Risko's. It hung above the workbench in my dad's basement for decades before I claimed it. The light still works, too!

The main desk is simple enough, a wood-and-glass affair positioned beneath the only window in the room. When I first moved in, the neighbor promptly began a construction project, and I was disgruntled about that, thinking it would spoil my view. Instead they built a gorgeous brick barn with a lighted cupola on top, and enhanced my view enormously. I see deer and turkey and hawks regularly, and occasionally a fox or coyote.



Above the desk is a photograph of a tiger named Tango, who debuted in "Those Who Wish Me Dead" as a horse, and who was one of the tigers brought back to the EFRC on the first rescue I ever went on. He's missing his tail – suspicions are his brother bit it off, I believe, and both brothers at one point tried to kill their father, so Tango appeals to me not only because of sentiment but because of his Shakespearean flair.

Directly above the desk is the name plate from a lion's cage, d'Artagnan, only it is misspelled, as astute readers will note. I don't know why it is misspelled, but I knew the lion well, I helped bring him back from Texas, I wrote about him in the afterward of "The Ridge," and I miss him daily. He endured a lot and he did it with dignity and he had the wisest eyes in the world.



The only things on the desk of any significance are a set of collected writer interviews from the Paris Review (four volumes of pure gold, and I'll reach for them often) and a daily datebook in which I log my word count. Gratefully. No matter what my readers think when they wade through the books, we're all granted a finite number of words in our time, and we don't know what that number is, how much sand is left in the timer. That might sound depressing, but I don't view it that way. I'm grateful for each day I write, no matter how it's going. Logging the words is a way of acknowledging that, and it simultaneously keeps me from lying to myself about how hard I'm working. When the writing is going slow, the desk is clean. When it's going great, the desk is cluttered and covered in iced tea bottles and glasses.



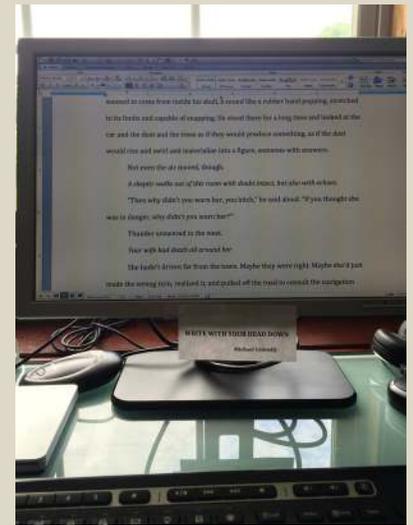
There's a single item taped to the monitor, a Michael Connelly quote: "Write with your head down." It's a damn fine reminder.

The final item worth mention is a newer addition – the drafting table just to the right of my main desk. I love this table for numerous reasons. One, it's just plain cool, a relic of the late 1950s, and it has an inherent quality of "you come here to do work, not fool around." The desk equivalent of a hardhat. It is the perfect height for standing and the perfect size for a reference table, spreading out books and maps and notepads.

It sat in my parents' basement for years, and I wrote my first two unpublished books on it and started numerous others, so there's some sentimental value. I also consider it the "perspective table." My father was an electrical engineer for Indiana University, but the home drafting table wasn't for his day job. He

did freelance work for an architect on the side, coming home from work to go downstairs and work some more, and he did this for years so my mother was able to stay at home until my sister and I were older, at which point she returned to teaching.

That's the sort of thing you don't consider when you're a kid, but having her at home had enormous impact. Maybe the least of them is related to my writing– we made a lot of trips to the library and read a lot of books because she was there and able to take us. The drafting table is a reminder of that. I'm able to do what I love now because my parents worked to provide us the best circumstances possible. As I said, the perspective table.



Last but not least, the trio of guardians behind me. The knight was a gift from my aunt. I love him. How could you not? His face got a little bent in one move, but I've done my best to straighten it, and he seems to understand. There's a statue of a raven below him, for moral support, and then there's the real deal – Marlowe, my cat/editor, who sits glowering when he is in a good mood and paces and screams when he's not.

This happens often. He's kind of like the Bob Knight of felines. Sometimes, he'll climb on my desk and stare at the words on the screen with contempt, and usually he's right, and those words need to be deleted. If he licks his paw in disinterest and climbs onto the windowsill to survey his kingdom, I figure he thinks it's coming along well enough to keep the cat food bill paid, at least.

