Write from what you know, our first writing teachers told us.

So in this book I tell stories of failures survived, dilemmas solved, books finished, editors that helped me, and writers whose work I love that inspired me. I go back to my own experience as a writer. But all writers know that the source of their work runs deeper than literary influences. Our writing teachers let us find out for ourselves what they really meant: write about any time or place or person you can imagine your way into—write from more than you know.

The essays in this book include family stories, told and retold. The book I write today has put down its roots in my earliest memories long before I know I want to write it. The kind of memories that give us stories and break our hearts do not come like obedient hounds when we call them. No, memories choose the writer, not the other way around.

Writers learn a great about their craft from books but they learn more, I think, from listening to ordinary speech and what it can tell us about each other and ourselves. The Left-Handed Story includes some of the lectures I’ve given at various places, but it also includes essays on teaching, on ancestors and rural life, and two interviews, neither of them with writers.