



## Craft and Conscience: Writing and Social Justice

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### REVIEW OF

*Kavita Das. Craft and Conscience: How to Write About Social Issues. Beacon, 2022. 320 pages.*

Dedicated to social change agents, writers, and those who straddle both realms, Kavita Das's *Craft and Conscience* is an indispensable text that will undoubtedly have a long life both within and outside of the creative writing classroom. The collection is an offering to those who love the world and love writing—and who know that, as Jericho Brown writes in the epigraph to the text, “Every poem is a love poem. Every poem is a political poem.”

Readers may come to *Craft and Conscience* out of such love and out of a political drive to bear witness, to speak the truth, to realize a better world, to dream and imagine anew. In the words of Jayne Cortez, social change writing does the work of envisioning “somewhere in advance of nowhere.” Robin D.G. Kelley, in his acknowledgment of Cortez's words, adds this: “Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down.” *Craft and Conscience* serves as a compass in this work of building that is for all writers, even those among us who might not (yet) identify as agents of “social change.” As Das explains in the text, “all writing is political” in that “[e]very piece of writing reflects a certain perspective or worldview that either directly or indirectly acknowledges social issues, or eschews them, which too is both an artistic choice and a political statement made by the writer” (2).

Das helps us grapple with such artistic choices. *Craft and Conscience* names the tangled commitments of creative writing. What Christiane Amanpour says of journalism is also true of our field: we get “itself into knots trying to differentiate between balance, objectivity, neutrality, and crucially, truth” (quoted in Das 9). In creative writing the overlapping threads of this knot might be named, following Orwell, as aesthetic enthusiasm, historical accountability, political purpose, and, of course, sheer egoism. How we navigate between these threads is a vexing matter. How do

we reconcile these commitments? How do we reconcile the various pulls of craft and conscience? Kavita Das's book is a salutary response to these essential questions.

Das's discussion is inclusive of a range of genres—not only op-eds and letters to the editor (although there is appropriately a chapter dedicated to the op-ed), but the craft principles outlined are also illimitably relevant to a range of other narrative nonfiction, poetic, and fictional forms, along with examples of solutions journalism and advocacy journalism. (Das describes *Epicenter-NYC*, for example, as a news media outlet that provides essential resources for health justice, immigration justice, and more.) Social change writing stretches beyond the journalistic investigation or exposé; the genres this text speaks to are innumerable.

Across these genres, Das provides accessible heuristics to help writers with many questions: how to navigate the spectrum of responsibility to both reader and subject, how to balance context and narrative, how to weave together reported perspectives and personal narrative, and how to consider ethos and positionality in relation to culture. A chapter is devoted to understanding the contours of cultural appropriation and what is known as sensitivity reading. Taken as a whole, the book serves as a nuanced ethical code of sorts, which, Das notes, is much needed in our field (242). The book prompts us to consider a range of questions: How do we account for the “history of well-intentioned pieces about social issues that leave out the voices and perspectives of those most impacted?” (38). How do we ensure transparency with, and accountability to, those who are most impacted by our work? How do we ensure that the agency of subjects is prioritized, with recognition of the multiple ways that people may be impacted by a piece of writing? How do we stay vigilant and self-reflexive about our relative proximity to or distance from that which we write about?

In response to these questions, Das shares her own journey that started in social change advocacy and led to writing and a fusing of her commitments as an advocate and creator. She shares her path into creative writing and the labor to create a sense of belonging as a writer of Color within a field that is marred by forms of exclusion, minoritization, and white-centering. Das's journey as an activist, journalist, marketing and communications director for *Race Forward*, biographer, and versatile writer enables her to speak to a range of spheres where one might find the impulse and ability to write for social change. Drawing from such a wide-ranging career, Das is a distinguished guide to her central topic.

*Craft and Conscience* presents comparative examples of each craft principle it names, with twelve of Das's own essays included along with writing by George Orwell, James Baldwin, Garnette Cadogan, Imani Perry, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Jaquira Díaz, Crystal Z. Campbell, Nichole Chung, Yashica Dutt, Lauren Michele Jackson, Kaitlin Greenridge, Alexander Chee, Alice Wong, and Gabrielle Bellot. The essays expertly and compassionately address a range of social harms and

injustices: racism, the school-to-prison pipeline, whitewashing and erasure of history, disinformation, public health crises, sexual violence, and more. Some essays are collected from larger works—excerpts from James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, Imani Perry’s *Breathe: A Letter to My Son*, Jaquira Díaz’s *Ordinary Girls*, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* are included, for example; other articles have been published in venues such as CNN, *Race Forward/Colorlines*, and elsewhere. Das’s curation of these texts is unique and thoughtfully rendered, with careful chapter introductions to each set of essays.

Full of resources, insight, and attention to what is most crucial for the writing life, Kavita Das’s book is an invigorating guide for both reader and writer. The text helps us to come closer to what is most at stake when we sit down to write. As Crystal Z. Campbell writes in the book:

Narratives are skins.

Narratives are tools.

Narratives are weapons.

Narratives are scars. (169)

*Craft and Conscience* holds the truth of all of this at once, as it enables writers to bravely keep telling that which must be told.