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"Give me a place to stand and I will take you somewhere else."

Erma Bombeck – The Myth about Legends

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Erma Bombeck has two things in common with other legends of Art and Sports:

1. They make it look easy.
2. It's not.

Let's look at a few American Legends from the mid-20th century. Between 1951 and 1968, Mickey Mantle made slugging yet another homer out of the park seem a breeze. Peggy Fleming, who started skating in Cleveland, executed her flawless figures on the rink through five US titles, three world titles, and a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics like it was no sweat. Operatic soprano Beverly Sills hit coloratura-embellished pitch-perfect high notes like child's play. And Erma Bombeck, time and again, made us laugh and hold our sides with her simple observations on the everyday absurdities of being a wife and mother as if it were a piece of cake; We might easily assume all she had to do was turn on her electric typewriter and the words just flowed.

The illusion of effortlessness, however, is a myth. I'm not saying these American Legends didn't have talent. But talent alone did not earn them the esteem in which they are held today. The appearance of ease that is the hallmark of expertise belies the dedication and hard work that led to all of these accomplishments.

Isn't Erma just chatting to us across the kitchen table over a cup of coffee? Nay, her words only read like silk off a spool because she's first put them through the wringer of editing. She quipped that on her driver's license, under "Occupation" she entered, "Rewriter." She'd search for the lead to lure us in, sift the words to find the perfect turn of phrase, play with sentence length to guide the readers' timing, and then solve how to bop us playfully on the head with her ending. Even when the ideas came easy, like when she attended a basketball game with her daughter, who mistakenly dropped an earring down the pants of the man in the next row, actually molding the memory into a story required focus, finesse, and a good bit of mental elbow grease.

The magic word for Erma was *discipline*.

"If you don't have discipline, you're not a writer. This is a job for me. I come in every morning at 8 a.m. and I don't leave until 11:30 for lunch. I take a nap, and then I'm back at the typewriter by 1:30 and I write until 5. This happens five, six, seven days a week. I don't see how I can do any less."

In addition to over two and a half decades of her column *At Wit's End*, with the help of her discipline Erma also churned out over a dozen books. In a speech at her alma mater, the University of Dayton, Erma remarked, "Writing a book is like giving birth. You figure the stupidest girl in the class did it, so how hard can it be?" Both as a mother and as a writer, she found out. And we are the beneficiaries.