CHARACTERS AND VIEWPOINT
BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

WRITER’S DIGEST BOOKS
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To Gert Fram,
alias Nancy Alien Black:
You never had any trouble
finding an attitude or point of view,
and as for inventiveness,
you wrote the book.

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Writing fiction is a solitary art. When an orchestra performs a symphony, it's a shared effort. Not only are there many musicians playing their instruments, there's also a conductor helping them sound good together. Yet before any of them plays a note, a composer has to write the musical score.

There's even more teamwork with a play or movie. Lots of actors, of course; a director to guide, suggest, decide for the group; designers of sets, costumes, lighting, and sound; technicians to carry out those designs. In film, add the vital work of the cinematographer, camera operators, and editors. But before any of this work can be done, a writer has to put together a script.
Script or score, those group performances existed because somebody had a plan. Somebody composed the music before ever a note was heard; somebody composed the story before ever an actor spoke a word. Composition first, then performance.

We who write fiction have no team of actors or musicians to do our bidding, so it's easy to forget that our work, too, has a composition stage and a performance stage. We are both composer and performer. Or rather, we are both storyteller and writer.

The actual writing of the story, along with the creation of the text, the choice of words, the dialogue, the style, the tone, the point of view- that is the performance, that is the part of our work that earns us the title "writer."

The invention of the characters and situations and events, along with the construction of plot and scene, the ordering of events, the complications and twists, the setting and historical background- that is the composition, the part of our work that earns us the title "storyteller."

There is no clear separation of our two roles. As we invent and construct our fiction, we will often do it with language—jot down notes, tell scenes to our friends, write detailed outlines or synopses. And as we are performing our stories, writing them out in our most effective prose, we also invent new details or motivations, discover new relationships.

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among characters, and we revise the construction of the story in order to make a scene work better, by adding a new fillip of suspense or horror or sentiment, or presenting a startling new idea that only just now came to us.

There is no "right" way to arrange the two roles of storyteller and writer. I often work for years on a story, inventing, outlining, mapping, constructing, before I feel that I'm ready to write it down. Writer Larry Niven tells his stories aloud to his friends, letting each tale grow and take shape with a live audience to help guide him. I know other writers who can compose only while performing, like an actor improvising a monologue- they have to be writing the story in order to bring ideas to mind, discovering and shaping the characters and plot as they go along.

Regardless of how you mingle the roles of storyteller and writer, though, you must do both jobs well. If you don't invent and construct well, then all your beautiful prose will be no more effective than a singer vocalizing or a clarinetist warming up—very pretty technique, perhaps, but music it ain't. And if you don't write well, readers will be hard put to discover the wonderful story you want to tell—just as bad acting can ruin a good script, or out-of-tune, clumsy, underrehearsed musicians can make Mozart sound like a mess.

Effective characterization requires careful attention at every stage in the writing of fiction. You must invent your characters carefully, to avoid cliche and to provide your story with rich human possibilities; as you construct the story, you must determine exactly how much and what type of
characterization to use for each character. Later, as you set out to write the story, you must make decisions about point of view—which character or characters will be the lens through which the reader sees the story. So I have divided this book into three parts: Invention, Construction, and Performance. Don't imagine for a moment that the actual process of characterization will ever be as neat and tidy as the chapters and sections of this book. I doubt that you could use the chapters of this book as a checklist, "characterizing" mechanically as you go. Instead you should bring the questions and ideas in each chapter to your own work, the stories you believe in and care about. See which aspects of characterization you already handle well and which you might have overlooked; examine your handling of point of view to see whether you're helping your readers or confusing them. You don't improve your storytelling by turning characterization into a mechanical process. You improve your storytelling by discovering and nurturing the characters, by letting them grow.

In other words, this book isn't a cupboard full of ingredients that you can pull out, measure, mix, and bake into good fictional characters. This book is a set of tools: literary crowbars, chisels, mallets, pliers, tongs, sieves, and drills. Use them to pry, chip, beat, wrench, yank, sift, or punch good characters out of the place where they already live: your memory, your imagination, your soul.

PART I
INVENTING CHARACTERS

CHAPTER 1
WHAT IS A CHARACTER?
THE CHARACTERS IN YOUR FICTION are people. Human beings. Yes, I know you make them up. But readers want your characters to seem like real people. Whole and alive, believable and worth caring about. Readers want to get to know your characters as well as they know their own friends, their own family. As well as they know themselves. No-better than they know any living person. By the time they finish your story, readers want to know your characters better than any human being ever knows any other human being. That's part of what fiction is for—to give a better understanding of human nature and human behavior than anyone can ever get in life.

So let's go through the ways that people get to know each other in real life, and see how each method shows up in fiction.
A CHARACTER IS WHAT HE DOES
If you're at a party and you see the same guy spill a drink, talk too loudly, and make inappropriate or rude remarks, those actions will lead you to make a judgment of him.

If you see a man and a woman meet for the first time, and then a few moments later see him stroking her back or see her with her hand resting on his chest as they engage in intense close-up conversation, you reach conclusions about them.

If you tell a painful secret to a friend, and within hours three other people act as if they know that secret, you have discovered something about your friend. People become, in our minds, what we see them do.

This is the strongest, most irresistible form of characterization. What did we know about Indiana Jones at the beginning of Raiders of the Lost Ark? He was a taciturn guy with a wry smile who took an artifact out of an ancient underground temple. When he was left to die, he figured out a way to escape. When a huge boulder rolled toward him, he didn't freeze- he ran like a madman to get away. None of this required any explanation.

What Is a Character?

Within ten minutes of the beginning of the movie, we knew that Indiana Jones was resourceful, greedy, clever, brave, intense; that he had a sense of humor and didn't take himself too seriously; that he was determined to survive against all odds. Nobody had to tell us-we saw it.

This is also the easiest form of characterization. If your character steals something, we'll know she's a thief. If he hits his girlfriend when he catches her with another guy, we'll know he's violent and jealous. If your character gets a phone call and goes off to teach a third-grade class, we'll know she's a substitute teacher. If he tells two people opposite versions of the same story, we'll know he's a liar or a hypocrite.

It's easy—but it's also shallow. In some stories and with some characters, this will be enough. But in most stories, as in real life, just knowing what someone does while you happen to be watching him or her isn't enough to let you say you truly know that person.

Motive

When you watch the guy at the party who spills a drink and talks loudly and rudely, would you judge him the same way if you knew that he was deliberately trying to attract attention to keep people from noticing something else going on in the room? Or what if you knew that he had been desperately hurt by the hostess only a few minutes before the party, and this was his way of getting even? You may not approve of what he's doing, but you won't necessarily judge him to be an ignorant boor.

What about your friend, the one who told your secret to others? Wouldn't it make a difference if you found out that she thought you were in serious trouble and told others about it solely in order to help you solve the problem?
You would judge her very differently, however, if you were a celebrity and you discovered that she tells your secrets to other people so they'll think of her as the closest friend of a famous person.

And the man and the woman who met and moments later were stroking and touching each other with obvious sexual intent: You'd judge them one way if you knew that the woman, a government bureaucrat, was lonely and had a terrible self-image, while the man was an attractive flatterer who would do anything to get this woman to award his company a valuable contract. You'd judge them very differently if you knew that his wife had just left him, and the woman was rebounding from a failed affair. The same acts would take on a completely different meaning if you knew that she was passing government secrets to him while they only pretended to be romantically involved.

What about a person who tries to do something and fails? He aims a gun at the governor and pulls the trigger, but the gun doesn't fire. She dives into a pool to pull out a drowning man, but he's too heavy for her to lift. Don't we then think of him as an assassin and her as a hero, even though he didn't actually kill anyone and she didn't actually save a life?

Motive is what gives moral value to a character's acts. What a character does, no matter how awful or how good, is never morally absolute:

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What seemed to be murder may turn out to have been self-defense, madness, or illusion; what seemed to be a kiss may turn out to have been betrayal, deception, or irony.

We never fully understand other people's motives in real life. In fiction, however, we can help our readers understand our characters' motives with clarity, sometimes even certainty. This is one of the reasons why people read fiction—to come to some understanding of why other people act the way they do.

A character is what he does, yes—but even more, a character is what he means to do.

THE PAST
Knowing a person's past revises our understanding of who he is today. If you're introduced to a man at a dinner, all you know about him is what he does and says at that dinner.

But what if, before meeting him, a friend had whispered to you that this man had been a prisoner of war for seven years, finally escaped, and recently made his way to safety by crossing 300 miles of enemy-controlled territory?

What if your friend told you that the man was the corporate raider who had just caused the layoffs of many of your friends who worked for a company he tried to take over?

What if, as you conversed with him at dinner, he told you that he was just getting over the death of his wife and infant boy in an automobile accident several months before?
What if he mentioned that he's a critic for the local paper, and you realize he's probably the same critic who wrote that vicious review of your last book? Wouldn't such bits of information about a person's past cause you to look at him differently?

People are what they have done, and what has been done to them. That's how we construct our image of ourselves. We all carry around in our memory our own story of what has happened in our past. Some events we disregard—oh, yes, I did that, but I was such a child then—whereas others loom over us all our lives. Our past, however we might revise it in our memory, is who we believe that we are; and when you create a fictional character, telling something of her past will also help your readers understand who she is at the time of the story.

REPUTATION

Isn't it awful when you're introduced to somebody who says, "Oh, you- I've heard so much about you!" It's an unpleasant reminder that people are talking about you when you aren't there—and you can be sure that not everything that gets said is nice.

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You have a reputation. If enough people tell stories about you, we call it fame; but even if it's just your neighbors, the people in your workplace, or your relatives, stories are being told about you, shaping other people's judgment of you.

We all take part in the process of building up or tearing down reputations. We do it formally sometimes, as with letters of recommendation or employee evaluations. Mostly, though, the process is informal. When others do it, we call it gossip. When we do it, we call it conversation.

"Wasn't it terrible about poor Mrs. Jones getting sent to the sanitorium? To think her son did that to her after all those years she took care of him."

"Did you hear Bill's been hitting on JoBeth for a date? What a waste of time—she's such a cold fish. She probably bathes with her clothes on and waters down her ginger ale so it doesn't get her too high."

"Don't bother asking Jeff to contribute. He's such a tightwad I heard he wouldn't even help buy flowers when Donna's husband died."

You "know" a lot of things about people you've never met, just from what others say about them. The same process works in fiction—your readers will form attitudes and opinions about characters they haven't "met" yet, just by what other characters in the story say about them. When you finally bring the character into the story in person, readers think they already know him; they already have expectations about what he'll do.

As a storyteller, you have the option of fulfilling those expectations, or violating them—but if you violate them, you also have to show your readers how the character got such an incorrect reputation. Maybe he's a con man who deliberately created a positive image. Maybe he was the victim of jealous
gossip, whose perfectly innocent or well-meant behavior was misinterpreted. Maybe he made a serious mistake, but can never seem to live it down. Whether his reputation is deserved or not, however, it must be taken into account. Part of a character's identity is what others say about him.

STEREOTYPES

The moment we see a stranger, we immediately start classifying her according to the groups we recognize she belongs to. We also, unconsciously, compare the stranger to ourselves. Is the stranger male or female? Old or young? Larger than me or smaller? My race or another? My nationality or another? Richer than me or poorer? Does he do the same kind of job as I do, or a job I respect, or a job I think little of?

The moment we have identified the stranger with a certain group, we immediately assume that he has all the attributes we associate with that group. This is the process we call prejudice or stereotyping, and it can lead to embarrassing false assumptions, needless fears, even vicious unfairness. We may wish that we didn't sort people out this way, that we could be color-blind or gender-blind. Indeed, in our society most of us regard it as uncivilized to treat people differently because of these stereotypes, and most of us try to live up to that standard. But no one can keep his mind from going through that sorting process.

It's built into our biology. Chimpanzees and baboons and other primates go through exactly the same process. When a chimp meets another chimp in the wild, he immediately classifies the stranger by tribe, by sex, by age, by relative size and strength. From this classification the chimp will decide whether to attack, to flee, to attempt to mate, to share food, to groom the stranger, or to ignore him.

The difference between us and the chimp is that we try to keep ourselves from acting on all our immediate judgments. But make the judgments we will, whether we like it or not—it happens at an unconscious level, like breathing and blinking and swallowing. We can take conscious control of the process, when we think about it, but most of the time it goes on without our noticing it at all. The more like us a stranger is, the safer we feel, but also the less interested; the more unlike, the more we feel threatened or intrigued.

Strangeness is always both attractive and repellent. Chimpanzees show the same contradiction. A stranger is frightening at first, yes—but as long as there is no immediate attack, the chimp stays close enough to watch the stranger. Eventually, as the stranger causes no harm, the chimp's curiosity overcomes fear, and he approaches.

Readers do the same thing with characters in fiction. A character who is familiar and unsurprising seems comfortable, believable—but not particularly interesting. A character who is unfamiliar and strange is at once attractive and repulsive, making the reader a little curious and a little afraid. We may be
drawn into the story, curious to learn more, yet we will also feel a tingle of suspense, that tension that comes from the earliest stages of fear, the uncertainty of not knowing what this person will do, not knowing if we're in danger or not.

As readers, we're like chimpanzees studying a stranger. If the stranger makes a sudden move, we bound away a few steps, then turn and watch again. If the stranger gets involved in doing something, paying no attention to us, we come closer, try to see what he's doing, try to understand him.

Characters who fit within a stereotype are familiar; we think we know them, and we aren't all that interested in knowing them better.

Characters who violate a stereotype are interesting; by surprising us, they pique our interest, make us want to explore.

As storytellers, we can't stop our readers from making stereotype judgments. In fact, we count on it. We know of and probably share most of the prejudices and stereotypes of the community we live in. When we present a character, we can use those stereotypes to make our readers think they understand him.

The old man was wearing a suit that might have been classy ten years ago when it was new, when it was worn by somebody with a body large enough to fill it. On this man it hung so long and loose that the pants bagged at the ankle and scuffed along the sidewalk, and the sleeves came down so low that his hands and the neck of his wine bottle were invisible.

What Is a Character?

She heard them before she saw them, laughing and talking jive behind her, shouting because the ghetto-blaster was rapping away at top volume. Just kids on the street in the evening, right? Walking around outside because finally the air was cooling off enough that you could stand to move. One of them jostled her as he passed. Was it the same one who laughed? A few yards on, they stopped as if they were waiting for her to catch up with them. The one with the boom box watched her approach, a wide toothy grin on his face. She clutched her purse tighter under her arm and looked straight ahead. If I don't see them, she thought, they won't bother me.

Both of these descriptions—of the old man, of the city kids—rely on stereotypes. You immediately recognized the old man as a bum, a wino. And if you're a white American in the 1980s, you probably thought of the kids in the second paragraph as black, even though I never actually said so. I gave you enough subliminal clues to awaken the stereotypes in the contemporary white American mind: "jive," "ghetto-blaster," "rapping," the city setting, the "wide, toothy grin," and the woman's fear—all of these draw on the countless movies and television shows and news stories that have played off of and reinforced racial stereotypes.

As writers, we find stereotypes are useful, even essential—but I'll discuss that more in another place. It's important to remember that you can also play