Characters and Viewpoint Study Guide

Characters and Viewpoint by Orson Scott Card

Contents

Plot Summary

The book is subtitled "How to invent, construct, and animate vivid, credible characters and choose the best eyes through which to view the events of your short story or novel." In exploring this intent, the book offers several suggestions of techniques writers can employ to bring fictional characters to vivid life in order to fully engage a reader in the story being told. These suggestions are grounded in the key thematic premises relating to the necessity for justification, the importance of the narrative's relationship with the reader, and the value of craft.

After a brief introduction (in which the author refers to writing as a solitary art and discusses different aspects of fiction writing), the author begins the first part of his analysis (subtitled "Inventing Characters") with basic descriptions of what a character is and the function that a character fulfills in a narrative. He then goes into a detailed analysis complete with illustrations (taken from both fictional and dramatic writing) of various techniques for developing effective and engaging characters. Also in this first section he analyzes and comments on various useful sources for characters (life, research, narrative context and/or requirements, among others).

In Part Two of his analysis ("Constructing Characters"), the author introduces and defines what he calls his MICE theory of narrative analysis, with the four letters of MICE standing for the four basic components of any narrative. M represents milieu (physical location, social and community-defined characteristics associated with that location), while I represents idea (the story and/or thematic premise being played out and/or explored by the narrative). C represents character (the individuals playing out the narrative and the way those individuals change over the course of the narrative), and E represents event (incidents, confrontations, etc that trigger that process of change and manifest the idea). Also in this section, he contends that transformation has become an essential component of contemporary narrative, and presents his hierarchy of characters (the relative importance of the various kinds of characters as defined by the effect they have on the narrative).

An important component of the author's analysis in this section is his contention that at the beginning of every narrative, a writer establishes a contract with the reader to answer the questions posed by the narrative, and to write in a consistent style and from a consistent point of view. The most important part of the contract, he suggests, is that the writer must ensure that event, character and theme are all developed and presented in a justified, logical manner that will ultimately feel true to the reader. He reinforces this central thematic point by suggesting here and throughout the book that the purpose of any narrative is to bring a reader to a deeper, truer understanding of the human experience and condition.

Part 3 of the book is subtitled "Performing Characters." In this section, the author compares the value of presentation (reminding the reader s/he is being told a story) with representation (drawing the reading into the story), and contrasts dramatic (showing) with narrative (telling) technique. He also analyzes various ways of defining a

character's individualized voice and perspective, and discusses how that voice can be utilized in supporting and/or defining the perspective of a narrator. This, in turn, leads to an in-depth discussion of various narrative perspectives—first person/third person, past tense/present tense, limited/omniscient point of view, cinematic/light/deep penetration and insight.

The author draws his book to a conclusion by suggesting that the possibilities for creating, defining and utilizing characters in a narrative situation are almost infinite. He adds that a writer is capable of an unlimited capacity to surprise and engage a reader, and that ultimately that surprise is valuable in opening the experience of a reader to a new perspective on him/herself and/or the world.

Part 1, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2

Part 1, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

The book is subtitled "How to invent, construct, and animate vivid, credible characters and choose the best eyes through which to view the events of your short story or novel." In exploring this intent, the book offers several suggestions of techniques writers can employ to bring fictional characters to vivid life in order to fully engage a reader in the story being told. These suggestions are grounded in the key thematic premises relating to the necessity for justification, the importance of the narrative's relationship with the reader, and the value of craft.

"Introduction" The author first suggests that the act of creative writing is a solitary art (as opposed to other forms of art which are much more collaborative—producing a play, creating a film, for example). He then suggests that there are two different aspects of creative writing—that of the storyteller (creating character and event, understanding and defining theme, shaping elements into an effective, engaging narrative), and that of the writer (using words and structure, defining style, tone and point of view). He concludes by saying the purpose of the book is to give creative writers a set of tools to help them fulfill their responsibilities as both writer and storyteller (see "Quotes", p. 2).

"Inventing Characters—What is a character?" The author begins by suggesting that readers want to know characters better than they know people in life. "That's what fiction is for," he says, "to give a better understanding of human nature and human behavior than anyone can ever get in life." There are several ways, he adds, to know a character—by what they do, by coming to understand what they mean to do, by understanding their past, by giving them a reputation (deserved or not), and by exploring how they got that reputation. The author goes on to suggest that a powerful way to initially define a character is by stereotyping, by first impressions, and by broad strokes definitions (male/female, old/young, big/small). He then points out that an effective writing tool is to break down stereotypes, adding layers of dimension to the stereotyped characters and thereby surprising and/or involving the reader. He goes on to list other ways of defining character—through portrayals of their "networks" of friends, family and co-workers (people generally behave differently depending upon the network they are in), personal habits and/or patterns of behavior (and how people react to them), talents and abilities, and tastes and preferences (which can sometimes become obsessions). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the value of a character's physical appearance, their relationship (and the relationships of others) to that appearance.

"Inventing Characters—What makes a good fictional character?" The author begins this chapter by suggesting that characters in fiction each have a function. Major characters have to be interesting and believable enough for people to want to know more about them, while minor characters have to simply do what they are intended to do (create

suspense, offer information, add love interest, for example) and leave the narrative. Readers have to care about the characters in a narrative and about what happens to them, and for that to happen, he suggests, characters have to do believable things that make sense. He goes on to suggest that the writer must come to a project with a genuine commitment to and understanding of the human truth s/he and his/her story is exploring, and bring that sense of truth to the characters. He then offers an example of a technique that he often applies to get at not only a truth of a character and situation, but an interesting truth—exploring a scenario with repeated "why" and "what happens" questions, bypassing inactive or easy answers in search of answers that are inventive, intriguing, and revealing of a perhaps unexpected human truth. He also suggests the application of exaggeration (but only to a point where a character is still believable) and twisting (taking ideas and turning them in an unexpected but logical direction), adding that the application of such techniques can help avoid cliché. Finally, he suggests that the process of creating dramatic interest in character and situation can be helped by asking a couple of basic questions, "What can go wrong?" and "Who suffers as a result?"

This book is clearly intended to be read, studied and/or used by writers, those who want to become writers, and/or by those who teach writers. That intention must be taken into account by any analysis of the book and its ideas, since a non-writer would, in all likelihood, find very little of interest here. Possible exceptions to this point are the author's reference to the purpose for writing (to broaden understanding of the human experience, an idea that may come as a surprise even to some writers), and his suggestion that readers want to know a character better than they know themselves (an idea that might come as a surprise to many readers). While these two points might provide intriguing insight for non-writers into the writers' process and essential purpose, ultimately this book is still for those who, on some level and in some way, use words to create fiction, literary or dramatic, and are looking for more and/or better ways to do so.

With that in mind, then, in these first chapters the author starts from the very beginning of the character development process, describing the basic ways of defining a character and explaining why a character has to be defined at all. In doing so, he begins his exploration of the book's central thematic point—that writing is a craft as much as it is an art, and that in fact the application of craft is far more important to the creative process than impulse or idea. This is the core premise of every point the author makes here and throughout the book (for further consideration of this point see "Themes—The Value of Craft"). The author also introduces his second key thematic concern here—the need for actions, situations, and emotions to "ring true," to feel to a reader as though they are both justified and logical, as though they might actually happen—if not in the world of the reader, at least in the world of the characters.

The value of the author's final two questions, "What can go wrong?" and "Who suffers as a result?" might, in fact, transcend their importance in developing character. It could reasonably be argued that they are, in fact, the questions at the core of any and every engaging narrative, dramatic or literary.

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4

Part 1, Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

"Where do characters come from?" The author begins this section with the idea that there are ideas for characters everywhere—in life, in observation of strangers or family or friends, in memory, in the newspaper. He adds that very often what is observed and/or remembered has to be shaped/added to/exaggerated in order to make it both effective and believable as narrative. He also suggests that a powerful resource for finding character is the writer's self, feelings, experiences and, in particular, memories that may not relate exactly to what a character is experiencing but which have emotional and/or spiritual and/or experiential resonance with what a character is experiencing. The author then suggests that the story itself will suggest characters, according to what needs to happen and how it needs to take place. A story of a kidnapping, for example, will need a kidnapper, a victim, and presumably people looking for the victim (police, detective), people fearful for the victim (parents, a lover), people living and working around where the victim is being hidden. "All [a writer has] to do," he says, "is take his/her eyes off the main characters long enough to see who else is nearby." These other characters, he adds, might add possibilities for conflict, assistance, or additional love interest. He also suggests looking for characters in the pasts of the central characters or in the core idea of the piece (particularly if the writer is exploring particular issues). This last, he adds, is a particularly tricky source of characters, in that writing based on an "issue" often finds itself populated by characters who embody attitudes or perspectives, rather than characters who are fully rounded, multi-faceted human beings who happen to have attitudes and perspectives. The author then suggests it is both possible and interesting to put characters from seemingly unrelated ideas and/or stories together, and also to find characters by the author imagining him/herself in unaccustomed situations—in fact, by imagining scenarios at all times and in all conceivable circumstances. "There isn't a landscape on earth," he says, where [a writer] can't find wonderful stories ..."

"Making decisions" The author begins this chapter by suggesting at some point, every writer/storyteller has to start making some decisions about his/her characters' identity, including their names. He adds that last names often provide a clear starting point for defining a character's context and/or family background, with both first and last names offering possible clues as to who a person is and why s/he is that way. He suggests varying the names of the characters (in terms of length, initial, number of syllables, ethnic background) in order to help the reader keep track of who's who, and using names early and consistently in order to create a clear impression of identity in the mind of the reader. He recommends keeping a detailed list of character traits/facts in order to enhance and maintain consistency, as well as to keep track of potential springboards for further character development (see "Quotes", p. 46).

Many experienced writers of fiction will claim that every character in every piece of his/her fiction is taken, to greater or lesser degrees, from life—from a newspaper

clipping, from memory, from a glimpse of an interesting-looking person on a street corner. What the author proposes in this section is that an author has a fundamental responsibility to observe, absorb, and analyze the world and the people around him/her, as well as to excavate his/her own life and experiences for truth, or for facets of a truth that a narrative and its characters can be shaped to suggest. In other words, the writer (according to the author) can/should always be aware of possibilities for character and story—eyes, ears and heart must always be open to possibility, and to insight, with an eye to translating both possibility and insight into an engaging, perhaps unexpected truth.

That said, throughout this section, the author's suggestions and analysis reinforce his central thematic contention—that conscious choice rather than unconscious impulse is the key factor in creating successfully engaging narrative fiction. A particularly intriguing manifestation of this intent is the detailed exploration of how to name a character. It is somewhat unusual for books of this nature (ie books about the writing process) to speak as technically as the author does here on the process of choosing a character's name. Most other such books would, to a greater or lesser degree, focus on the value/necessity of the more instinctive aspects of the creative process and the freeing of that instinct. The focus on names is just one example of how the author of this book frequently speaks openly of matters that many writing teachers might consider too technical and/or superficial to be explored in any detail. This, in turn, is a clear manifestation of his central thematic premise—that a craft-based choice, when made in connection to instinct and desire to communicate, is far more effective at making narrative points clearly than a purely instinctive initial impulse.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

"Constructing Characters—What kind of story are you telling?" This chapter begins with the author's contention that there are four basic factors common to all forms of narrative writing. The first is milieu, the physical, cultural and/or social context in which the narrative plays out. In some narratives, he suggests (westerns, science fiction, fantasy) milieu is the prime narrative element, but even in such stories, the other three basic elements are incorporated to a greater or lesser degree. Milieu is important, he contends, because it involves more than just physical setting. "The characters' own attitudes and expectations," he writes, "are part of the cultural ambiance, and their very strangeness and unfamiliarity is part of the readers' experience of the milieu." The second basic factor common to all stories is the idea, what the reader is intended to understand and/or learn. In narratives such as mystery, detective, caper and/or some science fiction, the idea or the puzzle becomes the primary focus, and it is rarely necessary for characters to be more than stereotypes and/or simple plot functionaries.

The third basic narrative factor is character, or the degree to which an individual pursues transformation in his/her life because his/her role has become unbearable. By definition, the author writes, narratives with this element as the main focus require the most complex and detailed characterization. He adds that not every character in such a story needs to be fully and complexly developed. The final basic element is the event, or what happens in the narrative and why. Narratives with event as their focus are essentially grounded in efforts made by a character to change an intolerable situation, either by returning it to its original condition or by creating a new condition. The author suggests that the event-focused narrative is the core reason for story, as both a concept and specific manifestation of that concept, to exist—to make sense of the chaos brought into the world by life. "Our very belief in order in fiction," he writes, "helps us to create order in reality." He suggests that the amount of characterization in event stories depends on the desires of the author, again commenting that the more complex characters there are, the more story possibilities there are.

The author goes on to say that at the beginning of each narrative, the author establishes a "contract" with the reader. This "contract" agrees that the parameters of the basic type of story will be fulfilled (in other words, the mystery will be solved, the troubled character will achieve balance), or that once started, a narrative thread will reach a conclusion (that all the questions raised by the various clues in a mystery will be explained). In bringing this chapter to a close, the author suggests that both readers and creators of contemporary narrative have come to believe that in-depth characterization is both expected and necessary. He also suggests, however, that a writer must pay careful attention to the sort of story he is telling in order to determine just how much characterization to incorporate. He concludes that if a writer is fully committed to and/or aware of the kind of story s/he is writing, it is possible to see that "less" characterization is not necessarily "bad" characterization (see "Quotes", p. 58).

"The Hierarchy" In this chapter, the author suggests there are three basic sorts of characters. "Walk-ons" appear as background, and are intended to lend realism or perform a simple function. They are sketched in broad, unspecific terms, and are often portrayed as stereotypes, as having maybe one distinguishing characteristic, or as having no real identity at all. "Minor characters" make a difference (to greater or lesser degrees) in the plot, but do not take too much narrative time or focus. They can be vivid and memorable, eccentric or exaggerated, add texture or humor, but all should perform their essential function and disappear from the action. "Major characters" are, to greater or lesser degrees, intended by the author as the characters the reader is to identify with, with their decisions and actions moving the narrative forward. Major characters have power, receive a great deal of focus from both the narrative and from other characters, appear frequently, make active choices, and generally engage the reader's sympathy/empathy. Also, he says, major characters are generally the subjects of the narrative's point of view. The author adds that the lines between the three basic sorts of character are often blurred, but suggests that with experience it becomes easier to understand the role a character plays in the narrative and how much emphasis each one should receive.

The author introduces a number of central premises in this section. The first, which he introduces without putting it in so many words, is that on a very basic level character in narrative is defined by relationships. These include the relationships between character and "milieu" (how milieu defines character, how character struggles with and/or lives within milieu), and character and "idea" (how the character defines the idea s/he is playing out in the narrative and vice versa). Other important relationships are between character and self (how able s/he is to make a journey of personal transformation) and character and event (how a character affects and is affected by the narrative's events).

The second premise introduced by the author is the idea of the writer's contract with the reader, an essential component of any narrative. The contract is essentially that once a narrative begins, the author is going to bring it to its justified and logical end, traveling a consistent stylistic narrative path. The point is not made to suggest that every narrative must have a happy ending, but rather that every narrative must feel self-contained and ultimately true, at least to some degree.

The third premise introduced in this section is the idea of a hierarchy of characters—a sense of importance, a guideline as to which characters should receive the most narrative attention. Like his comments on naming a character in the previous section, the comments here relate to an aspect of writing that many books on writing would probably ignore or avoid, focusing as they do on what might be described as more spiritual or inward-focused aspects of writing. In short, in his discussion of the hierarchy of characters the author is again manifesting his core thematic perspective that creating a successful narrative can be at least as much the result of craft, if not more so, as it is of impulse and inner creative vision.

All that said, more experienced writers and teachers of writing might find in this section the first hints of a significant missing component to the author's analysis of character—the relationship between character and story. Contemporary writing theory suggests that

character defines and motivates story—specifically, a character's needs and desires, the action that a character takes to achieve those needs and desires, and a character's action whenever those needs and desires are unmet ... or met, for that matter. The author touches very briefly on this subject in his commentary on "character" as one of the four core aspects of narrative, but for some reason leaves it unexplored. It may be that he does so as the result of his intent to focus on more craft-specific components, such as the examination of how to come up with names or how to utilize the hierarchy of characters. Ultimately, however, there is the sense that just perhaps he has left a key component out of the character/story equation.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

"How to raise the emotional stakes" In this chapter, the author discusses ways that the reader's intellectual and emotional attention can be more fully engaged with the life and world of the characters by making what is happening to them more important to them—in other words, by raising their stakes, what they have got to lose or gain. He describes several techniques in considerable detail—creating the (suspenseful) potential for pain and suffering, either physical or emotional (see "Quotes," p. 68), creating the sense that a character is capable of making great sacrifice, and putting characters in physical and/or emotional (but believable) jeopardy. He also explores the value of sexual tension and/or attraction between two characters and the value of signs, symbols and omens (adding a layer of emotional intensity by connecting the experiences of an individual with the natural world).

"What should we feel about the character?" In this chapter, the author discusses techniques for engaging a reader fully and immediately with a character. The first of these is by creating a strong initial impression. By defining a character with broad-strokes traits similar to those of a narrative's intended audience, or by giving a character generally appealing characteristics and/or values, that audience is more likely to connect emotionally with that character. The opposite is also true—create a character with opposing characteristics or generally negative values, and an audience is likely to have an immediate negative reaction to that character. The author points out, however, that a character's evolution from these initial impressions is often a powerful and engaging component of story. He also suggests that too much similarity can be a negative (ie boring) thing—what a character needs is to be both familiar and eccentric or idiosyncratic. He then suggests several basic characteristics that, for better or for worse, make a character more appealing to readers—a physical appearance that is generally appealing but vague enough to allow a reader to project something of him/her self onto the character, a balance between victimization and courage, a balance between self-sacrifice and reason. He also suggests that the more active a character is, the more likely s/he is to gain a reader's interest (particularly if a character is actively striving to achieve basic goals a reader might be more able to identify with—see "Quotes," p. 82). He goes on to list other attributes for an appealing character—a sense of courage and fair play, dependability, cleverness, a positive/healthy/empathic attitude towards themselves, their relationships and their lives, and whether s/he is a draftee (for a tough job that will bring glory) or a volunteer (for a miserable job that will bring suffering).

Finally, the author suggests the addition of endearing imperfections (foibles) and or eccentricities. He then discusses traits that will easily and/or automatically trigger dislike in a reader—sadism or bullying (grounded not in a love of pain but a love of power or control), or murder (for selfish reasons and only of a "good guy"—altruistic murders of the bad guys create sympathy). He also suggests that readers will react negatively to

characters who are self-serving or self-appointed, who make a promise or an oath, who display overt intellectualism and/or a large, overused vocabulary, who are dangerously insane, or who have a generally negative attitude. Finally, he points out that even a negative character becomes a more intriguing one if s/he has some redeeming and/or relatable qualities, but only to the point where that character might be pitied and/or understood. If an evil character does truly dark things, he writes, "at no point will [a reader] want [him/her] to emerge victorious."

"The Hero and the Common Man" In this relatively brief chapter, the author examines the necessity for blending the exceptional with the commonplace, the romantic (larger than life, idealized) with the realistic (common, ordinary). He suggests that the most engaging characters have the opportunity, in the course of a narrative, to reveal the heroic sides of themselves—the extraordinary in the ordinary. This, he continues, is necessary in order to convince a reader that the character s/he is reading about is actually worth reading about. "The author has created characters," he writes, "who somehow inspire enough admiration, respect or awe that readers are willing to identify with them, to become their disciples for the duration of the tale."

At this point, it might be useful to reference here a point the author makes later in the book—that it should not be viewed and/or used as a kind of checklist, as an inventory of choices a writer has to go through and check off one by one as they are each employed. It is probable that beginning writers, or writers eager to reinvent themselves and their work, would view the suggestions and analysis offered here as exactly that. As previously discussed, however, and as the author himself points out, the ideas and techniques suggested and analyzed throughout the book are simply tools a writer can use, and perhaps needs to be reminded are there to be used. To look at it another way, a handyman does not require every single tool in his toolbox every time s/he does a job —s/he will not, for example, use every head of a multi-headed screwdriver, or every gauge of a socket wrench set. Likewise every writer will not, nor should not, employ every technique of character development in this particular writer's toolkit—but it is, however, useful to both know that all the tools are there and to know how to use them.

The key thematic component of this section is the emphasis on creating and defining the relationship between character, narrative, and reader. Every single point the author makes is, as he himself suggests, intended to help the author create and define the relationship s/he desires with the reader—to bring the reader into the narrative's world and the character's lives in the desired way, for the desired reasons, and with the desired effect.

In "The Hero and the Common Man," the author explores a basic writing premise, again without doing so in so many words—that at its core, an engaging narrative is about ordinary people doing extraordinary things, or about extraordinary people doing ordinary things, all for extraordinary reasons. Never is it about ordinary people doing ordinary things for ordinary reasons. In other words, every person in a narrative is heroic to some degree, facing challenges s/he usually would not face, doing things s/he usually would not do, in order to realize some purpose that s/he would not normally desire. In the

author's perspective and in that of other contemporary writers/teachers, this is part of narrative's purpose, and part of the purpose in exploring character in narrative.

Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

"The Comic Character: Controlled Disbelief" In this chapter, the author makes several important points about comedy—that it is almost always about pain and suffering, made acceptable to readers by incongruous interjections of humor and/or skewed perspective, and that ultimately those interjections are grounded in deeper truth (see "Quotes", p. 100). He then lists techniques for interjecting humor—a "take" (a moment in narrative in which a character points out to an audience and/or reader just how absurd something is), exaggeration (within certain boundaries), downplaying (making less of a setback rather than more), and eccentricity or oddness. All, the author writes, become even more effective when/if there is a clear emotional and/or historical grounding or reason for the reaction, particular when a major character is also comic. The "controlled disbelief" of the chapter's title refers to a particularly effective emotional component to comedy—the fact that a character cannot believe what is happening to him/her, but is going along with the action without allowing that disbelief to interfere with or affect his/her actions.

"The Serious Character: Make Us Believe" The author begins this chapter with the statement that believable characters in fiction are the result not of a portrayal of absolute truth, but of an illusion of truth—something that feels as though it could be true as opposed to something that purely and actually is true. The primary source of this illusion the author continues, is the inclusion of "relevant, appropriate details" presented pertinently and effectively. Specific sorts of details include clearly elaborated and defined motives as well as layering of those motives so that each new revelation also reveals character and changes the direction of the story (see "Quotes", p. 107).

The author also suggests that clearly defined attitudes towards events, in terms of a character's actions and in terms of narration, can create a vividly powerful sense of attitude, and that a character's past is a key contributor to those attitudes—in other words, that there is value in defining the present through exploration of the past. Techniques for this exploration, he writes, include the flashback (a straightforward narration of past events that generally slows the present action down), the telling of a story of the past (which is valuable to the narrative only if it advances action in the present), and a brief reference to a past event as the present narrative line continues. Another technique includes references to the implied past—expectation (given that expectation is by definition a manifestation of past experience), habit, and past relationships (family, friends, lovers, co-workers). Finally, he explores the value of justification, setting up actions and experiences in a character's background and history earlier in a narrative in order to explain actions and experiences later on. "The amount of justification," he suggests, "must be in proportion to the event being justified, or it leads the reader to expect things that [the writer isn't] going to deliver." For more on this particular aspect of justification, see "Quotes", p. 118.

The author's first point in relation to comedy, that it is on some level all about pain and suffering, could conceivably apply to all narrative. On some level, to some degree, all narrative exists because a character is, in one way or another, suffering in his/her current situation and is determined to make a difference. The main difference between comic and serious narratives, the author contends, is the character's reaction, and by extension the reader's reaction. There is no guarantee that a reader and a character will have the same sort of reaction, particularly to what is intended to be comedy—what a particular writer and/or a particular character finds amusing is not automatically going to be found amusing by all readers. This is what makes comedy so difficult, so unpredictable, and so rewarding when it works.

In both these chapters, the author's implication is again that narrative is dependent upon relationship to be effective and engaging. These include the relationship between character and incident (ie whether a character's reaction to a situation is intended to be comic or "serious"), between a character's past and his/her present, and between a reader and an author's sense of what is, or can be perceived as, true. It seems that in fiction as in life, the old saying holds true—no person is an island. In other words, narrative cannot exist without the presence of relationship, and cannot function well without an author's mining of the various relationships involved in narrative for the fullest, most effective and most engaging potential.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

"Transformations" The author begins this chapter with the contention that people and their behavior change, often in ways that others cannot understand and, on some level, are often fearful of. This, he adds, is an important reason fiction exists (see "Quotes", p. 120)—to provide meaning and justification for some changes so that readers will perhaps feel less uncomfortable as the result of others. He goes on to say, however, that characters in fiction do not have to change, "no matter how much a reader might wish they might ... if they [do], it's because [the reader] didn't understand them in the first place." He then suggests ways in which a writer can develop stories about unchanging individuals—characters who are who they are consistently and who perhaps want to change but cannot, characters who seem to change but reveal a truth of who they have been all along, and characters who discard their outward selves and live fully according to who they truly are. He also discusses characters who change as the result of consequences beyond their control—the animalistic nature of their bodies, and/or the outside influences of other characters and/or circumstances. Finally, he discusses characters who change themselves, by a combination of will, action, and external circumstances. He concludes this section by reinforcing his contention that transformation is justified and logical. "The more important the character and the greater the change," he writes, "the more time you will have to devote to explaining the transformation."

The author also suggests, however, that some fiction explores the idea that "changes in human beings are random, absurd, uncaused ...", that people do what they do for no reason at all. The author then argues that for a piece of writing from this perspective to succeed, it must take place in a world in which random change is the natural way. Even in comedy, he concludes, in which characters have more freedom to change, act, and/or react in extreme ways, transformations must still feel, to a reader, fully justified.

As has been the case throughout the book, a certain tension exists between what the author contends and what most contemporary writing theory and practice would suggest. In terms of the content of this chapter, current thinking and application holds that transformation is, in fact, a fundamental and inescapable component of all fictional narratives, from mystery novels to character fiction to romance. That transformation may be as straightforward as moving from unknowing to knowing (in mystery novels), from wounded to healed or from unwise to wise (in character fiction), from unloved to loved (in romance), and everything in between. It could be argued that by leaving this aspect of narrative essentially unexplored, the author is doing his readers something of a disservice. It could also be argued, however, that like most good teachers the author is leaving the making of connections up to the student/reader—in other words, he is not dealing in absolutes, but only in tools and/or suggestions that he hopes can and will trigger understanding and/or insight. Perhaps he is hoping for "transformation" in those

who read and understand and take to heart his work, a movement from perception to insight, from unskilled to skilled, from unaware to aware.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary and Analysis

"Performing Characters—Voices" This chapter begins with the author discussing the ways each human being has different voices, different word usages, rhythms and inflections that are each used depending on circumstances (see "Topics of Discussion— What are some of the different voices ..."). He goes on to suggest that one of the most important choices a writer/storyteller makes as s/he works is to define the voice of the narrator. These are first person ("I go"), when the story is narrated by a character who is experiencing or has experienced its events, or third person ("He goes"), when the story is narrated by someone who "was not present as a character." There are, he suggests, other narrative perspectives but they are used irregularly. He will therefore, he writes, focus solely on first and third person narrative perspectives.

A second key choice a writer/storyteller must make, the author suggests, is that of tense —will the story be narrated in present tense (as events unfold) or in past tense (after events have concluded)? Stepping outside these basic choices, the author suggests, is a risky choice because it tends to draw attention to itself rather than draw the reader into the world of the story and its characters. He carefully warns writers away from making choices about voice and character that are innovative or experimental for their own sakes, suggesting that the writer/storyteller's job is to make what they are saying as clear and evocative as possible (see "Quotes", p. 133)

"Presentation vs. Representation" In this brief chapter, the author discusses a third key choice the writer/storyteller must make—whether to tell the story from a presentational or a representational perspective. The former is a narrative style in which the reader is made consciously aware, and/or is frequently reminded, that s/he is being told a story. This is most often accomplished, the author suggests, by the writer adding comments and/or observations about the story, and is frequently employed in first person narratives. A representational perspective, on the other hand, is one in which the reader is invited into the world/reality of the narrative, suspending the sense that s/he is reading a story. This perspective is often employed in third person narrative. There are, the author adds, different ways of employing and/or exploring both forms—for example, including a representational story-within-a-story in a presentational narrative. There are also, he suggests, ways in which a presentational story can incorporate the means of telling the story into the reason the story is told—this, he points out, is employed with particular effectiveness into comic writing. Ultimately, he warns, the writer/storyteller must be extremely careful about employing this technique (see "Quotes", p. 139)—the bottom line with this particular choice, as it is with all narrative choices, is to determine what means of telling it serves the story best.

"Dramatic vs. Narrative" This chapter focuses on the difference between "showing" and "telling", between playing out and describing a narrative's events/scenes/relationships. The former, the author suggests, takes more time but also gives a sense of immediacy,

of something having happened. The latter takes less time, but gives the sense of passivity, of waiting for something to happen. Either can be useful, depending on the importance of the event/scene/relationship to the overall narrative and on how memorable the writer wants the event/scene/relationship to be in the mind of the reader.

With this section, the author clearly (deliberately?) moves away from what might be described as his "checklist" style of presentation and into an analysis that is somehow broader in scope and simultaneously less complex. In other words, the choices he explores here have a greater number of effects, manifestations and implications, while at the same time manifesting fewer options. Here again he develops his core theme that creating a narrative is more about craft and conscious choice than it is about impulse. The point must be made that nowhere in the narrative does he actively devalue instinct. By rarely (if ever) referring to it, however, he is implicitly contending that work, choice, and consideration are ultimately of more value in determining a narrative's success. Does this necessarily mean that a writer cannot make a choice, not to mention develop and sustain it throughout a narrative, simply because it "feels right?" Not at all. What it does mean, in the author's thesis as defined and presented throughout this book, is that that choice must be justified, consistent, and ought to be explored and/or developed through every technical and/or considered means possible.

Chapters 16, 17 and 18

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

"First Person Narrative" The author begins his discussion of this narrative perspective by suggesting that the writer/storyteller should avoid overuse of dialect and/or speech habit in defining the voice of his/her narrator. The narrative is, after all, being written from the perspective of what the narrator believes himself to be saying, rather than by what the listener/reader is actually hearing. He goes on to suggest that a limitation of the first person form is that for the form to be entirely effective, the person narrating the story has to be present at the major incidents of the narrative—if a narrator does not describe the specifics of a circumstance or event, there must be clear and valid justification for doing so. The main advantage to first person narration, he suggests, is "to let [the reader] live for a while in a strange or twisted world, to see the world as someone else sees it." In other words, a first person form of narrative is a much more intimate form. The author also points out that the narrator of a first person story must have both an individually defined character and a reason for telling the story. Also in first person, the author asserts, there is the difficulty of distance in time—for the most part, first person narratives (particularly if they are written in past tense) feel like an act of memory, with a resultant (and relative) lack of intimacy. By contrast, third person narratives (because of their capacity for transcendent awareness and understanding) suffer from a distance in space—the narrator was not really there. Therefore, the author suggests, the choice the writer / storyteller must make is what form of intimacy (omniscience or presence) is more effective in relation to the story being told. The author sums up the point of this chapter by suggesting that "first person narration must reveal the narrator's character or it isn't worth doing."

"Third Person" This chapter begins with a discussion of the differences between the omniscient narrator (who has the capacity to observe, understand and comment on everything in the narrative) and the viewpoint narrator (who observes, understands, and comments on the narrative only from the perspective of a single character). The omniscient narrator, the author writes, "can tell more story and reveal more character in less time than it takes the limited third person narrator." On the other hand, the limited narrator allows for more intimacy with the story (particularly with a character within that story) and its experiences while at the same time allowing for a degree of distance from other aspects of the story (ie what is not experienced by the viewpoint character) that can, and will, more fully engage the reader.

The author concludes this chapter with a discussion of how deeply the author can/should penetrate the mind/experience of the viewpoint character. There are, he suggests, three levels of penetration—cinematic, (event and character are portrayed and observed, leaving interpretation up to the reader), light (event and character are observed and interpreted without being commented upon), and deep (event and character are observed, interpreted, commented upon and intensely defined). The author goes on to suggest that in most cases, viewpoint narrative is most effective when

it incorporates, to varying (and justifiable) degrees all three levels of penetration. "Mastery of different levels of penetration," the author writes, "is a vital part of bringing [the writer's] characters to life. This is where [the writer] has the most control over [the] reader's experience ... how well readers will know [the] characters and how much they'll care."

"A Private Population Explosion" In this very brief conclusion, the author suggests that the number of characters available to an author and the ways in which they are developed are virtually unlimited. He adds that a writer/storyteller is capable of surprising him/herself by the characters s/he creates, and that the potential is always there for a writer/storyteller to create characters that a reader can/will be recognized and/or moved by, saying "I know you, I believe in you, you're important to me."

It is intriguing to note that the book concludes with what is arguably the first and most important decision a writer must make—the point of view from which his/her story is to be told. There is the sense that this choice is somewhat daunting, and this is perhaps the reason why the author saves it for last—quite possibly, if he had presented it with all its inherent significance first, someone reading this book might reasonably have felt just a bit over-challenged and/or intimidated. Granted, there is enough information presented in enough detail throughout "Characters and Viewpoint" that the book runs that risk anyway, but ultimately the author seems to be saying, here and elsewhere in his book, that not all these decisions have to be made at once, or even at the same stage of each individual creative process. All he is saying is that these are things to be considered, and ultimately acted upon. On the other hand, there are his final words in "A Private Population Explosion," his suggestion that there are infinite possibilities for character, and therefore for narrative. In other words, where there is the daunting and intimidating, there is also the possible and the hopeful.

It is also intriguing to consider the point the author makes about the different sorts of intimacy that arise from the different narrative points of view. This is a clear manifestation of one of his central themes—that a writer's primary concern has to be the relationship being forged with the reader. Here again, is point is that every choice the author makes ought to be, on some level and at some point in the process, made with the reader in mind. And again, there are the author's final words to consider—it may be, in fact, that he is not just exploring ways for a reader to respond to a character with an "I know you"—he is also looking for ways for a reader, as the result of the work and choices made by a writer, to possibly say "I know myself."

Characters

Character

This term is used by the author to identify any individual who plays any kind of role in any kind of narrative. His primary focus in writing the book is to introduce other writers to techniques of making such individuals interesting, engaging, and realistic to a reader (see "Important People—Reader"). As part of the process of exploring those techniques, the author defines broad types of characters (main characters, secondary characters, for example), and explores each type in terms of function, importance, and depth. Throughout the book, he grounds each exploration of each character in three central premises. The first is that the actions, personalities and transformations of each character must feel justified (logical, reasonable) to those reading about them (see "Themes—The Necessity for Justification"). The author's second central premise is that characters in fiction (dramatic or literary) are what might be described as hyper-realistic, motivated by fundamental and/or archetypal human needs but with clearer and more accessible motivations than most real-life individuals. In other words, for the author a key component of any character is that it is possible for a reader to at least begin to understand why the characters do what they do, whereas in life such understanding of individuals is not always possible. The author's third central premise is that effective characters are those whose existence is a blend of lived experience (actions, attitudes and feelings grounded in reality) and what is required by the story being told (function, transformation, and meaning). If the balance is tilted too far towards the former, the author suggests, the result is a lesser sense of story and/or meaning. If the balance is tilted too far towards the latter, he adds, the result is a sense that the characters (and therefore the reader) are being overly manipulated, and therefore less realistic.

Reader

In the author's perspective, the reader is the person for whom a narrative's characters exist. A narrative, the author suggests, is created for the main purpose of awakening a reader (or viewer, in the case of dramatic narrative) to a different understanding of the world and/or of human nature, and that characters in such a narrative therefore exist, and be defined, to trigger that broader, deeper understanding. A reader/viewer, the author suggests, must be lured into a sense of belief—in the characters, in what they are doing, and in why they are doing it. This, he suggests, is the reason why writers have to be careful, specific, and relentless in their pursuit of characters that will seem, to whoever engages in the narrative as a reader and/or viewer, realistic (not just real), understandable, and justified. Every choice a writer makes, he proposes, must be made with that goal in mind—to bring the reader into the world of the characters and their story. These choices extend to the actions, background, emotions and motivations of the characters playing out the story to the various characteristics of the narrator telling the story. The third person observer, the first person observer and the first person participant must all, to respective and/or various degrees, connect to a reader/viewer in

exactly the same way and for the same reasons as the characters whose story is being narrated. In short, the overall suggestion of the book is that the key relationship in any piece of narrative writing is not that between one character and another, or between any character and the writer, but between the characters in a narrative and a reader/viewer.

Storyteller/Writer

The author breaks down the creation of a narrative into two separate processes—the telling of a story and the writing down of that story. The storyteller is the aspect of the creator that explores, understands and defines the narrative's meaning, and that of its characters. The storyteller is aware, consciously or subconsciously, of the story's theme and meaning, the ways in which the actions of the characters embody and/or dramatize both, and how the reader can/should be affected by the entire package. The writer is the aspect of the narrative's creator that knows how to put words together to create the effect desired by the storyteller—how to technically define characters and shape events to make theme, meaning and/or emotional experience available to the reader. In other words, the "storyteller" has the ideas and the insight, the "writer" is the craftsman with the capabilities and technical skills to convey those ideas and insights to the reader.

Protagonist

The protagonist is one of the main types of character as defined by the author. Other terms commonly substituted for "protagonist" include "hero", or "central character." The protagonist is defined by a variety of attributes—s/he is the character who undergoes the most significant personal transformation over the course of a narrative, and/or who plays the most active role in motivating/defining the action, and/or who simply has the most to do, who takes up the most page space.

Antagonist

The antagonist is the other main type of character defined by the author. This is the character who, according to the author, provides the opposition to the protagonist—physical, emotional, or spiritual. The antagonist, as the result of that opposition, triggers (consciously or unconsciously) the process of change undergone by the protagonist, and makes him/her strive harder to achieve that goal. It is important to note that an antagonist is not necessarily or automatically an evil character—so-called "good" characters, who for whatever reason desire the protagonist to change, can function as antagonists.

Narrator

The narrator is the individual telling the narrative's story—describing its events, exploring the feelings and/or motivations of its characters, conveying its theme. The narrator does not necessarily have to be identified and, in terms of third person

narrative (see "First Person Narrator" and "Third Person Narrator" below), very often is not. The narrator does, however, have a particular voice, perspective, and/or point of view.

First Person Narrator

A first person narrator tells a story from the point of view of an individual connected, at least to some degree, to the story. In terms of language, a first person narrative employs "I" and/or "we" to define perspective. A first person narrator can play an active role in the narrative or function mostly as an observer, but has at least a degree of intimacy in relation to the events of the story.

Third Person Narrator

A third person narrator tells a story from the point of view of an individual not directly connected in the story, from the perspective of an observer with a deep, intimate understanding of one or more of the characters playing out the narrative. A third person narrative employs "she" and/or "he" to define perspective. A third person narrative exists outside the events of a story but can function inside the experience, describing the feelings and attitudes of one or more characters in depth.

Omniscient Narrator

An omniscient narrator is a third person narrator with the ability to explore the feelings and/or experiences of all the characters to the same degree.

Viewpoint Narrator

A viewpoint narrator is a third person narrator with the ability to explore the feelings and/or experiences of one particular character—in other words, from the particular point of view of only one character in the narrative.

Objects/Places

Narrative

A narrative, as defined by the author of this book, is essentially a story, a recounting of events in the lives of a character(s) that illuminates, for the reader, a particular aspect of the human experience.

Writer's Contract

This is the unspoken agreement between writer/storyteller and reader of the kind of story that will be told. For further information about the writer's contract see Part 2, Chapter 5.

Choice

Choice, the author suggests, is the fundamental building block used in constructing a narrative. Every choice, from character name to motivation to setting to where to place a comma, is a fundamental component in defining narrative and character, and in making sure both convey the desired message to the reader.

Milieu

"Milieu" is an umbrella term used by the author to describe the physical, cultural, emotional, and/or spiritual context in which a narrative unfolds. Another term for "milieu" might be "setting," but it is important to keep in mind that milieu, at least in the context of this book, refers to a broader scope of context than simply geographical/physical location.

Idea

"Idea" is the term used by the author to describe the central premise of a narrative or story, the basic image and/or experience at the core of its events and character transformations.

Event

"Event" is the term used by the author to define incidents in a narrative—confrontations, encounters, conversations, happenings, realizations, anything (external or internal) that moves a story along towards a conclusion and/or further into its exploration of idea.

Hierarchy of Characters

This is a term used by the author to describe and/or quantify the varying degrees of importance of characters in a narrative—main characters, secondary characters, minor characters, or place holders, for example. The further up a character is on the hierarchy, the author suggests, the more time and effort an author has to make in developing, defining, and justifying him/her.

Network

"Network" is a term used by the author to describe the relationships experienced by a character, a "network" of friends and/or family and/or co-workers. Exploration and/or description of one or more of a character's networks is, the author suggests, a useful means of revealing and defining that character.

Transformation

Many, if not all, central characters (according to the author) undergo a process of transformation, a movement from one state of being to another. The process of transformation is the central narrative element of many/most narratives, with such transformation sometimes manifesting physically/externally, more often manifesting spiritually/internally, and sometimes both.

Voice

"Voice" is the term used by the author to describe the way in which a narrator tells his her story, the perspective s/he takes and how s/he uses words as the result of that perspective. Voice can be comic, sarcastic, heartfelt, sentimental, objective, clinical, omniscient or limited in viewpoint—whatever the author chooses and needs to convey his/her idea to the reader in the way s/he wants.

Themes

The Necessity for Justification

Throughout the book, the author repeatedly makes the point that no matter what choice the writer/storyteller makes in creating and defining his/her narrative, that choice has to feel "justified." This, he writes, is important on two levels. The first is that of logic, in that the pieces of a narrative puzzle have to fit together. Events and reactions to those events have to lead one into the other, questions must be answered and answers must have questions (this is particularly true, he suggests, of mystery and/or suspense narratives), and the basic rules of the world (milieu) in which the story takes place must be followed. This last point is not made to suggest that the writer/storyteller cannot create his/her own rules for a narrative, but rather to point out that whatever rules are established must be adhered to. In short, the reasons things happen where and how and why they happen, not to mention who is involved and why—it all has to simply make sense to the reader. Everything has to be explained, or explainable. This, the author suggests, is related to the second level of justification, that of emotion and/or motivation. What a character does and/or says must feel, to a reader, as though it simply makes sense, as though it is realistic and as though it could happen not only within the world of the novel and the characters inhabiting that world, but to the context of this world and how it works. Any narrative, the author contends, even one which has entertainment as its main purpose, has at least an element of exploration and/or expansion of a reader's experience of being human, even if it is simply the deepening curiosity arising from the reading of a mystery or the laughter arising from a comedy. Ultimately, the author writes, a sense of justification, of logic and of realism, is essential if a reader is to become fully engaged in a narrative, if s/he is to not become distracted by events or actions that simply do not make sense or do not feel right.

The Value of Craft

A core thematic implication of this book is that craft rather than impulse is the primary ingredient of a successful narrative (success being defined as the creation of a desired response in a reader/viewer). Simply by writing about what he does in the way that he does, the author is suggesting that an emphasis on deliberate and careful choice, of specific and reasoned shaping of narrative and character by an author/writer, is the most effective means by which a narrative achieves its purpose. This is true of its general purpose (to awaken broader understanding and experience in a reader) as well as the thematic purpose unique to a particular narrative. Throughout the book, the author pays very little attention to the value of instinct or impulse. Instead, there is an overall sense that the author likens the act of successful narrative creation to a skill, the application of studied and practiced techniques to achieve an artistic purpose. A further implication of this authorial perspective is that the originating idea, image, or seed of insight is about the only way in which a writer's impulse and/or inspiration manifests. The author rarely refers to talent, to desire, or to passion as a factor in a writer's

process, but instead focuses on concentrated, considered, carefully shaped work. Ultimately he seems to be saying that artistry, or at the very least connection with a reader, is less a result of what is felt or imagined by a writer than it is of what is done.

The Relationship between Writer and Reader

As previously discussed (see "Important People—Author" and "Reader"), there is the overall sense throughout the book that for the author, the most important relationship in a narrative is that between Writer and Reader. As suggested above, the author seems to be expressing the opinion that everything a writer does in terms of creating and/or shaping his/her narrative must be undertaken in terms of how it can/will affect the reader's perception. This implies not only that the act of creation is a much more conscious process than some might believe, but also that a narrative is fundamentally an act of communication, rather than an act of expression. To many this might seem self-evident, but there are others who might suggest that an act of creation is simply that, and that the purpose of a creative artist (writer or otherwise) is to simply express a truth as experienced, leaving a reader to realize an interpretation of what has been created on his/her own terms. It could also be argued that the degree to which communication is necessary is dependent upon the sort of narrative being created. A narrative more interested in exploring event (ie a mystery narrative such as works by Minette Walters, Sue Grafton, or any number of similar writers) might place more emphasis on communication (of suspect, clue and solution) than a narrative more interested in exploring character, experience and language. The works of writers such as Virginia Woolf and Michael Ondaatje clearly fall into this category. Ultimately, however, the question of how much emphasis should be placed on a reader in the writer/reader relationship could very well be moot—is it truly possible for a story to exist if there is no intent to have someone read it?

Style

Perspective

As indicated in biographical notes at the beginning of the book, the author is an acclaimed fiction writer and teacher, with years of experience in both creating narrative himself and in teaching others how to do so. In other words, there is a very clear sense that he knows from experience what he is talking about, and that he knows there are writers out there with both the need and the desire to know more about how to write (specifically how to create engaging and effective characters). The point is not made to suggest that the book is aimed solely at those who are just starting out in a writing career. On the contrary, the points discussed by the author could very well be useful to more experienced writers, as reminders of what has been previously applied or forgotten, or as introductions to fresh ways of both creating and thinking about creating. As he himself suggests (see "Quotes", p. 2) the book is full of techniques that writers of all experience levels can employ to create fully engaging narratives. At no point, however, does he insist that any of those techniques must be applied, but rather suggests that they have proven to be both effective and relevant in the past, and could easily be both in almost any circumstances. Any writers interested in adding depth and/or variation to their work will, it is almost certain, find something in "Characters and Viewpoint" to at least trigger new thoughts, and more likely bring aspects to their work they had not previously considered or applied.

Tone

The book is clearly intended as a kind of instruction manual. It is, in fact, almost a literary tool kit (again, see "Quotes", p. 2), a mostly objective presentation of tried and true techniques for successful literary creation. There are times at which the author's perspective becomes a degree or two more subjective—when he writes of personal experience in his struggles to create effective characters and narrative, and at these times, his comments carry a degree or two of additional weight. For the most part, though, his tone is conversational rather than dictatorial, suggesting rather than imposing—as previously discussed, the techniques he discussed are ideas and possibilities, rather than hard and fast rules. Above all, his observations and suggestions seem to simply make sense. They are presented in a straightforward and matter-of-fact way, with this manner of presentation playing a significant role in creating the previously discussed sense that the author advocates craft over inspiration (see "Themes—The Value of Craft"). He is, in short, urging his reader to work hard rather than to rely on impulse to carry the weight of the narrative work. Some readers, perhaps those less experienced as writers, might find this tonal perspective somewhat disappointing—nobody likes to be told that anything, creative or otherwise, is work. Ultimately, however, the author's tonal attitude suggests that the work, the effort and the craft are all ultimately worthwhile—it will, he consistently contends, make the art of communication much easier and much more rewarding.

Structure

The first point to note here is that the book is essentially divided into two sections—as the title suggests, "character" and "viewpoint". Within each of those two larger sections, the book's structure is essentially as straightforward as its perspective and tone, employing the useful (and archetypal) academic technique of moving from the general to the specific. In terms of character, the author moves from a general discussion of what character is and how it functions through different sorts of character. Each sort is, in turn, broken down into even more specific sorts, so that the author's theory about the hierarchy of characters (see "Objects/Places—The Hierarchy of Characters") plays out in context (form, structure) as well as in content (idea, practical technique). In terms of viewpoint, the author again moves from the general to the specific—a general discussion of what viewpoint is to a specific discussion of the various kinds of viewpoint and an even more specific discussion of the pros and cons of each kind. It is important to note here that throughout the book, the author effectively employs both illustrations of his points (from various established, published narratives) and writing examples, most of which he created himself. In other words, there is an effective blend of theory and practice throughout the book, a structural reinforcement of the relationship between idea and experience that, as previously discussed (see "Tone" and "Perspective"), creates the sense that the author's teaching can be trusted. However, this sense might be undermined to some degree by a lack of exploration of the relationship between character and story.

Quotes

"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," p. 2.

"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 ... the uncertainty of not knowing what this person will do, not knowing if we're in danger or not," p. 8.

"The moment you use a technique that doesn't belong in your story, solely for the sake of appealing to some imagined reader who wants a bit more sex or a tad more sentimentality or some tough action, at that moment your story dies a little, becomes a little more lie and a little less truth," p. 9.

"...distorted or not, your memory of yourself is the clearest picture you will ever have of what a human being is and why people do what they do. You are the only person you will ever know from the inside, and so, inevitably, when your fiction shows other characters from the inside, you will reveal yourself," p. 31.

"...the stories that astonish us, the characters that live forever in our memories—those are the result of rich imagination, perceptive observation, rigorous interrogation, and careful decision-making," p. 46.

"A good understanding of characterization includes knowing when it's appropriate to concentrate on character—and when it isn't," p. 58.

"Pain is a sword with two edges. The character who suffers pain and the character who inflicts it are both made more memorable and more important," p. 68.

"As a general rule, audience sympathy increases with the importance of [a] character's dream and the amount of effort the character has already expended to try to fulfill it," p. 82.

"The character may wear the mask of the common man, but underneath ... his true face must always be the face of the hero," p. 95.

"The comedy writer always walks a delicate line between being too believable, and therefore not funny, and being too unbelievable, and therefore losing the audience's interest," p. 100.

"Revelation of the past constantly revises the meaning of the present," p. 107.

"As a general rule, the more bizarre and unbelievable the character's behavior and the more important it is to the story, the earlier in the story [the writer has] to begin justifying it and the more time [s/he'll] need to spend to make it believable," p. 118.

"One of the reasons fiction exists ... is to deal with that fear of inexplicable change, that uncertain dread that lurks in the background of all our human relationships. Because fiction lets us see people's motives, the causes of their behavior, these stories about made up people help us guess at the motives and causes of real people's behavior," p. 120.

"...the great writers will always be the ones who have passionate, truthful stories to tell, and who do all they can to help their readers receive them ... choose the simplest, clearest, least noticeable technique that will accomplish what the story requires," p. 133.

"The more [a writer relies] on the narrator's voice to carry the story instead of the events themselves, the better [the] writing has to be. Because when the audience's attention is drawn away from the story, it goes somewhere. They're staring at [the] style close up, and if your voice happens not to be very entertaining, [the writer has] lost them," p. 139.

"...plays and films are dramatic in form. The action unfolds in 'real time' while the audience watches. Fiction has a narrator, a storyteller. Instead of the audience seeing events directly, they are unavoidably filtered through the perceptions of the narrator," p. 140.

Topics for Discussion

Consider a work of fiction (novel or short story) currently being discussed or examined in class. What character development techniques are evident in the writing? Which character is the protagonist? The antagonist? Which are the major characters? The minor characters? The functional characters?

Consider the same, or another work of fiction. What narrative perspectives are employed? First/third person? Omniscient/viewpoint perspective? Cinematic/light/deep penetration?

Consider a work of fiction by which you have been significantly affected in the past. What techniques of character/narrative development made it memorable?

Choose an article from a newspaper that you believe would make a good narrative. Develop characters using techniques outlined here. Discuss the pros and cons of the various narrative perspectives to determine which would recount the narrative most effectively.

What are some of the different voices you have? Compare and define the ways you speak to your parents, your spouse, your colleagues, shop clerks, and children. Choose a character from the project outlined above and put him/her in a series of conversations with three or four very different people, and define the different ways s/he speaks.

Write a scene from the narrative outlined above from the different narrative perspectives: first/third person, omniscient/viewpoint, cinematic/light/deep penetration.

Discuss ways that techniques discussed here in relation to fiction narrative are/can be applied to other forms of narrative—theatre, film, dance, etc.

Debate the author's implication, referred to in "Themes—The Value of Craft" that inspiration is less important to the creation of good narrative than the carefully considered application of craft. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Discuss the author's thematic suggestion that the purpose of creation is to communicate, rather than to simply express. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? What do you see as the role of the reader/viewer in narrative?