Week 1: Characters – Burrowing Beneath the Surface

Introduction:

*It is perfectly okay to write garbage—as long as you edit brilliantly.*
– C. J. Cherryh

This quote from Ms. Cherryh, although somewhat humorous, is vital for every aspiring novelist to remember. It is not the first draft or even the second that matters—these early drafts are all about uncovering the emotional depths of your characters and discovering the general outlines of your story. A novel often takes years to write, so don’t put any false pressure on yourself to produce beautiful prose right out of the gate. Let your work be messy, repetitive, incomplete, sophomoric, obvious, etc. Experimentation always includes some colossal blunders and backtracking and re-thinking. And once you accept this, you can lower your expectations and actually have fun writing!

A writer friend of mine spent over 14 years constructing his first novel. Why? Simply because he edited each sentence as he went along. Remember that there will be plenty of time to deconstruct and overanalyze during the revision process, but for now, as you are in the middle of creating characters and events and settings, you must remain open to the scattered incompleteness of the early draft. The more you allow yourself up to feel good about your literary work, the less likely you’ll be bullied and blocked by unrealistic goals.

For the first few weeks of class, we’ll focus on characterization simply because great literature is always about the very specific and idiosyncratic human beings who populate your pages. Charismatic protagonists (and antagonists) linger in the minds of readers long after the final page is turned. Yet most aspiring writers wonder how to create characters who are both realistic-seeming and fascinating—who behave and misbehave with equal dexterity and aplomb.

There’s no easy answer or magical elixir that can alchemize flat characters into living, breathing, three dimensional ones. But the willingness of a writer to dig deeply into the emotional and historical secrets of her/his characters is the very first step. And this unearthing can only come from familiarity—from the writer spending ample time burrowing in the following locations:

1. The inner recesses of the character’s psyche (the secret desires, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, resentments that he or she keeps hidden from the rest of the world)
2. The aspects of the character that he or she is in denial about or has no access to (unacknowledged and unrecognized motivations, feelings, temptations, behavioral habits that are too scary to admit to, etc.)

3. Her/ his present & past (and depending on the narrative perspective, maybe even the future)

The longer a writer spends occupying a foreign set of perceptions, a consciousness independent from the author’s own heart, mind, and specificities of life, the author learns how the character herself would act. How would she respond to certain stimuli, certain pressures? What’s important to her? Is she funny? What are the great regrets of her life? What are her goals, her private desires? Has she ever been in love, in genuine peril? What does she (perhaps falsely) pride herself on?

Often, despite a writer’s best planning and preconceived notions of a character’s identity, we have to see them act, talk, think, interact; we have to see them stalk the habitat of the page before we ourselves know the nuances and complexities of their souls.

This invariably (and frustratingly) will lead to some trial and error, false starts that take us in certain directions that don’t make the final draft. Resist the urge to think about the discarded scenes as wasted pages. Try to think of this process as the research necessary to render an independent heart and mind. Writers have to possess a reservoir of knowledge in order to zero in on and reveal the specific aspects of character that bring these humans fully alive.

To Read This Week:

Chapter 1 in *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*

As far as possible in *Illumination Night*

Writing Assignment:

Conflict between characters is magnified when they are put into close contact with each other in a confined space. Put your main character in a stuck elevator, or in crowded airplane, or in a slow line at the bank or the post office or the DMV (or a tight space appropriate to your novel’s setting). Now put somebody in the same physical space with her/him that is the very last person they want to communicate with. What happens? Be sure to consider/utilize what Catherine Brady has to say about the importance of subtext and “crooked logic.”

Limit 750 words.

Supplementary Assignment:
The workshop component of the course will be starting in Week 2, so you should already be working on preparing the 3500 word excerpt you’ll share first with the group. Use this class as permission to prioritize your novel and get cracking now!

**Discussion Points:**

1. What kind of writer do you want to be? In the great constellation of authors—from Virginia Woolf to John Steinbeck to Cormac McCarthy—we’re all trying to accomplish the goal of telling a compelling story. So what kind of storyteller do you want to evolve into? How will you define “compelling”? What will the word “story” mean in your specific hands?

2. In the early pages of *Illumination Night*, what secrets are Vonny, Andre, Simon, and Elizabeth hiding from each other? What secrets are they perhaps hiding from even themselves?

**Week 2: Characterization: the Seen and the Unseen**

**Introduction:**

All stories contain the “unseen”—the thought processes and interior life of the characters, and the “seen”—the mechanics of the story’s plot. Finding the correct balance between these two twinned aspects is one of the most challenging parts of writing. As the author of our text rightly points out, “meaning must be embodied in the literal,” but this meaning is very rarely expressed outright. Readers want to decide for themselves what it is that the actions and words of a character imply and suggest. They do not want the author to tell them what each current action means as it occurs, nor do they want to be told what is going to happen next. Instead, they want to figure out for themselves what each movement of the plot (the “seen”) means on a symbolic, internal, and emotional level (the “unseen”).

Our text tries to explain this in terms of T.S. Eliot’s concept of the “objective correlative.” This is merely a fancy, lit-crit phrase that says that many of the “seen” objects and actions and words in a story contain implied or “unseen” meaning that the reader recognizes without being told. The book uses the example of a protagonist’s cleansing and enlivening literal walk in the rain that (thanks to the meaning-making mind of the thoughtful reader) comes to imply a figurative baptism of sorts. Literal rain when experienced by a character who has come to a turning point, contains the symbolic status of a

So how do you go about supplying your novel with both the “seen” that implies and suggests the “unseen,” the literal that implies the figurative? Interestingly, it is in much the same way that you first learned to utilize “showing” to do “telling.” You figure out which specific actions and words of the protagonist (and other characters) will best imply or hint at the larger meaning you want your story to reflect.
In *Illumination Night*, we see Andre buy two antique motorcycles that he cannot afford. Because of the scenes that have taken place previously, we as readers, fill in the unspoken and “unseen” emotional meaning of this act and have a fairly good guess about why he has deliberately done this self-destructive thing. In this way, the purchase of motorcycles becomes something much larger than itself.

This reminds me of the John Gardner writing exercise in which writers are asked to describe an abandoned barn from the point of view of somebody who’s just fallen in love, and then render the same setting from the perspective of one who has just committed a murder. Are these two characters seeing the same place?

Literally, the answer is yes. But when we think about how the emotional and “unseen” details of their situations colors this “seen” and literal building, they are witnessing very different places. For a lover, the barn might seem sensually secluded, a perfect spot for an atmospheric tryst. The pigeons and doves in the rafters may be cooing in apparent pairs, and the smells of dry hay an evocative and nostalgic reminder of the natural world. The dust motes in the air might soften and filter the light that is falling in golden bands from the glassless window. Yet the murderer, perhaps racked with guilt and denial and self-hatred, doesn’t see this optimism in the scene’s setting; no, rather than seeing possibility and deepening romance, she sees nature’s cruelty, time’s erosion of the wooden structure, the loose boards and broken glass, the smell of dried horse droppings, and the poverty that probably caused the building’s desertion in the first place.

All of this is just to say that the relationship between the “seen” and the “unseen” is of utmost importance to both the development of your character’s dimensionality, and the recognition of your plot-events’ symbolic meaning. Readers need to be able to make sense of the actions and words of your characters without having their power lessened by authorial or narratorial explanation. They also long to assign meaning to the objects and settings of the story, instead of seeing them as random and inconsequential.

**To Read This Week:**

Our reading load for the workshop component of the course (weeks 2-10) will be to read the two to three 3500-word submissions from your peers. Please try and read everything twice: once for plot and a general sense of what transpires (the “seen”); then please read a second time for all the nuances and subtleties (the “unseen”). Only after you’ve done this should you compose your feedback. Write at least 250-words of feedback for each submission.

Chapter 2 from *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*

As far as possible in *Illumination Night*

**Discussion Points:**
1. Make a list of the 5 most important “seen” objects, settings, actions, and conversations from your novel and explain what larger and “unseen” meanings they contain.

2. How will you make sure that your reader will assign the correct meaning to these important “seen” things?

**Week 3: Plotting with Glaciers**

**Introduction:**

Our text says that a novel’s plot should move with the speed of a glacier, rather than with the short story’s avalanche of action. And that the rocks and debris this glacier-like plot accumulates as it moves is what gives this glacier its power to change the landscape it passes through. These rocks and debris are the subplots that branch off of the story’s central conflict, and they both add to and distract from the movement of the main storyline.

Why would we want to distract from the story’s main conflict? Primarily because tension and conflict are most suspenseful when stretched nearly to the breaking point. If you have ever watched a TV sitcom or a soap opera or a romantic comedy, you know that the very best love relationships are those in which the love interests are eternally kept apart. It’s the tension of wondering where and when and whether or not that keeps the viewer watching. This is equally true of the reader. We want to head toward a resolution of the story’s conflict, but we want to get there only after a great deal of struggle. And it is the struggle that makes the ending itself matter so much. This is the same reason people are willing to wait in line to eat somewhere or buy something. It is almost as if the presence of the line and the delaying of pleasure makes the acquisition of the desired object all the sweeter.

Keeping your glacier moving forward while also picking up interesting rocks and debris that add to the glacier’s size and seriousness sounds difficult, but not if you already know your characters and are very familiar with their past histories and current desires (secret and otherwise). Here is where you can consider the different ways in which your characters can interact with each other and pick up interesting and unexpected debris.

Consider how nearly all the conflict in *Illumination Night* stems from each character’s internal fears and desires coming into direct conflict with those of other characters. Because of her own past familial distress and dysfunction, Vonny wants desperately to provide her own son with plenty of safety and security. This works well until…Simon’s lack of physical growth becomes a threatening and dividing force, and until Andre’s need for personal independence undercuts the family’s financial resources. At least a dozen more pieces of debris get factored in here, as well—each one increasing the size and speed and severity of the story’s glacier. This accumulation of debris ups the reader’s interest level and also makes the major conflicts more costly and less likely to be resolved easily.
Each of these additions also changes the glacier’s original shape. Vonny’s and Andre’s marital relationship becomes packed with extra rocks and debris when Elizabeth’s granddaughter comes to stay, and what once seemed to be merely problematic, now becomes a serious and life-changing situation—a dangerous glacier that threatens to wreck everything in its path.

To Read This Week:

Read and Comment on our workshop submissions.
Chapter 3 in Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction
Continue your reading in Illumination Night

Discussion Points:

1. How will your novel’s glacier be changed and enlarged by the debris it accumulates?
2. How does Elizabeth factor in to the glacier-effect in Illumination Night?

Week 4: Plotting with Icebergs

Introduction:

Hemingway famously (and confoundingly) claimed that stories were like icebergs in that the majority of their size and chief power should remain hidden beneath the water’s (and the story’s) surface. The writer, Hemingway theorized, should be totally knowledgeable of what lay beneath, while the reader would only be vaguely aware. Regardless, according to Catherine Brady, the story will assume proportion as the reader fills in these gaps left by the author via three related craft strategies: the peripheral detail, recurrence, and sequencing.

If you have read Chapter 4, you have seen examples of the ways in which images that seem at first glance to unrelated to the story’s action can take on force and meaning by being repeated or by being closely associated in space and time with a particular event. For example, in Illumination Night, the title itself references not only a celebratory evening on which candles light up an entire town, but (thanks to repetition and following closely on the heels of a particular action) it also becomes a moment of revelation/illumination during which Vonny and Andre each see each other differently. No one, least of all the author, tells the reader this. We discover this information for ourselves by connecting dots and filling in gaps. We suddenly realize that the night in question is carrying beneath its surface an enormous power and weight, and the symbolic meaning of the title becomes apparent.

Elizabeth’s view of herself as a bird capable of flight, and Simon’s notions of his own apparently shrinking body are images that are repeated, but are not explained by the
author. The reader, instead, comes to the realization that these two characters are in an important state of bodily flux—and ones that may change their forms permanently.

Readers understand, since they have been reading and listening to stories forever, that it is not just the literal that has meaning. They are always on the lookout for the hidden, the peripheral, the repeated image, and the order in which these things are presented. They are constantly attempting to make meaning, and it is in our best writerly interests to provide them with the tip of an iceberg that hints at greater and more meaningful things beneath.

To Read This Week:

Read and Comment on our workshop submissions
Chapter 4 in *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*
As much as possible in *Illumination Night*

Discussion Points:

1. What are some of the most important repeated images in your novel? What do they imply or hint at?
2. How does Jody’s changing appearance function as more than just teenage trend-following in *Illumination Night*?

Week 5:

Introduction:

In order for readers to relate to our novels, the characters who populate them have to be recognizable as basically human (even if they are unrecognizable creatures from another planet), and their emotions and actions have to seem realistic and believable. However, these characters should never, ever be predictable. In fact, our characters are the very most fascinating when their behavior and attitudes and dialogue seem puzzling.

It is the complexities and ambiguities of human nature that make for excellent fiction. It is the fact that Andre loves Vonny thoroughly and longs to make her proud of him that makes his attitude toward Jody seemingly inexplicable. However, pretend for a moment that Andre always behaved in ways that were utterly consistent and predictable. Would he then seem more realistic? Would you believe in him as a real human being? Probably not. Readers know from their deep acquaintance with themselves that consistency is not a chief attribute of any human being. Even when we think we know someone extremely well, we can be bitterly or joyously surprised by their behavior. Ask any broken-hearted lover or spouse whether or not he anticipated being cheated upon or divorced. Ask any mother of a man on death row whether or not she knew this is where her baby boy would end up.
The tension inherent in unreliable characters is a wonderful fictional tool. It engenders plot and keeps readers turning pages to see what each character will do next. This doesn’t mean that the best characters are those who act with utter randomness and spontaneity, it simply means that every human being is capable of change and contradiction. Surprising your reader occasionally with a character’s ambiguous actions or changeable attitude is a marvelous way to reinforce the real seeming nature of your story.

Nearly every human emotion is an a mixed one. Watching your firstborn leave for college is a bittersweet experience. Sitting by the bedside of your terminally and painfully ill father is an ambiguous experience full of both grief and relief. People involved in weddings often laugh and cry, both. Very little in human life is either undiluted or pure pleasure or pain.

Take advantage of these emotional and character inconsistencies to muddy the novel’s waters and complicate the actions, dialogue, and emotional responses of all of your characters in ways that reflect the truest version of the human existence.

To Read This Week:

Read and Comment on our workshop submissions.
Chapter 5 in Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction
Any chapters you haven’t already read in Illumination Night

Discussion Points:
1. What are some of the most important inconsistencies and ambiguities revealed by your novel’s characters?
2. What is an complex and surprising action taken by one of the characters in Illumination Night?

Week 6: Who’s Telling this Story Anyway?

Introduction:

As Catherine Brady tells us: “Dramatic tension often derives from the reader wavering in relation to character, writer, or narrator for most of the way. Ideally, the reader will be left holding the bag, with a changed awareness of the difficulty of judgment.” What this really means is that the narrator should ideally withhold any implied judgment of the characters and their actions, so that the reader can make up her own mind about each of the novel’s events and the people responsible for these actions. If the narrator does indeed imply his or her own feelings about the actions of the characters, the reader (even just subconsciously) puts up a defensive wall against this particular interpretation and attitude.
Sometimes the author deliberately has the narrator imply a judgment of a character and then allows this same character to do or say something that obviously contradicts this
narratorial evaluation. This juxtaposition complicates things, although readers tend to believe direct actions over stated/implied impressions.

Point of view and narration choices seem complex when they are discussed in their many possibilities and variations: limited omniscient, distant third person, unreliable first person, peripheral narrator, etc. However, most point of view and narratorial decisions are made unconsciously by the author and long before the story begins. We tend to hear in our mind’s ear the correct teller and voice for each story and we tend to do this automatically. It is only when a story is simply not working or progressing at all that we may realize that the wrong person is holding the story’s camera and knows far too much or too little to be of any help in relaying this particular series of events.

For example, a child narrator (like Simon) cannot possibly have enough insight into a morally complex situation to present more than an extremely limited viewpoint. And a teenage narrator (like Jody) is limited in her maturity level and is likely to be overdramatic in her depiction of less-than-serious situations. In my own novel, *The Girl Who Slept with God*, I deliberately used an adolescent narrator because it was important to me that the narrator NOT know or understand the story’s larger picture in the same way that the adult reader probably would. When a reader understands or knows or anticipates something that the protagonist does not, dramatic tension is created. The reader then longs to tell the character what he or she knows, and since this is not possible, the reader feels an underlying tension and anxiety that keeps them turning the novel’s pages.

Choosing the best narrator(s) for your novel is mainly a matter of deciding how much information you want revealed and with how much insight. Taking these ideas into account will definitely result in tighter plotting and greater emotional tension in your own novel.

**To Read This Week:**

Read and Comment on our workshop submissions.
Chapter 6 in *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*
*Illumination Night*

**Discussion Points:**

1. Alice Hoffman does something unusual with point of view in the first chapter of *Illumination Night*. What do you think she is trying to accomplish?
2. Why have you chosen the narrator and point of view that you have in your own novel?
Week 7: Using Setting, Staging, and Dialogue

Introduction:

Plot is intertwined with structure/staging. It’s not just what we say as writers, but also when we say it that creates wonder, mystery, and excitement in our readers. Stretching action across many pages or chapters can help solidify a reader’s attention. Plot is a meaningful series of events, but it’s also a manicured system of events. The order we parcel out information is just as vital as what those moments might contain.

Chapter beginnings are nice spots to entice our readers. Lynda Barry uses this technique masterfully in her novel “Cruddy,” the story of a teenage girl who has been kidnapped by her father.

Here’s how chapter five starts:

According to the newspaper version of the story, the father stole me, kidnapped me, snatched me up in the middle of the night and left the mother a note saying if she contacted the police or tried to find either one of us he would not hesitate to slit my throat.

Chapter conclusions can also make nice locales to dangle bait—this tactic is often called “cliff hanger endings”—postponing the payoff, forcing the reader to flip to the next chapter or even later in the book to find out how a certain scenario played out. This can be used to create tension, but the technique should not be overdone or the writer runs the risk of annoying the reader and leaving a bad taste in her mouth when the “payoff” is not great enough. These false dramas that lead to very little are referred to as “red herrings” and should be avoided.

The location of each scene and its accompanying weather conditions, odors, sounds, and amount of light all help to orient the reader in space and time, but these setting details can also add to the emotional tenor of the story’s action. One of the easiest ways to enhance the mood and tone of a scene is to have the action take place in a location that either mirrors the situation or contradicts it. For example, if a funeral takes place in a gloomy old stone church on a day it is raining and heavily overcast, this atmosphere will obviously complement the day’s activities. Amazingly, though, if the burial takes place on a brilliantly hot and sunny afternoon in a cemetery lush with long grass and blooming wildflowers, this death will seem even more inappropriate and wretchedly wrong. In the same way that laughing nervously during a funeral can seem to highlight its somber and dreadful tone, a beautiful setting for a terrible event can heighten the drama and make the situation feel jarringly hideous. Having a very wretched lovers’ quarrel in an expensive and beautiful restaurant on Valentine’s Day can make the break up feel all the worse, while having to walk home through a foot of slushy snow after you’ve found out that your boyfriend is cheating on you, can exacerbate the rottenness of the situation. The thing to avoid here is the stereotypical and the clichéd. You do not want something frightening to happen during a severe thunderstorm, or lovers to meet in a field of daisies
and sunshine with a lone heart-shaped cloud floating by overhead. If you must match your setting to your plot events, try to use something at least slightly unusual or unexpected in your description. Being highly specific is always a good idea.

This same idea applies equally when your characters are engaged in dialogue. Here, not only setting can be used to excellent advantage, but the physical actions of the character(s) can mirror or contradict the tone of the words being said. If two friends or spouses are quarrelling, one of them could be anxiously shredding a paper napkin beneath the table, or conversely, she could be smiling grimly while eating bite after bite of dessert. The goal here is to have the characters’ actions shine a spotlight on their words by either reinforcing the attitudinal tenor of the conversation, or being in direct opposition to it. Either way, the dialogue will take on a depth and a complexity thanks to the body language and physical gestures and movements of the players involved.

**Reading Assignment:**

Read and comment on workshop submissions
Chapter 7 from *Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction*
*Illumination Night*

**Discussion Points:**

1. What setting in *Illumination Night* mirrors its action? Contradicts it?
2. Tell us about 3 spots in your own novel where the physical actions and gestures of a character contradict the dialogue being spoken.

**Week 8: Meaningful Imagery**

Introduction:

“In the best fiction, patterns of imagery heighten this sense of the relationship between the visible action and its invisible meaning(s), and they do so through subtle associations, seeming to occur at the periphery of the reader’s field of vision, so that their cumulative effect is an ah! response of astonished recognition.” Catherine Brady

Metaphor, simile, allusion, symbol, and repeated images are tools that the skillful writer can use to heighten and reinforce an underlying and unstated idea. These concrete images can appear on the page to suggest something about an abstract idea that the author does not want to state directly, but wants his reader to notice on his own. For example, in my own novel, the protagonist’s father is an astronomy professor who discusses the night sky with his daughter just often enough to allow the stars and their movement (concrete image) to imply that patterns exist, but not forever (abstract concept). This particular abstract concept matters to the novel because the father’s actions seem to follow a pattern as stable as the stars, that unfortunately changes as the novel progresses. This same young daughter also notices that the summertime moths (concrete image) are continually drawn toward light sources even when the heat will ensure their deaths (abstract concept). This
idea matters because she, too is drawn toward things and people that cause her great harm. In a meeting of these two images, her father tells her that moths supposedly navigate via light sources like the moon and the stars, so their interest in light is a necessary one (just like the daughter’s).

The most important aspect of image-using is to make sure that these “symbols” occur naturally in your story. A reader can tell when a writer has forced an image or a metaphor because the imagery will feel false and/or heavy handed. No image should seem artificial and awkward. All poetic language and symbolism must seem to grow organically from the events and location of the story itself, or it should not be used. A bad metaphor or simile is far worse than none. Imagery must accumulate slowly and naturally as a result of the novel’s time period, season, setting, and interests and obsessions of the characters. Repeated imagery strengthens its emotional impact, but any particular image must only appear when it would naturally—the writer should not think, “Oh, it’s time to have a white rabbit (or wet umbrella or torn apron) appear in the story again.”

To Read This Week:

Read and write at least 250-words of feedback for each workshop submission.
Chapter 8 in Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction
Illumination Night

Discussion Points:

1. How are you taking advantage of images in your novel?
2. What concrete images does Alice Hoffman use repeatedly to suggest abstract concepts?

Week 9: Tension between Showing and Telling

Introduction:

“In judging when and whether to show or tell, the one absolute rule is that you cannot tell your story’s secrets, but must dramatize what lies at the heart of the conflict.” Catherine Brady

By the time they are writing a novel, nearly every writer knows the difference between showing and telling, and the reasons for using each technique. Craft textbooks and writing teachers place an emphasis on showing primarily because it is vital that readers interpret a story’s importance and meaning for themselves. If, on page 1, a character tells the reader “I hated my mother and was glad she died because she caused my breakup with my wife,” the reader will have little reason to continue reading. If, however, on page 1, the character is seen happily speeding past his mother’s gravestone without even glancing at it or stopping, we will be much more inclined to turn the page to find out why. Showing has an enormous effect on readers since it requires them to do some
mental work that results in discovery. This process allows them to feel smart and capable and as if they know something that the characters themselves may not.

Something that makes even more of an impression on the reader and causes him to do a bit more mental cogitation is when a piece of telling contradicts what is being shown (or vice versa). If the character tells us that he hated his mother and is glad she is dead because she caused his divorce, and we then see him carefully buying an enormous bunch of her favorite flowers, placing them reverently on her grave, and going back three days later to water them, we will wonder which of these two differing “truths” is the correct one. We will be inclined to believe what he has told us, but we will also wonder whether or not he is overly conscientious, is wracked by guilt, or is the most dutiful son ever. We may also think less of him because his actions ring so false and seem hypocritical. Regardless, we are intrigued and want to know more about the tension between this man’s actions and words.

In my own novel, the father of the female protagonist reiterates quite a few times just how much his daughters mean to him and how responsible he feels for their welfare. We then watch as he forces two of his daughters to hide out in an old house at the edge of town because of the eldest one’s unexpected pregnancy. Once again, what this character tells us and what he shows us are quite different. And wisely, the author doesn’t tell us how to feel about the contradiction—we make up our own minds about the quality of this father’s parenting.

Allowing sections of telling and showing to occasionally counter or challenge each other creates interesting tension in the story, and forces the reader to examine every character’s inner reflections, words, and actions to see how closely they align.

To Read This Week:

Read and write at least 250-words of feedback for each submission.
Chapter 9 in Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction
Illumination Night

Discussion Points:

1. Which character in Illumination Night does things that contradict what he or she says or thinks?
2. Where in your own novel do you utilize tension between showing and telling?

Week 10: Revision Strategies

Introduction:

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention some tactics for what comes next, not only in finishing the rough draft, but of what to expect and how to plan to finish subsequent revisions. I
want you to leave our class feeling somewhat prepared for that day when you do complete the first draft, with at least a basic understanding of how to continue to work on your creative project.

Revision will be the driving force that shapes your narrative. As I've LOUDLY advocated, your rough draft—along with everyone else who has ever written a book—will be something close to terrible. A disaster. In all honesty, even your own family members who have to like your writing will only be pretending to have enjoyed this “literary” experience, and once you walk away, they’ll purse their lips and silently pity you.

But that’s okay. It’s expected. We’re prepared for this. We were ready for the rough draft to be sloppy and incoherent at times, with characterizations oscillating all over the place and plot points contradicting one another. We knew our imagery might not map through the whole story; we anticipated rushing through some sequences and rendering others at such a glacial pace we almost nod off ourselves.

Most importantly, though, we know the most important detail: that our true goal with the rough draft was simply to finish it—to sculpt a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

Now the really exciting part starts... like a sculptor, we have our mass of clay and now we start to carve out the art that is hidden inside.

To Read This Week:

Read and write at least 250-words of feedback for each submission.
Chapter 10 in Story Logic and the Craft of Fiction
Illumination Night

Discussion Points:

1. It’s never too early to think about revision. What changes do you know you want to make in draft 2 of your novel?
2. How has your character evolved as you’ve continued to draft ahead?
3. Are there major plot points that will need tuning in the next remix?