

How to Transfer Emotion from the Author to the Character and the Reader By Mike Klaassen

According to Mildred I. Reid, in the *Writer's Digest Guide to Good Writing*, there is only one must in creative writing: the author must transfer an emotional experience to the reader.ⁱ Gloria Kempton, in *Dialogue*, provides an avenue for transferring that emotion when she observes that "The only way to connect with our reader on an emotional level is to first connect with our characters." And, "The way we do this is to make sure our characters connect with themselves."ⁱⁱ

EMOTION AND THE ELEMENTS OF FICTION

As pointed out by James N. Frey, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, "The reading of novels is primarily an emotional experience."ⁱⁱⁱ

Each of the five fundamental elements of fiction (character, plot, setting, theme, and style)^{iv} plays a role in creating emotion. It's through **characters**, of course, that authors portray emotion, and thus transfer it to the reader. Emotions can be present anywhere in a **plot**, but they are especially important when:

- Providing and reinforcing a character's motivation
- Creating a catalyst for a story's turning points
- Portraying the emotion phase of sequels.

Setting may establish the tone of individual scenes, or the story as a whole, and thus help stimulate character and reader emotion. A character's emotions may also provide a common thread for the development of one or more of a story's **themes**. And, of course, how and when emotion is utilized throughout a story and the skill with which emotion is presented are important aspects of an author's unique writing **style**.

NARRATIVE DISTANCE

Donald Maass, in *Writing the Breakout Novel*, notes that since the invention of the novel it has been transformed by a progressive narrowing of point of view: from the once-essential author's voice, to omniscient narration, to objective narration, to first- and third-person narration, and most recently to close third-person narration. According to Maass, today's reader wants an authentic experience.^v

Many modern-day readers expect to live the story through the mind of the character, experiencing the story as if the reader *is* the character. Effective use of emotion as a fiction-writing mode can go a long way toward making that experience a virtual reality.

READER INVOLVEMENT

Orson Scott Card observes that "Reading is *not* a passive process. While a reader may seem to be sitting still, slowly turning pages, in his or her own mind he is going through a great many emotions." And ". . . the intensity of the

character's feeling, as long as it remains believable and bearable, will greatly intensify the reader's feelings—whatever they are.”^{vi}

As explained by Ron Rozelle, in *Description and Setting*, “Sometimes you'll be nudging your readers toward what you want *them* to feel when they read your fiction, so they can associate a feeling that they might never have experienced with one that they probably have.”^{vii}

Many times the reader's emotional response will mirror the character's emotions, but sometimes not. For example, a viewpoint character may enjoy torturing a victim, but the reader might be appalled. A character may enjoy a tender love scene, but the reader may be horrified because he suspects that one of the characters is a serial killer.

Orson Scott Card notes that “You can't control everything the reader feels, and no two members of your audience will ever be emotionally involved in your story exactly to the same degree. Still, there are some things you *can* control, and if you use them deftly, without letting them get out of hand, you can lead most of your audience to intense emotional involvement with your characters.”^{viii}

Faith Baldwin (1893-1978), in an article reprinted in *The Writer*, March 2008, summed up the value of emotion eloquently: “The quality in a book or story that most impresses and interests me as a reader is sincere emotion.” She also observed that, “Any book or story worth the paper it's printed on must have genuine emotion, communicated by the writer to the character and by the character to the reader.”^{ix}

Writers evoke emotion in readers by first generating emotion in their characters.

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Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

ⁱ *Writer's Digest Guide to Good Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 105.

ⁱⁱ Kempton, Gloria. *Write Great Fiction: Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2004, 148. ISBN: 9781582972893.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frey, James N. *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 94. ISBN: 978-0312104788.

^{iv} Klaassen, Mike. *Fiction-Writing Modes*. Pennsauken, NJ: Bookbaby, 2015, 4. ISBN: 9781682221006.

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- ^v Maass, Donald. *Writing The Breakout Novel*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2001. ISBN: 9780898799958.
- ^{vi} Card, Orson Scott. *Characters & Viewpoint*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1988, 68. ISBN: 9780898793079.
- ^{vii} Roselle, Ron. *Description & Setting*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2005, 88. ISBN: 9781582973272.
- ^{viii} Card, 74.
- ^{ix} Baldwin, Faith. "Infuse Characters with Sincere Emotion." *The Writer*, March 2008, 20-21.