



# EMOTIONAL RESONANCE IN YOUR WRITING

David R Slayton - Author



## WHY DOES EMOTION MATTER?

- Welcome to the shortest workshop on the biggest topic: humanity or making your characters human.
- Whether fiction or non fiction, good writing often hinges on whether it evokes emotion or how it makes us feel.
- It's also the gateway to Voice, that ineffable quality that's hard to define but is often a trump card when you're trying to sell a book.
- Regardless of genre, emotion is critical.

# WHY DOES EMOTION MATTER?

- But David some of you might say, my main character isn't human.
- And I would argue that emotion transcends genre or experience.
- It's universal.
- Sometimes, the characters we the most about don't have any emotion at all but struggle with it or understanding it.



I'd even argue that Star Trek's entire success hinges on characters trying and often failing to understand the human condition.

## WHY DOES EMOTION MATTER?

Let's look at it another way.

- Imagine that you're driving by a car wreck. You might have a moment of sympathy for those involved. You might spare them a prayer. You might be frustrated that the slowdown has made you late, but it's hard to feel empathy for the strangers involved. You *don't know them*, so you're not emotionally invested.
- Now imagine that you realize it's your friend's car you see wrecked. Suddenly, you're invested.
- You can feel something for someone *you know*.

# WHY DOES EMOTION MATTER?

- If we can create emotional resonance with our characters and their problems, readers will engage. If our characters don't evoke resonance, readers tune out.
- A lot of rejection in the publishing industry comes from a lack of emotional connection. "I just didn't love it."
- When a reader says they can't connect with the character or the story, this is what they mean.
- It also results in a lot of DNF: Did Not Finish.
- One of your most important, and in my opinion one of the trickiest, jobs as a writer is to get readers to care about your character.



**Frankly, my dear,  
I don't give a damn.**  
~Gone with the Wind

# WHY DOES EMOTION MATTER?

Readers put a book down because they can. It's our job to try and make sure they can't.

Put another way, we want readers to get on board, to be so invested in our stories, and care so much about characters or non fiction narrators, that they stick with us to the end.



The plot is the track.

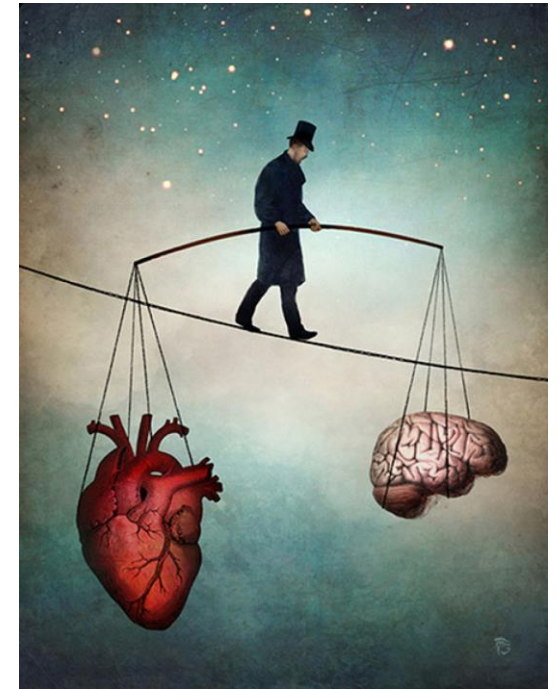
The character is the train.

Emotion is the fuel that keeps things running.



# HOW?

- I said this was the biggest topic in the shortest workshop and I mean it.
- I won't be able in an hour to teach you how to be human, but I can start you on your way.
- Mostly, because you're already doing it yourself.
- You just need to take those feelings, get in touch with them, and imbue your character with them.
- Most writers have no problem getting inside their characters' head: how they see things, what details to include on the page.
- You also need to get inside your character's heart.
- And what's tricky, you have to show me what their feeling without telling me.



# HOW?

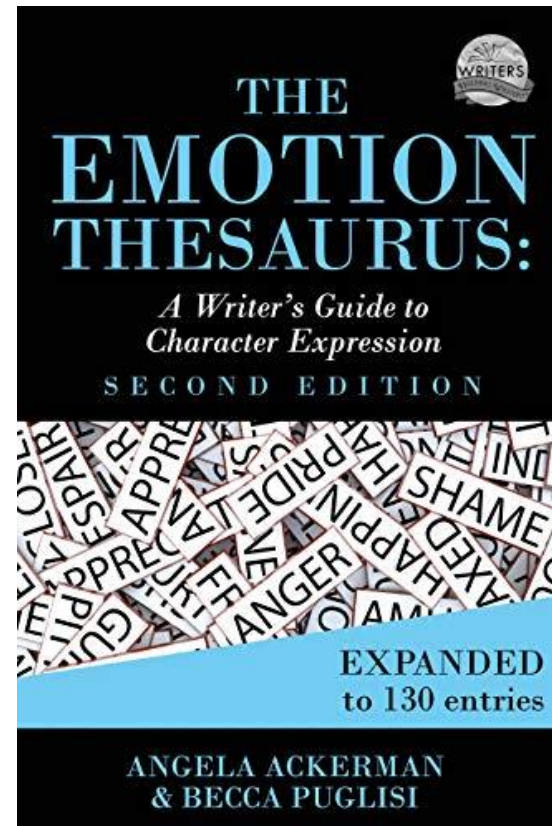
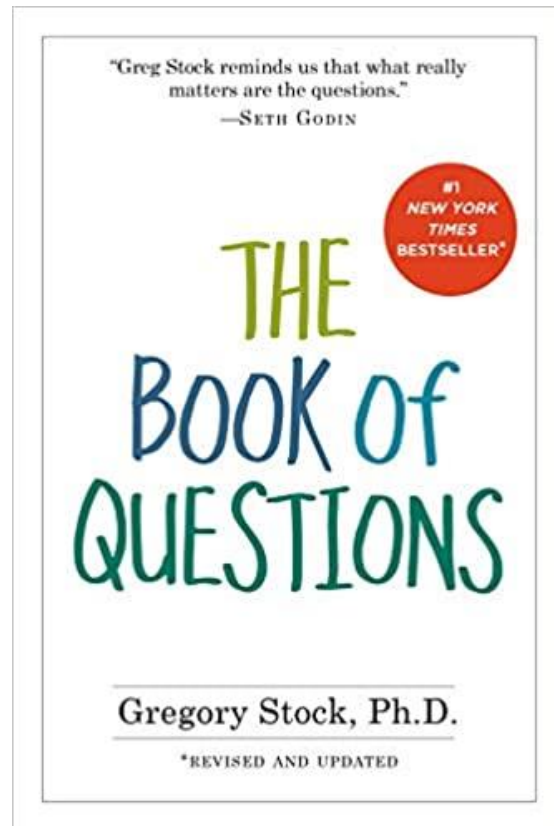
- Play therapist.
- Ask your characters hard questions, then ask them how do you feel about it?
- Write that answer down.
- Then have them react without words.
- What does their body do?
- I suggest creating an emotional beat sheet for each major and secondary character.
- Hit the big feelings: Anger, Sadness, Love, Joy, and Fear, but also try to take notes on how they react to smaller emotions: surprise, frustration, envy, embarrassment, etc.





# HOW?

- If you're stuck here are two books that can help:



Full disclosure: I needed both of these books to help me write White Trash Warlock AND I spent a year working with a bioenergetic therapist to help me get in touch with my emotions.

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

- As you create your characters, try to feel your way through their emotional expressions. Vary them, character by character.
- This is the key to getting different characters who don't all sound or feel the same to the reader.
- When you can, surprise us and be sure to mix it up.
- How does a character act or react that is different than what you would consider baseline? (This is where relying on the Emotion Thesaurus or using the same beats across characters can trip you up).

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

- For example, I just wrote an epic fantasy with two points of view.
- The two characters are attracted to each other, but being from vastly different backgrounds, they react differently when they run into one another at a party.

Raef spied a hint of gold, armor.  
The knight, Seth, was here, gleaming and eager as  
always.

Raef forced himself not to tense, to remember his  
mask and top hat, the costume that disguised him.  
He made his jaw unclench as Seth walked toward  
him and fought to keep himself from hunching his  
shoulders.

He wasn't supposed to be here.  
He couldn't be recognized.

Seth went for it.  
The man in the white mask had a grace he wished  
he shared.  
It was stupid, but his heart beat a little faster as he  
crossed the room, careful to avoid the dancers, eyes  
fixed on the man in black.  
Seth forced a smile, not because he wasn't excited,  
but Arno's rejection still smarted along the top of  
his heart.

# CONSIDER A BEAT SHEET

- It can be helpful to create a list of emotional reactions for each main character. Personalize it to them.
- Make a sheet with the character's main traits and list out the big emotions. Put in surface reactions and maybe some more surprising ones.

## Raef – Feral Street Thief, Orphan, Dirty, Sneaky

Emotion	Common Reaction	Uncommon Reaction
Anger	Clenches his fists because he likes a good fight.	Sucks in his breath through clenched teeth because he's trying not to say the snarky thing he wants to (because he doesn't want to hurt his friend's feelings)
Fear	Shudders if fire is involved	Of getting emotionally hurt, dips his head as if avoiding the blow.
Excited	Chews his lip, greedy to pull off the con or swipe the goods	Rubs his fist to chest to calm his racing heart (he's afraid to trust a good thing).
Sad	Squeezes his eyes shut. He'll never cry again.	Punch a wall or kick the ground to bury what he's feeling

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

- **What** does your character see?
  - What's the first thing they notice when they enter the scene?
  - Why do they notice it first?

**What** they notice is just as important as what they **don't** – for example, if they don't even see someone who they consider ugly or who is less fortunate than them, then they've just told you something about who they are.

Or maybe it's the opposite, they notice something everyone else ignores.

Maybe they notice *everyone* and smile.

Ask yourself constantly, *what are they feeling? How do they react to that?*

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# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

**How the character feels about those details, and how they react, matter even more.**

- How does your character **feel** about what they see?
- “She’s looking at me. What does she want? I hope she doesn’t ask me for money.”
- How does your character **react** to and **treat** everything?
- What a character describes says something about the object and **them**.
  - For example, describing a bedroom like a prison versus a sanctuary.
- Your character’s expectations and past experiences help determine their emotions.
  - *She’d done her absolute best, made everything perfect for Christmas morning.. It was the kind of Christmas she’d always wanted as a kid. So why were they crying?*

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

*Smiling, Susan shut her bedroom door. She'd left the sign up that said NO ARTHUR in thick letters. Brothers were such a pain. She ran her fingers over her bookshelf, smiling at each spine like it was an old friend. She stretched out on her bed. She could nap. She could read. She could just be.*

- What can we infer about Susan from this passage?
- What can we tell about her emotional state?
- Notice that none of her emotions are named (show not tell).

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

*Susan shut her bedroom door, a little harder than her mother would appreciate, but not so hard that she'd get another lecture. The colorful sign that said "Susan's Room" glared at her. She wanted to overturn the bookshelf, to toss its contents out the window or against the wall. She threw herself on the bed. She needed something new. She needed air.*

- What is she feeling in this example?
- How does the way she notices the objects tell you something about her and her emotional state without her saying it?

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

*“Go to your room!” her mom yelled.*

*Susan stomped up the stairs, away from the dinner table.*

*She shut her door, just hard enough for her parents to hear and threw herself onto her bed, knowing they'd hear that too through the too thin floors. She left the lights off.*

*“Finally,” she muttered, head dropping against the pillow.*

- Notice how what she's feeling doesn't match the obvious reaction to punishment.
- Look for ways to surprise your reader, to reveal your characters through their reactions.

## GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

“Here’s the secret: being able to see it through your protagonist’s POV means letting us hear what she’s thinking as it happens—and not what she’s thinking in general, but her **struggle to figure out what’s going on and what to do about it**. These thoughts will be woven throughout every paragraph in your novel.”

—Lisa Cron, *Story Genius*

# GET INSIDE YOUR CHARACTER'S HEAD AND HEART

Try to be an observer, seeing the scene through your character's eyes (first person) or as if you're sitting on their shoulder (third person).

The point of view you choose is the lens for your story.

*Try different points of view to see which gives you the best connection with your character.*

*Different stories call for different points of view.*

*I get better emotion out of my characters working in third person past tense. Find the POV and tense that works for you and the story.*





# ALL THE HEADS AND HEARTS!



Get into as many character's heads and hearts as possible.

Always remember, that your villains are the heroes in their version of the story. Try to understand them too.

Spy on them. Get into what makes them tick.

You might find your villain is more interesting than your hero. Giving them emotional resonance will make their point of view come alive too.

*Fairy godmothers develop a very deep understanding about human nature, which makes the good ones kind and the bad ones powerful. - Terry Pratchett, Witches Abroad*

# SEEING THROUGH THE CHARACTER'S EYES

- As an exercise, make a list of random objects, people, or places.
- Record impressions from the point of view of your protagonist.
- Then repeat the same exercise for your antagonist.
- Try not to take sides.
- Try to be an impartial observer.
- Interrogate your characters and let them surprise you.
- Where do their feelings contrast? (This the easy one)
- Where do they overlap? (This is a little harder)
- Where would their reactions surprise the other? (This is the hardest one)



# DON'T BE AFRAID TO GO DEEPER

- Don't hesitate to dig deeper.
- Often writers fail at emotional resonance because they don't want to put the unpleasant or intense feelings on the page.
- We hold back, and so our characters hold back.
- **But** characters aren't real people, even though you're giving them real emotions.
- It's okay to crank up the hard or secret truths about their feelings and write them down.
- Don't spare their feelings.
- All the good stuff is down there, in the dirt.
- And don't be afraid to use your own experience, to write you know and feel.



“You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.” – Anne Lamott

# DON'T BE AFRAID TO GO DEEPER

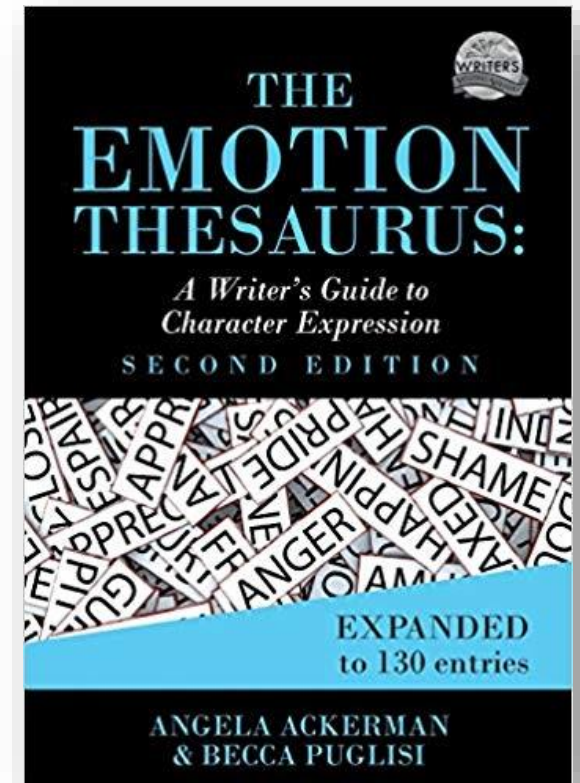
*He wished he was sick. Then he didn't have to go. Grandma lived in a trailer. It smelled of mold, but only sometimes because she chain-smoked. Her cooking was terrible. He could still taste the cake she'd baked for his birthday. She'd mixed up the sugar and the salt. He couldn't even get the dog to eat it. But he didn't say anything to his mother. He couldn't. Ian trudged off to the car.*

- What's he feeling on the surface?
- What's the second emotion?



## REFERENCE

- If you need help coming up with emotional reactions, I highly recommend getting a copy of *The Emotion Thesaurus* by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi.
- I use this book all the time, and even keep it open in a browser tab on Kindle so I can quickly search it.
- The better you know your characters the less you'll need this book.



# WHEN IT'S OKAY TO TELL

- We've all heard to ALWAYS show, don't tell.
- But telling can give context.
- Speech tags provide clarity on who is talking, etc.
- If your writing sounds like writing, you might be trying too hard. Sometimes you just need to spit it out for clarity's sake.
- A character telling is a window into their emotional state. Sometimes, we get blunt, and when used carefully, it can create a powerful impact.

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*The old woman leaned over and looked me in the eye. "What a filthy child you are," she said **sweetly**.*

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*The bride starts to give her vows and I suddenly **feel sick**.*

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*I wanted to vomit on her perfect, white dress.*

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*"I want a divorce."*

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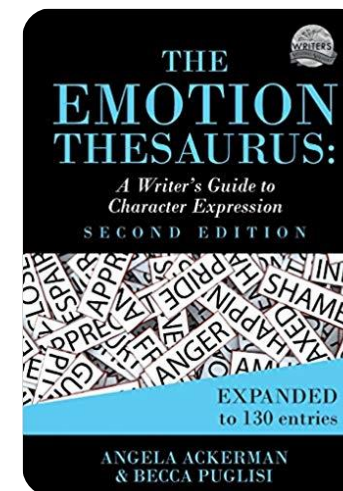
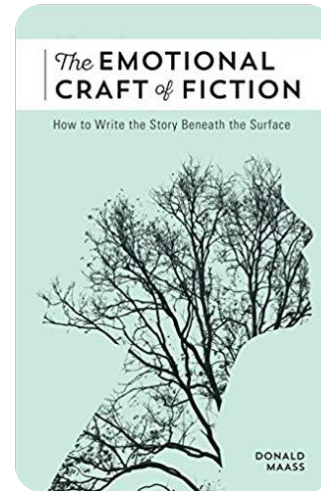
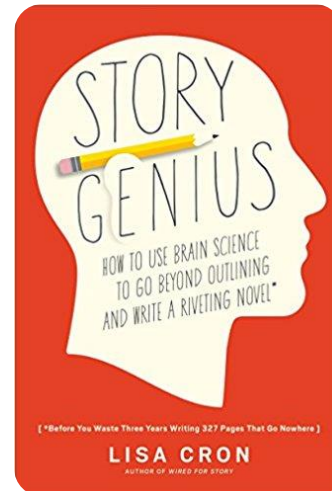
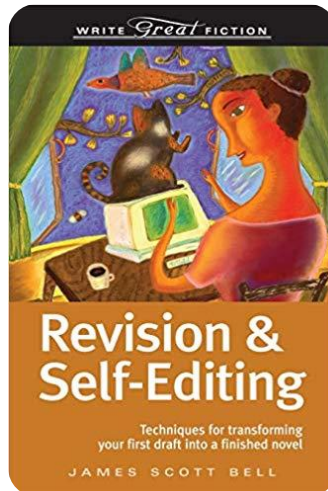
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# QUESTIONS?



# REFERENCES

- Revision And Self-Editing by James Scott Bell
- Story Genius by Lisa Cron
- The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface by Donald Maass
- The Emotion Thesaurus by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi



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# THANK YOU

DAVID R SLAYTON

[www.davidrslayton.com](http://www.davidrslayton.com)

@drslyton

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