

THE WRITER'S WORKSHOP AT AUTHORS PUBLISH



THE HEART OF
THE STORY:

WRITING EMOTION

BY EMILY COLIN

WHY A STRONG EMOTIONAL CONNECTION IS KEY

- Emotions are the beating heart of fiction, making us care what happens
- They propel the tension and conflict that drives the story
- Without a powerful emotional connection, we won't relate to characters or care what happens to them
- It's that caring that keeps us invested and turning pages
- Well-crafted emotion evokes empathy in readers
- We see ourselves in characters with whom we connect

BIG PICTURE AND MICRO- LEVEL

There's how we establish emotions on the big-picture level of the story, and then there's how we convey those emotions on-page

Big picture: what kind of story am I telling and why? Who is my audience? What do I want to leave them with? How do I want them to feel? What role do my characters play here?

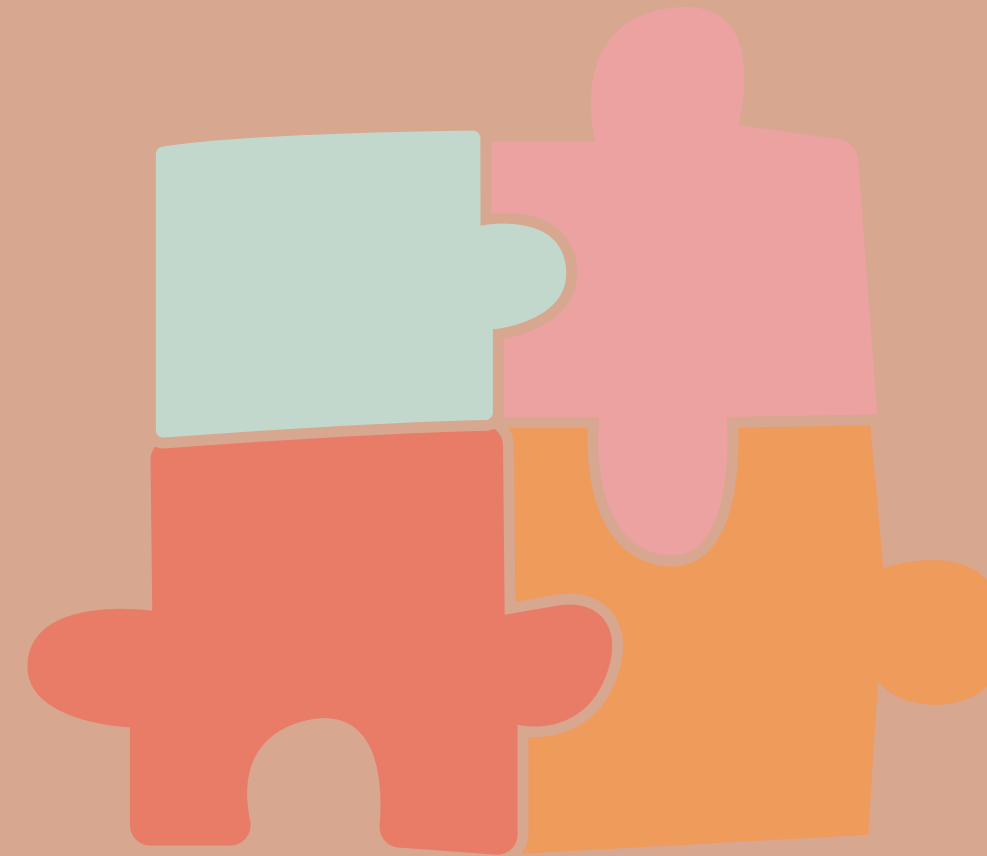
Micro-level: How do I make sure that my characters' emotions come across as genuine? How do I ensure that my readers feel what I feel?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT...

- Start out by considering how you want your reader to feel. Do you want them to laugh? Cry? Both at once? Is your story meant to be a tearjerker with a happy ending or a romcom that's laugh-out-loud funny?
- Grab a couple of your favorite books that evoke these same emotions. Study them carefully. What does the author do to stir these feelings in you as a reader? How might you adapt these techniques?
- Consider universal vulnerabilities (feeling alone, losing a job) & universal elements that evoke strong feelings (reuniting with a loved one, being humiliated in front of peers, birth of a first child, loss of a friend).

WHAT ARE EMOTIONS WE CAN ALL IDENTIFY WITH?

Love	Hate
Fear	Envy
Happiness	Anger
Anxiety	Confusion
Awe	Disgust
Hope	Disappointment
Grief	Compassion
Resentment	Excitement



HOW DO YOUR CHARACTERS REACT?

When things go your characters' way (or not!) they can have a wide variety of emotional reactions, depending on who they are and their circumstances.

How might your character react when:

- They're desperate to connect with others (joining? withdrawal?)
- They feel as if someone has wronged them (hate? self-disgust?)
- Everything's going well (joy? anxiety?)
- They compare themselves with those around them (envy? admiration?)
- They're in emotional pain (do they cry? close off? lash out?)
- They've failed to achieve their goals (determination? humiliation?)
- They're forced to reflect on their actions (humility? the opposite?)
- They're in a vulnerable position (love? hurt? defensiveness?)

87 Human Emotions & Experiences

Based on the research of *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown

<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Are Uncertain Or Too Much</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stress• Overwhelm• Anxiety• Worry• Avoidance• Excitement• Dread• Fear• Vulnerability	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Compare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comparison• Admiration• Reverence• Envy• Jealousy• Resentment• Schadenfreude• Freudenfreude	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Don't Go As Planned</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Boredom• Disappointment• Expectations• Regret• Discouragement• Resignation• Frustration	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN It's Beyond Us</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awe• Wonder• Confusion• Curiosity• Interest• Surprise	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Things Aren't What They Seem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amusement• Bittersweetness• Nostalgia• Cognitive Dissonance• Paradox• Irony• Sarcasm
<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We're Hurting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anguish• Hopelessness• Despair• Sadness• Grief	<p>PLACES WE GO With Others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compassion• Pity• Empathy• Sympathy• Boundaries• Comparative Suffering	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Fall Short</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shame• Self-Compassion• Perfectionism• Guilt• Humiliation• Embarrassment	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Search for Connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Belonging• Fitting In• Connection• Disconnection• Insecurity• Invisibility• Loneliness	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN The Heart Is Open</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Love• Lovelessness• Heartbreak• Trust• Self-Trust• Betrayal• Defensiveness• Flooding• Hurt
<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN Life Is Good</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Joy• Happiness• Calm• Contentment• Gratitude• Foreboding Joy• Relief• Tranquility	<p>PLACES WE GO WHEN We Feel Wronged</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anger• Contempt• Disgust• Dehumanization• Hate• Self-Righteousness	<p>PLACES WE GO To Self-Assess</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pride• Hubris• Humility		 <p>© 2022 Brené Brown, LLC All rights reserved www.brenebrown.com</p>

THE MAGIC OF UNIVERSAL FANTASIES

The credit for this concept goes to T. Taylor, author of [*7 Figure Fiction: How to Use Universal Fantasy to Sell Your Books to Anyone*](#):

- Why do some well-crafted, well-conceptualized books fail to sell?
- Why do we sometimes (compulsively) keep reading books that aren't technically well-written? What makes them unputdownable?
- Universal fantasies are concepts that many, many people can identify with, and that will drive them to keep reading, as they live vicariously through the reader to find out what will happen next!

EXAMPLES OF UNIVERSAL FANTASIES

Unrecognized,
down-and-out protagonist
achieves great success
(Harry Potter, Twilight)

Getting swept off your feet
by someone who solves all
your problems (Cinderella)

In romance: hero(ine) who's
closed off to everyone else
softens only for the love
interest (50 Shades;
Crossfire series)

Outsiders who find family
together and kick butt
(Six of Crows)

Proving to those who don't
believe in us that we can
accomplish great things
(Hunger Games)

Wounded character
healed by love
(Beauty and the Beast)

UNIVERSAL FANTASIES AND EMOTION

- If we can identify with or cheer for a character, we will feel for them
- We will put ourselves in their shoes and imagine what it would be like if this happened to us
- What would we do for the chance to see a long-lost loved one again? To get a second chance to right a terrible wrong? To heal a broken relationship? To prove to those who didn't believe in us that we can accomplish great things?
- If your reader connects with your story, they'll feel for your characters. If they feel, they'll care. And if they care, they'll keep reading!

ASK YOURSELF...

- Who played a fundamental role in shaping my character's views on emotion?
- Did they pass along healthy, functional perceptions and behaviors, or detrimental, dysfunctional ones?
- How did this emotional inheritance shape your character, and how does it continue to do so?

Source: [The Emotion Thesaurus, Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi](#)

CONSIDER PIXAR'S 4TH RULE OF STORYTELLING

Once upon a time there was...

Every day...

Until one day....

Because of that....

Because of that...

Because of that... (repeat as needed)

Then the BIG Bad happened...and it was awful.

Until finally...

And ever since then...

CREATING A STRONG EMOTIONAL ARC

Once you have an idea of how the external plot events of your story might affect your character's internal arc, then:

- Show gradual emotional change over time, rather than sudden transformations (unless they make sense in context)
- Incorporate setbacks and moments of doubt
- Use a mix of thoughts, dialogue, and internal actions/reactions to convey the character's evolving emotional state
- Employ “emotional beats” —key moments that trigger significant emotional responses and growth in the character

EXAMPLES OF 'EMOTIONAL BEATS'

- Loss of a job (might trigger fear, anger, exultation)
- Death of a loved one (grief, rage, relief, even happiness)
- Finishing your novel! (joy, 'I did it!', anxiety, in-your-face)
- Moving to a new town (struggle to belong, lonely, excited)
- Traveling to a dream locale (awe, overwhelm, curiosity)
- Betrayal by a partner or friend (disbelief, anger, shock, revenge)
- Failing to reach a goal (self-disgust, determination, need to prove)
- Partner says they love you (happiness, anxiety, sense of trust)

CONSIDER THE ANATOMY OF EACH SCENE

Once you have a sense of your character's internal arc, the major external beats of the story (sometimes called Tent Pole Scenes), and how they affect each other, consider:

- How are your characters' emotions evolving at the scene level?
- Are they reacting appropriately to what's happening on-page, given their backstory and personality?
- Do they experience a range of emotions?
- Is the emotional level of your scenes on par with the on-page events and context?

**WHEN YOU WANT TO
MAKE SURE A SCENE IS
EMOTIONALLY
RESONANT...**

**Consider your character's
backstory.**

Given who they are and all of the
events that have shaped them, how
would they react here?

Consider the context.

Are they with people to whom they have something to prove? With whom they have a history? What kind of day have they had? What mood are they already in and why?

Consider your character's goals, needs, and flaws.

In order for your character to get what they want,
how would they likely feel or act here?
How might their emotions reflect their flaws and
contradict their goals?



CONNECTING POINT OF VIEW AND EMOTION

FIRST-PERSON POV

Gives you a front-row seat;
naturally emotionally
immersive.

THIRD-PERSON LIMITED

We have a little more distance
here; the narrator can insert
themselves a bit.

THIRD-PERSON DEEP POV

Very similar to first-person, but
uses 'he/she/they' pronouns.
Deep in character's mind and
heart.

THIRD-PERSON OMNISCIENT

We have a bird's eye view of the
story; emotions might be more
filtered and less visceral. More
common to high fantasy.

THE WAY CHARACTERS EXPRESS EMOTION IS AN EXCELLENT INDICATION OF VOICE AND POV

- Everyone expresses emotion through different ‘tells’
- Some people may pace when anxious; others might bite their nails or drum their fingers
- Some people may be very comfortable displaying a full range of emotions, while others are only comfortable displaying negative emotions such as rage, and others aren’t comfortable displaying any emotions at all
- Some people yell when they’re angry; others give the silent treatment
- Familiarize yourself with the ways your characters express emotion verbally and physically, and use that to make them stand out



KNOWING YOUR CHARACTERS: AN EMOTIONAL ROADMAP

Source: [The Emotion Thesaurus, Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi](#)

BASELINE REACTIONS

How do your characters typically react? What will it take to upset them?

COMFORT ZONE

Where is your character most at home expressing themselves? Where are they least comfortable?

EMOTIONAL RANGE

Are they typically expressive? Reserved? How do they typically express themselves & when would this change?

WOUNDS & SENSITIVITIES

What is most likely to upset or bother your character and why? What triggers might set them off?

BIG-PICTURE CHECKLIST

- ✓ Is the emotional tone of my story on-par with the genre?
- ✓ Have I considered the emotions I want to evoke in readers?
- ✓ Have I thought about why readers will find my story relatable—why they'll love (or love to hate) my characters?
- ✓ Have I determined my characters' emotional wounds, flaws, and misbeliefs, and how those affect their thoughts & actions?
- ✓ Do I have a sense of how the major events of the plot will impact my character emotionally—& how their reactions might drive the plot?
- ✓ Is that big-picture arc reflected at the scene level?
- ✓ Am I demonstrating characters' feelings and growth through their interactions with others and with their environment?

Writing Emotion

THE MICRO LEVEL

5 Ways to Show Emotion

Source: [The Emotion Thesaurus, Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi](#)

VERBAL
COMMUNICATION



DIALOGUE

What's said or unsaid can indicate emotional state
Rhythm & sentence length can show tone
Nonverbal communication is equally important

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION



VOCAL CUES

Hesitation, rushed speech, pitch change
Contrast between what's said and the mode of expression

BODY LANGUAGE

How our bodies respond to our feelings
Unique to each character/helps to strengthen POV



VISCERAL REACTIONS

Involuntary responses (fight or flight)
Don't overuse; can seem melodramatic

THOUGHTS

Internal monologue that accompanies emotion
Helps to show how characters process the world

Physical Expressions of Emotion

SUBTLE PHYSICAL REACTIONS

**For sadness, instead of
bursting into tears,
consider...**

Swallowing hard

Blinking rapidly

Looking away quickly

INVOLUNTARY MICRO- EXPRESSIONS

Tightening around eyes
to show anger

Brief raise of eyebrows
for surprise

CHANGES IN BREATHING

Short, shallow breaths
for anxiety

Deep breaths when
trying to calm down

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERACTION

Pacing or drumming
fingers when anxious

Slamming door when
angry

MAKE IT PERSONAL

When you're trying to figure out how a character might react in a given situation, consider:

- Where and how do you feel this emotion in your own body?
- What response does it trigger in you, physically and psychologically, and how does that response relate to your life experience?
- How do you interact with your environment when you feel this way? With others? What does your internal monologue sound like?
- What's the subtext? How might your surface reaction in this situation differ from what you leave unsaid?



COMMON MISTAKES WHEN WRITING EMOTION

Overusing obvious physical reactions

Pounding heart,
sweaty hands,
clenched fists

Neglecting emotional complexity

Portraying emotions as
one-dimensional rather
than nuanced

Narrating vs. Demonstrating

“Jane was angry,” vs
showing us Jane’s anger
through her actions

Inconsistent character reactions

Characters respond in ways
that don’t match their
personality or history

HOW DO THEY PERCEIVE OR
FILTER THEIR SURROUNDINGS?
HOW DOES THIS REFLECT THEIR
EMOTIONAL STATE?

Consider how your own moods influence how you process the world around you. If you're in an awful mood, lines will seem longer and traffic slower. If you're happy or excited, the five people in front of you at the store might seem like an excellent excuse to strike up conversation rather than a massive annoyance.

EMOTION IN SWOONY SCENES

- Whether you write closed-door romance, erotica, or something in between, swoony scenes are about emotional growth or lack thereof
- If your characters are intimate but there's no emotional connection, that tells us something about them
- Rather than writing “filler” intimate scenes, each one should teach us something new about the characters' relationships and the plot
- Swoony scenes are just another lens for characters' self-expression
- They should build upon the characters' personalities, backstories, and relationship rather than existing in a vacuum

FROM “HOW TO WRITE SEX SCENES,” BY
DIANA GABALDON

“Where most beginning writers screw up (you should pardon the expression) is in thinking that sex scenes are about sex. A good sex scene is about the exchange of emotions, not bodily fluids. That being so, it can encompass any emotion whatever, from rage or desolation to exultation, tenderness, or surprise.

“Lust is not an emotion; it’s a one-dimensional hormonal response. Ergo, while you can mention lust in a sex-scene, describing it at any great length is like going on about the pattern of the wall-paper in the bedroom. Worth a quick glance, maybe, but essentially boring.”

Use Visceral Responses

Describe subtle, involuntary physical reactions:

- A tightening in the chest
- A sudden chill down the spine
- Dry mouth or difficulty swallowing

Employ Metaphor and Simile

Create vivid emotional descriptions:

“Her anxiety coiled around her like a constrictor, squeezing tighter with each passing moment.”

Show Through Action and Dialogue

Reveal emotions through character behavior:

- Fidgeting or pacing for nervousness
- Clipped, terse responses for anger
- Avoiding eye contact for shame

Utilize Setting and Atmosphere

Reflect emotional states in the environment:

- "The gray, drizzling sky mirrored her melancholy mood."

Use Specific Details

Focus on unique, character-specific emotional tells:

- She always tugged her earlobe when lying - a habit from childhood she'd never outgrown.

Explore Emotional Contradictions

Show conflicting feelings:

- “Despite her fury, a part of her still ached to comfort him.”

Use Subtext in Dialogue

Convey emotions through what's left unsaid:

"Fine. Everything's just fine," she said, her smile brittle.

Incorporate Emotional Triggers

Show how past experiences influence current reactions:

The scent of lilacs transported her back to that summer, joy and grief intertwining.

Employ Varied Sentence Structure

- Match sentence rhythm to emotional intensity:
- Short, choppy sentences for anxiety. Longer, flowing sentences for calm or contentment.

Show Emotional Evolution

- Demonstrate how emotions shift and change:
- His initial shock gave way to disbelief, then slowly morphed into simmering anger.

EVOLUTION OF
EMOTION

1. DYLAN WAS
ANXIOUS.

2. DYLAN'S HANDS
WERE SHAKING.

3. DYLAN SHOVED
HIS HANDS INTO
HIS POCKETS.

MAKE YOUR DIALOGUE WORK FOR YOU

You can demonstrate emotion through:

- Changes in pitch, tone, speed of speech, hesitation
- Rhythm or level of sentence complexity
- Word choice or accent (e.g., slipping back into old speech patterns when upset or angry)

- Don't overuse dialogue tags ("she said loudly")
- Let your nonverbal communication do the heavy lifting

BUILD IN EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY

- Characters aren't just reacting to what's happening on-page. They bring their entire history and personality with them.
- Ensure a character's deep sense of self shines through in what they say and do, as well as how they respond to situations
- They rarely feel just one emotion at a time. Their emotions may conflict with each other (happy their best friend has a boyfriend; upset because they've been lonely for so long and now they will truly be alone).
- What they say aloud or how they act may differ from how they feel

Exercise

Examining Third-Level Emotions

Source: "Third Level Emotions," by Donald Maass

<https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>



“START BY PICKING ANY MOMENT IN YOUR STORY WHEN YOUR PROTAGONIST (OR ANY OTHER CHARACTER) FEELS SOMETHING STRONGLY.

“What is that feeling? Write it down. Now, pause at that moment. Ask, what else does this character feel simultaneously? Write that down. Next ask, what else does my character feel at this moment? That third level emotion is our focus.”

Source: “Third Level Emotions,” by Donald Maass

<https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>

“EXAMINE THAT THIRD-LEVEL EMOTION.

“Ask, what is it like to feel this feeling? Create an analogy for it. How is this iteration of this feeling different from feeling it at any other time? Also, is it good or bad to be feeling this? What might (or should) this character be feeling instead? What would a finer human being feel? What would a more honest one feel? Regardless, why is this feeling the right and only one for this character right now?”

Source: “Third Level Emotions,” by Donald Maass

<https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>

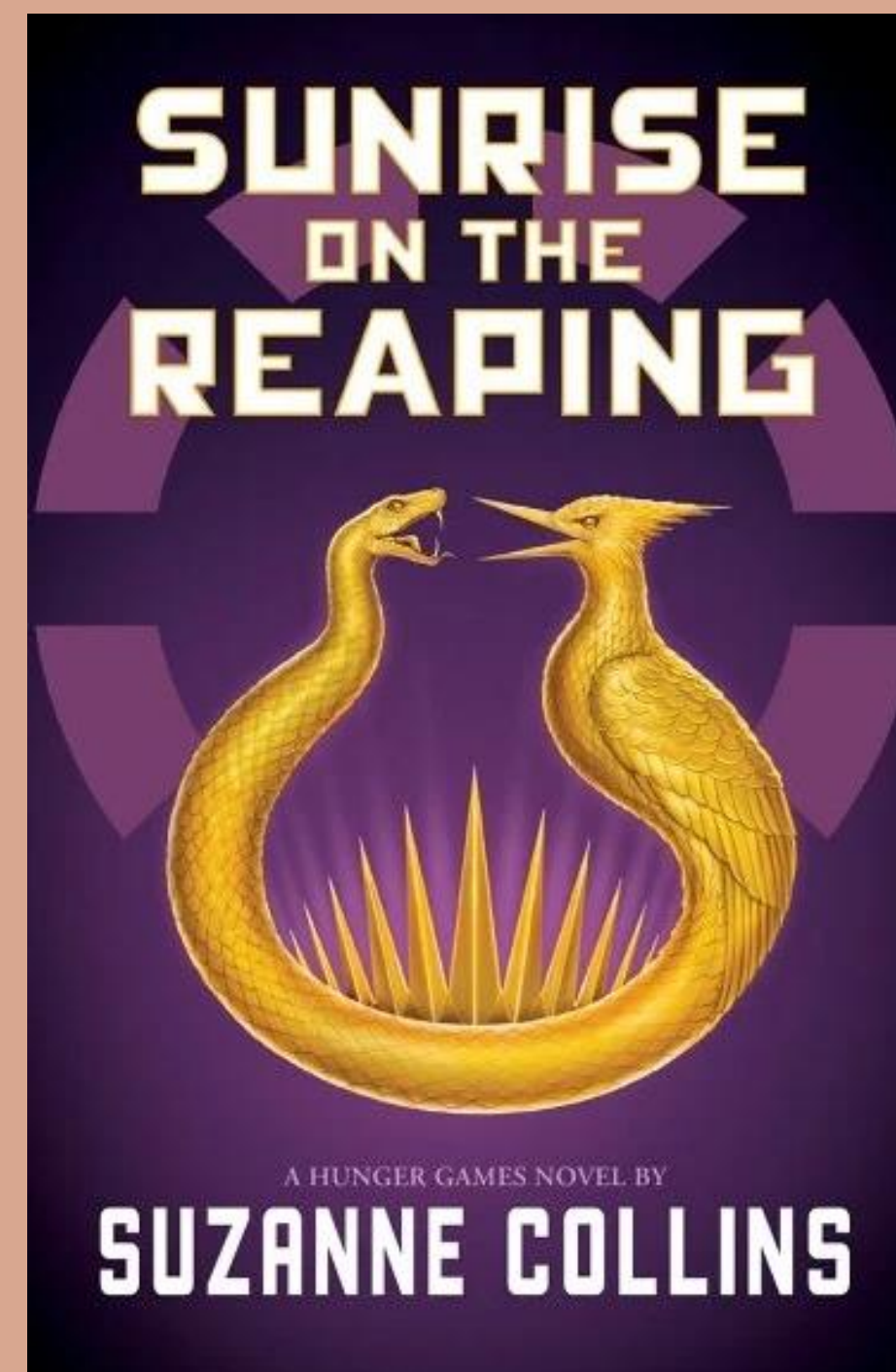
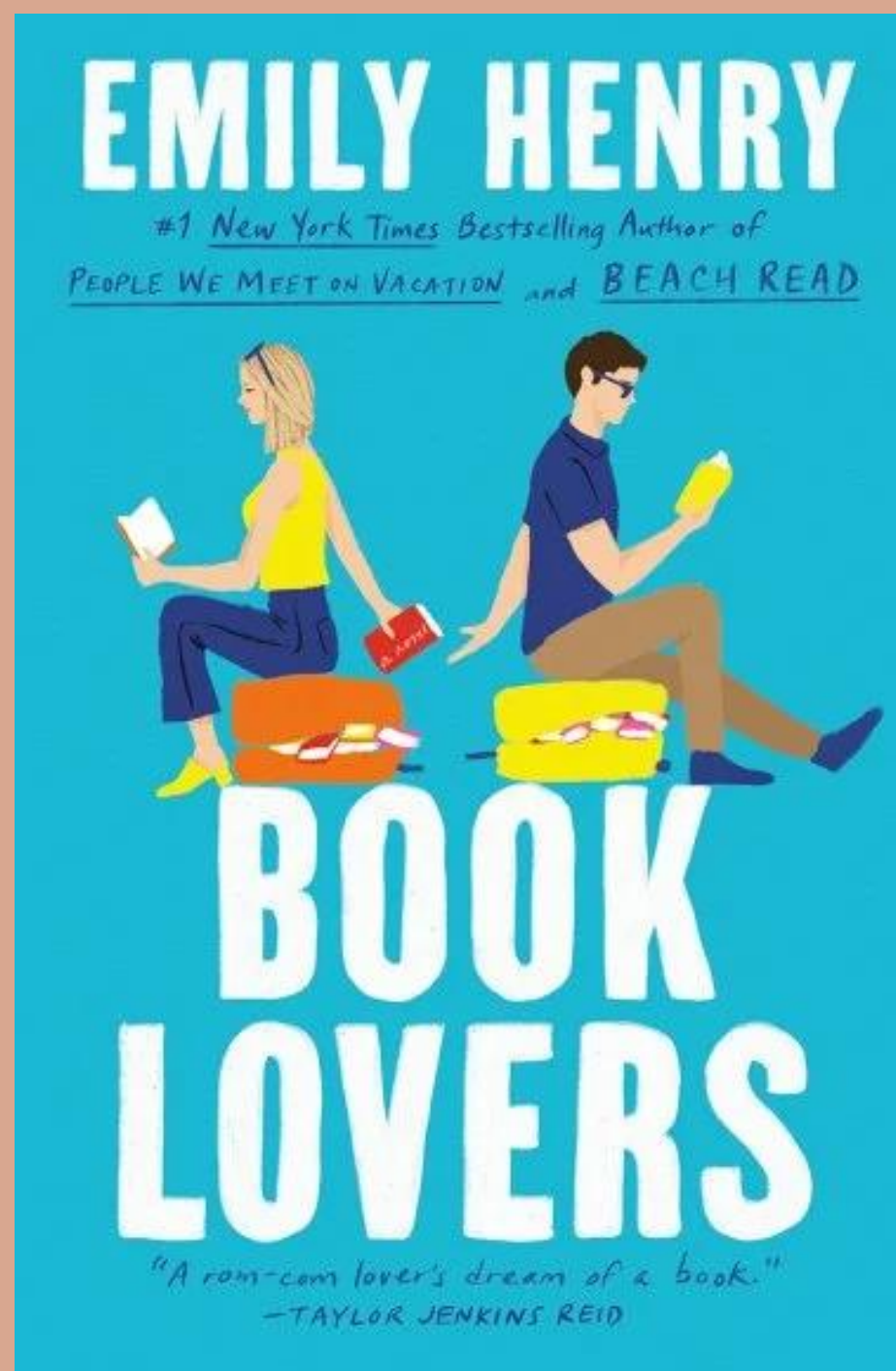
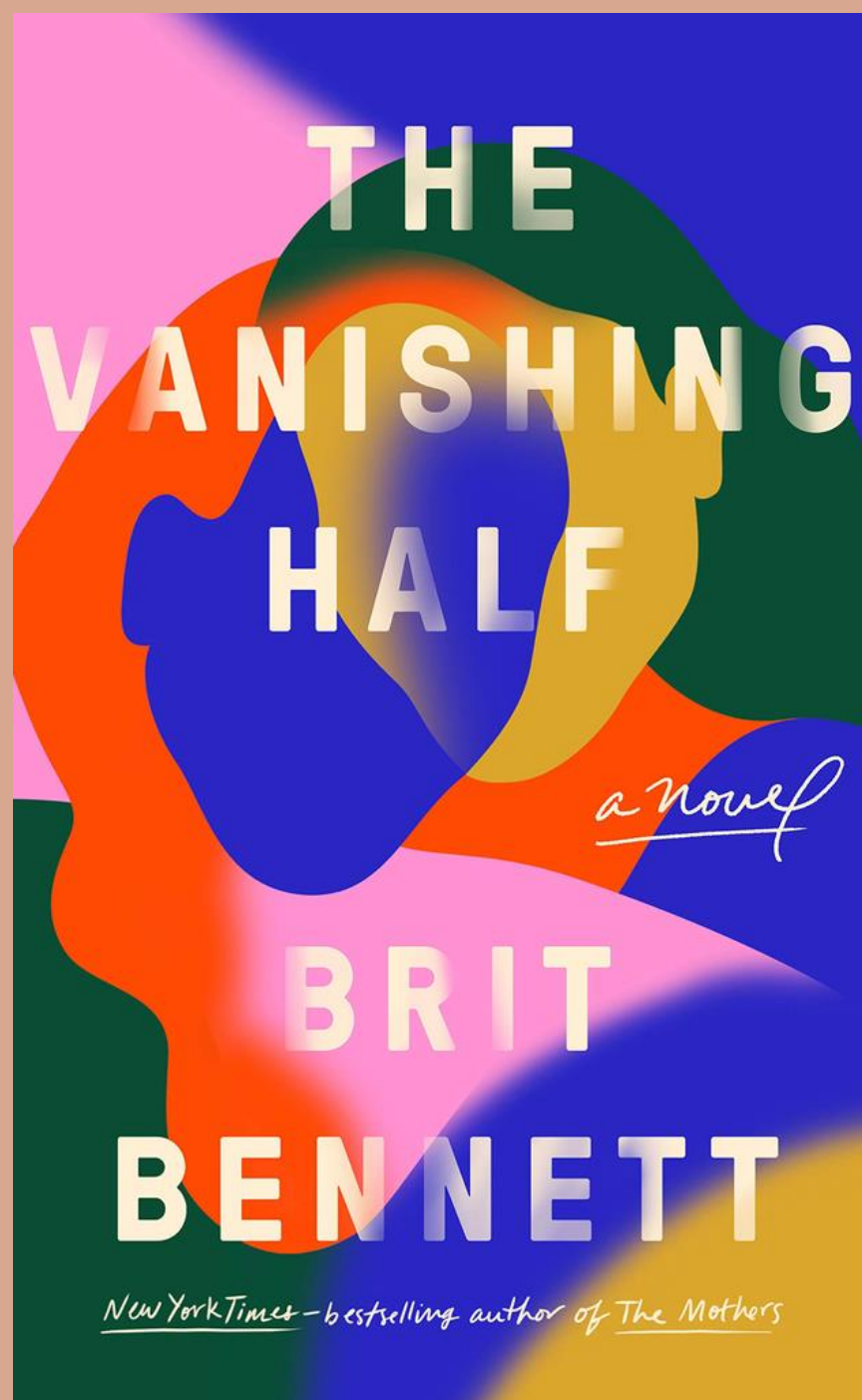
“FINALLY, WHAT DOES HAVING THIS THIRD-LEVEL FEELING TELL THIS CHARACTER ABOUT SELF?”

“What does it say about his or her condition? Has this character sunk or risen? Has this character grown or regressed? What’s the truth in it? How is this feeling beautifully universal or painfully unique? Is feeling this feeling to dwell in heaven or burn in hell?”

Source: “Third Level Emotions,” by Donald Maass

<https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>

3 Examples of Emotion Done Well



1

Always
remember your
scene goal

2

Don't forget the
context and
backstory!

3

Strike a balance
in your
techniques!

TO DEVELOP STRONG, RELATABLE CHARACTERS...

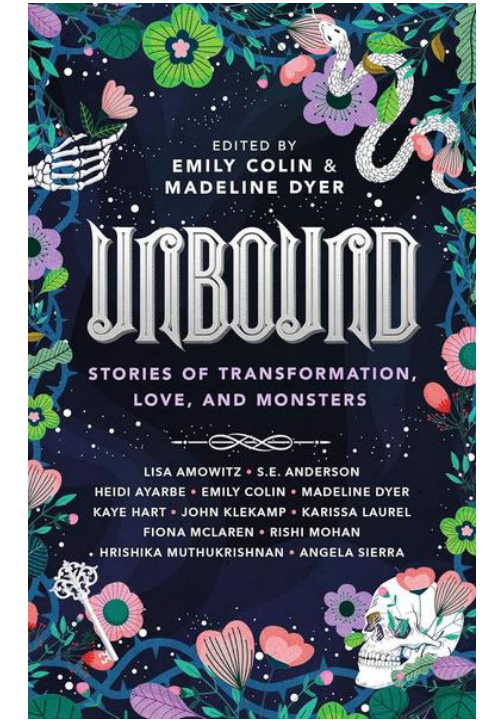
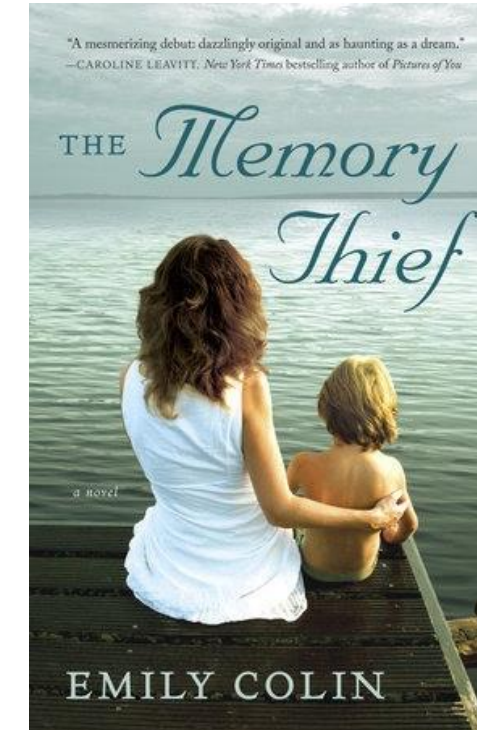
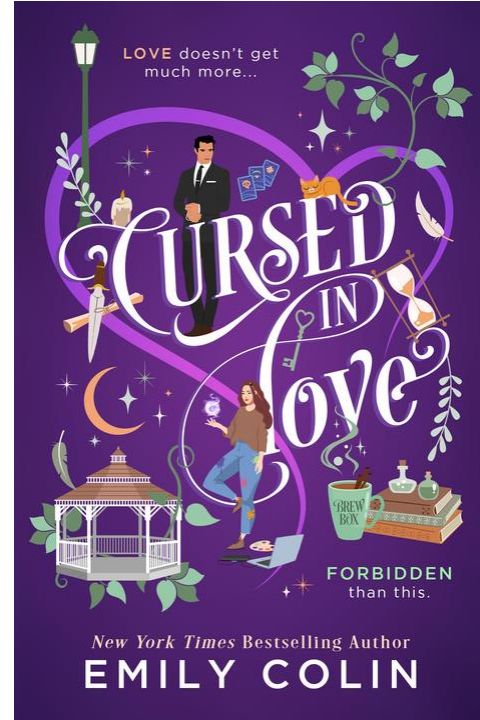
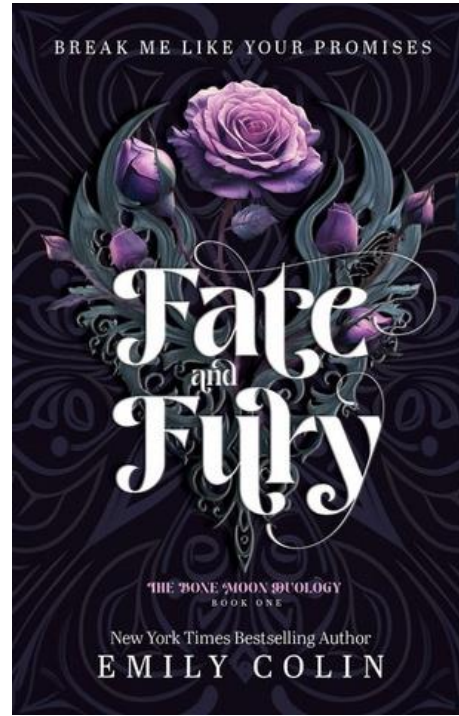
- Show how the character's emotional growth impacts their decisions, relationships, and overall arc
- Ensure the emotional arc aligns with and supports the external plot arc
- Build toward an emotional climax where the character confronts their core "lie" or misbelief
- Demonstrate how the character has changed emotionally by the end compared to where they started
- Use subtext and nuanced reactions to convey complex or conflicting emotions
- Allow space for quieter moments and reflection, not just high drama

RESOURCES

- [“How to Write Sex Scenes,” by Diana Gabaldon](#)
- [“The Power of Emotion in Fiction,” The Writers Studio](#)
- [*The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, Donald Maass](#)
- [*The Emotion Thesaurus*, Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi](#)
- [“Emotions in Writing,” Abby Wuderman](#)
- [*Wired for Story*, Lisa Cron](#)
- [*Atlas of the Heart*, Brene Brown](#)
- [*7 Figure Fiction*, T. Taylor](#)

The
End!

The text "The End!" is written in a bold, black, cursive script. The word "The" is on the top line, and "End!" is on the bottom line. The exclamation point is large and integrated into the flow of the word. The text is surrounded by decorative elements: four four-pointed stars and several small dots are scattered around the letters, particularly on the left and right sides, giving it a celebratory or dramatic feel.



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