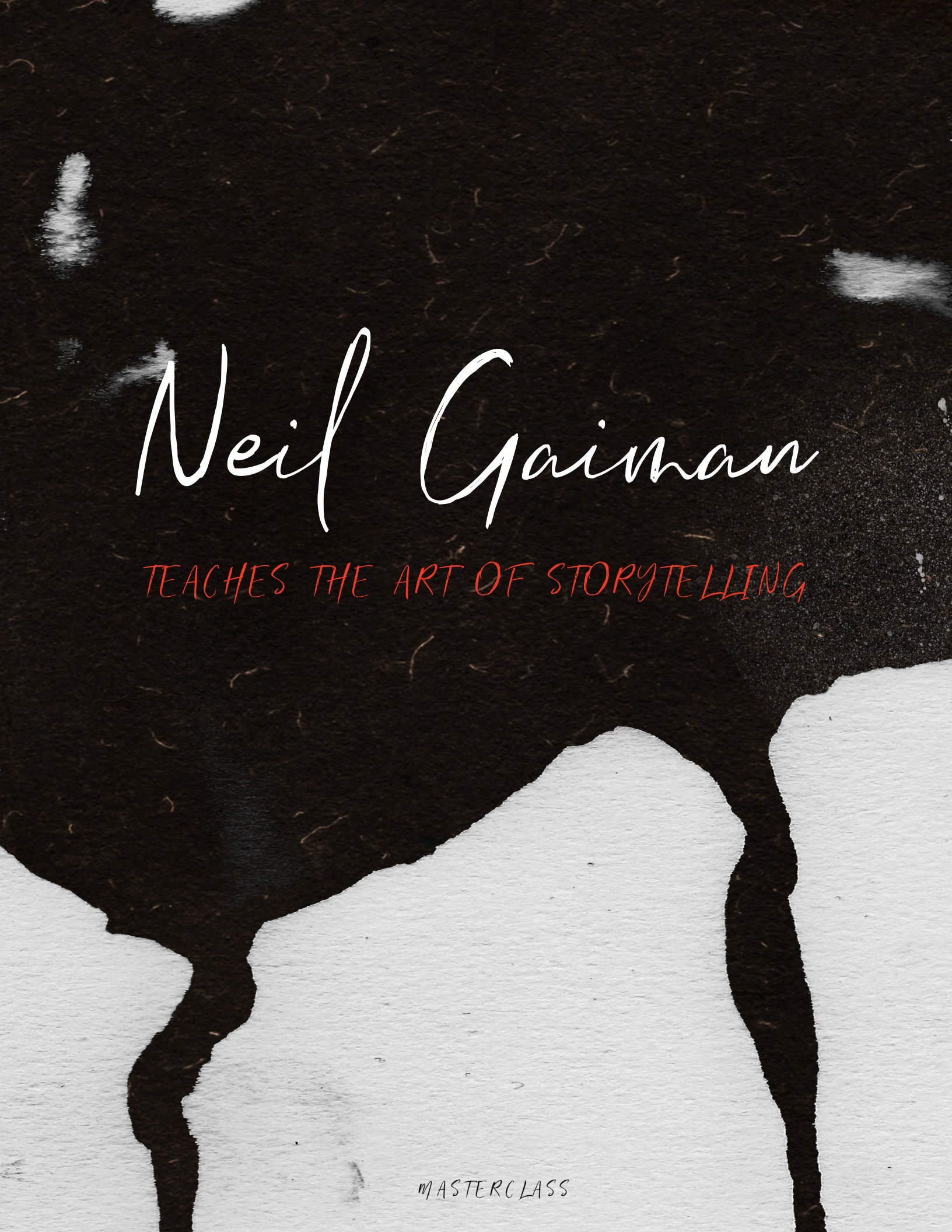
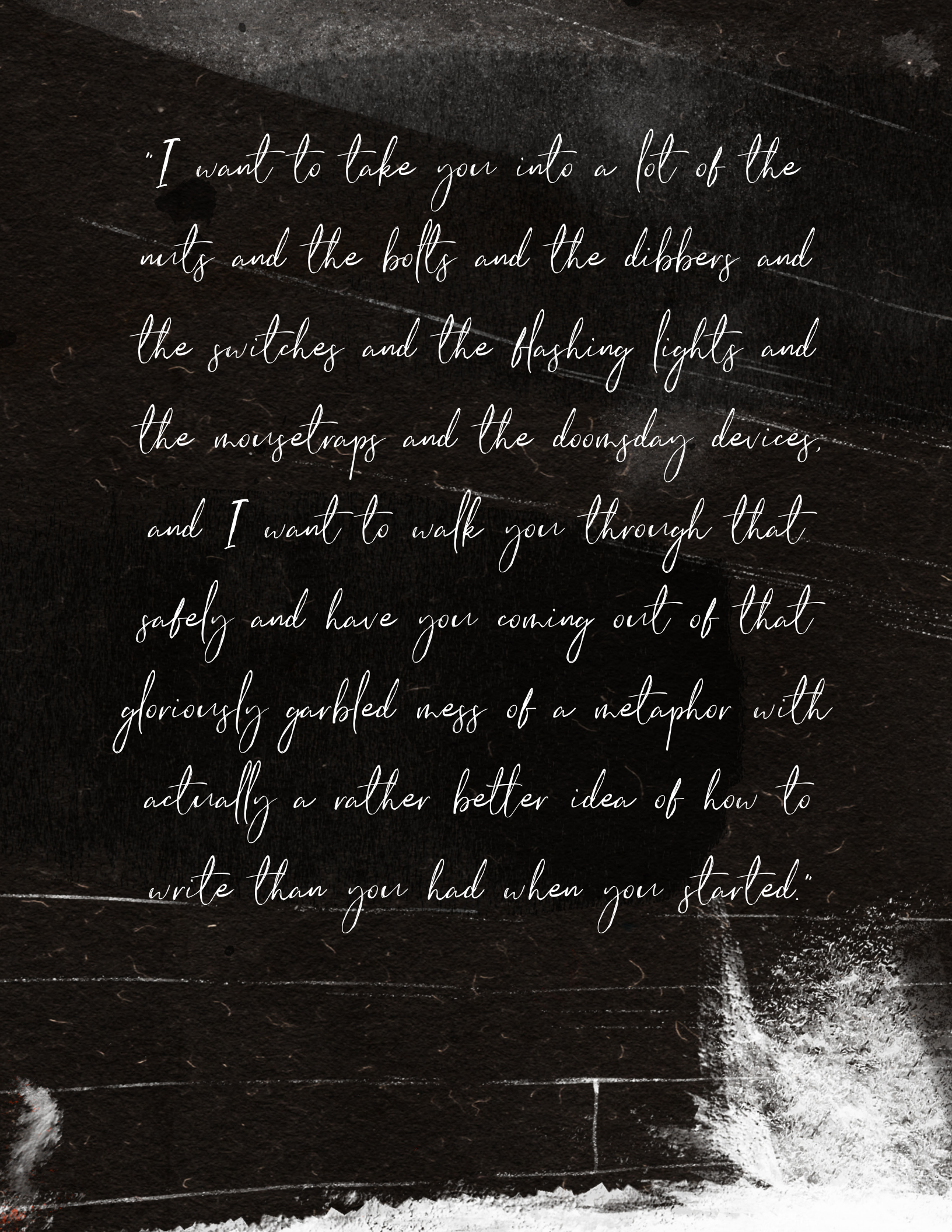

Neil Gaiman
TEACHES THE ART OF STORYTELLING
MASTERCLASS


"I want to take you into a lot of the
nuts and the bolts and the dibbers and
the switches and the flashing lights and
the mousetraps and the doomsday devices,
and I want to walk you through that
safely and have you coming out of that
gloriously garbled mess of a metaphor with
actually a rather better idea of how to
write than you had when you started."

Introduction

MEET YOUR NEW INSTRUCTOR:

Neil Gaiman

"I make things up and write them down" is the way Neil Gaiman describes his varied art, and as a "feral child raised in libraries," he credits librarians with fostering a lifelong love of reading. Today, as one of the most celebrated writers of our time, his popular and critically-acclaimed works bend genres while reaching audiences of all ages and winning awards of all kinds. *The Graveyard Book* is the only work ever to win both the Newbery (US) and Carnegie (UK) Medals, awarded by librarians for the most prestigious contribution to children's literature, and Neil's bestselling contemporary fantasy novel, *American Gods*, took the Hugo, Nebula, Bram Stoker, and Locus awards, as did his young adult novel *Coraline*. The Dictionary of Literary Biography lists him as one of the top ten living postmodern writers. Born in England, Neil lives in the United States and taught for five years at Bard College, where he is a Professor of the Arts. He is married to artist/musician Amanda Palmer.

In graphic novels, Neil's groundbreaking work *Sandman*, which was awarded nine Eisner Awards, was described by Stephen King as having turned graphic novels into "art." Hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* as the greatest epic in the history of the form, an issue of *Sandman* was the first comic book to receive literary recognition when given the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story.

Many of his books and stories have been adapted for film and television. *Coraline*, a 2009 stop-motion animated film directed by Henry Selick, was an Oscar

nominee for Best Animated Film and secured a BAFTA in the same category. Matthew Vaughn directed a 2007 film based on Neil's novel *Stardust*, starring Claire Danes and Robert De Niro. The Emmy-nominated adaptation of *American Gods* is in its second season on Starz and most recently, Neil scripted an Amazon/BBC six-part series based on the novel *Good Omens*, which he cowrote with the late Terry Pratchett.

His many honors include the Shirley Jackson Award, Chicago Tribune Young Adult Literary Prize (for his body of work), Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Defender of Liberty award, and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Arts, one of the oldest American universities dedicated to the visual and performing arts and design. Neil also has an honorary degree from St Andrew's. In 2017, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, appointed Neil Gaiman as a global Goodwill Ambassador.

ABOUT NEIL'S MASTERCLASS

Humans are fundamentally storytelling creatures. Whether you're talking to a friend or penning a novel, you're using the same tools to form a connection with people, to entertain them, and to make them think differently about the world.

As a writer, Neil is an explorer. His approach to writing encompasses a broad range of storytelling skills and offers useful tools for all kinds of writers at all stages of development.

This MasterClass will give you access to Neil's literary toolbox, which contains quite a complex collection. In the first eight chapters, you'll cover the basics, such as developing character, creating conflict, and determining your story's main themes and concerns. You'll use short stories to learn about economy and backstory, but also as a way to generate a reader's interest. Neil provides ample case studies, including comic books, that analyze character and story structure. Most of all, you'll learn the signature aspects of Neil's craft: how to push your story beyond a single genre or influence, how to subvert the expected, and how to weave disparate ideas into something unique and fresh.

Chapters 9 and 10 will tackle the deeply interwoven aspects of dialogue and character while Chapters 11-14 will help you build the world of your story. In Chapter 15, you'll see Neil's process for drafting stories in the comic format. The final four chapters will provide practical advice for the writer's life—everything from editing to overcoming writer's block.

Throughout, Neil sends a plumb line into writing's deeper subjects—the social importance of storytelling, where inspiration comes from, and what to make of the great contradiction of using lies to reveal the truth. These questions, which lie at the center of writing, can often reveal just the right thing to the writer who has become stuck or who is looking for an evolution of their craft.

This book was created by MasterClass as a supplement to Neil's class.

RECOMMENDED READING: NEIL'S WORK

Neil has written a staggering variety of work in multiple mediums. If you haven't read his work yet, pick up any of the following titles. Although not required, they will benefit you throughout the class.

- *The Sandman Vol. 1: Preludes and Nocturnes* (1988)
- *The Sandman: Dream Country* (1991)
- *Neverwhere* (1996)
- *Stardust* (1999)
- *American Gods* (2001)
- *Coraline* (2002)
- *The Graveyard Book* (2008)
- *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013)
- *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances* (2015)
- *Norse Mythology* (2017)

Additional Reading

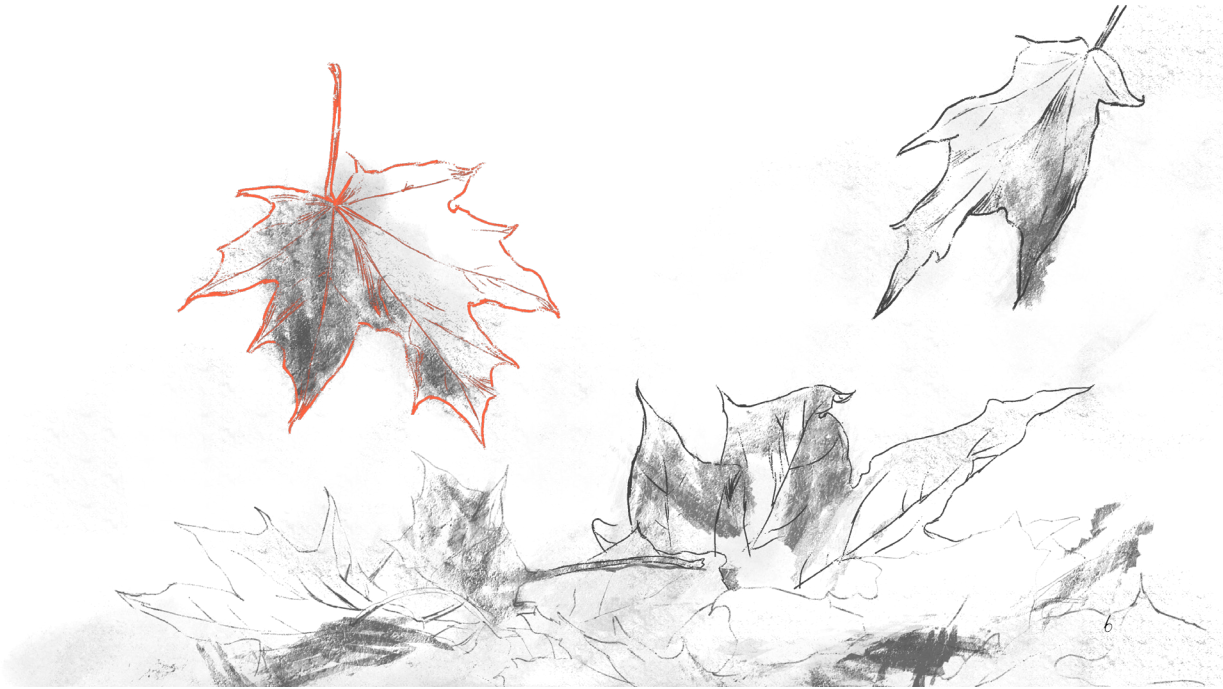
This workbook references important elements from other books to supplement Neil's teachings. You may want to obtain copies of the following:

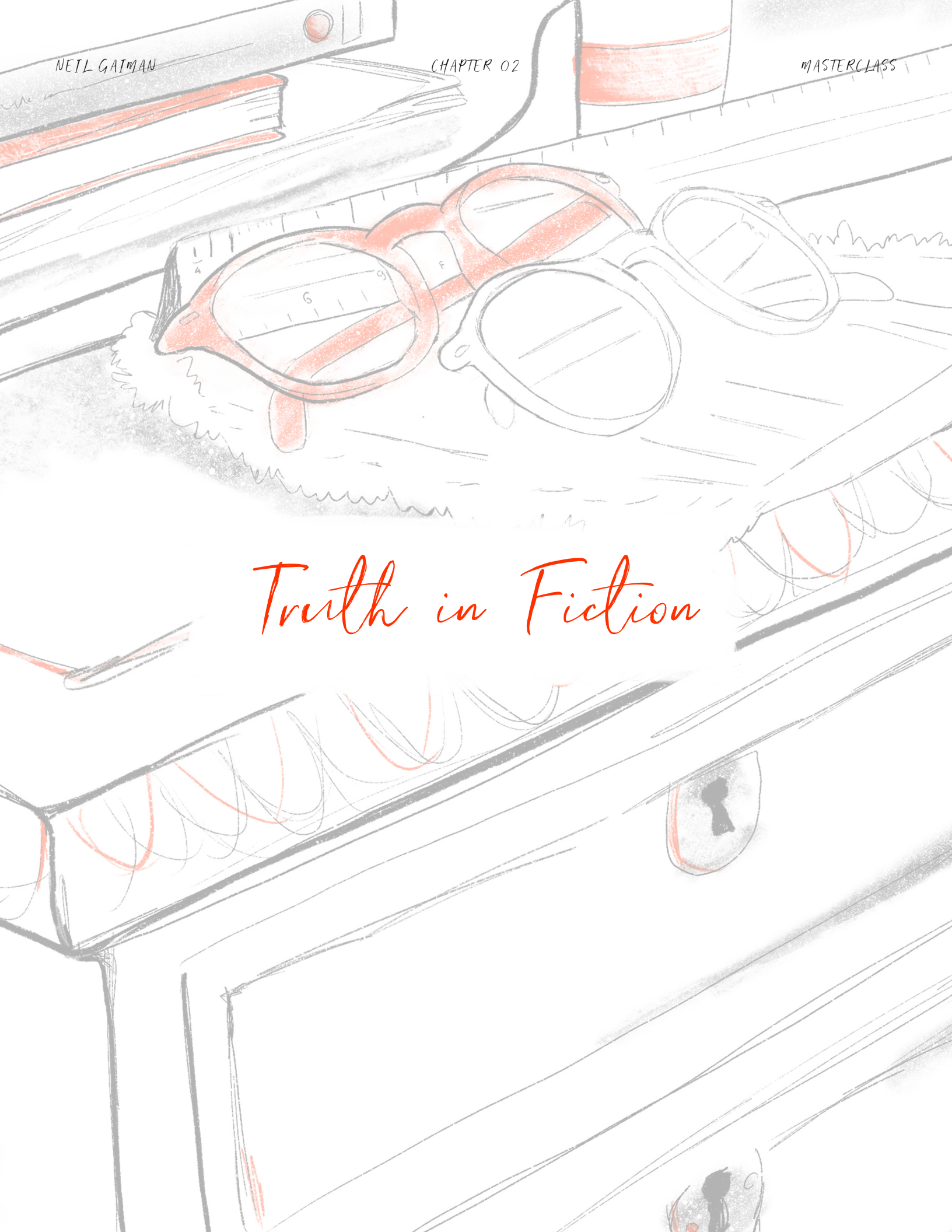
- *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee (1997)
- *The Art of the Short Story: 52 Great Authors, Their Best Short Fiction, and Their Insights on Writing* by Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn (ed.) (2005)
- *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing* (2007) by Alice LaPlante

WRITING EXERCISES

The coursework in this book is divided into two sections. *Writing Exercises* offer everyone a chance to practice the tools Neil teaches in this class. *For Your Novel* sections will apply Neil's tools to the process of writing a novel. They will be most helpful for writers who are starting a novel or who are in the midst of longer works. If you've already finished a novel, these section will help you strengthen your work.

Keep a separate notebook for this course. The writing exercises will ask you to work on assignments that build on previous ones. If you're working on a novel, having a notebook devoted to this course will give you space to develop new and experimental aspects of your work.





Truth in Fiction

CHAPTER 02

Truth in Fiction

"We're using memorable lies. We are taking people who do not exist and things that did not happen to those people, in places that aren't, and we are using those things to communicate true things."

Using the "lie" of a made-up story to reach a human truth is one of the central tools of literature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge explained that in order to sink into and enjoy a story, an audience must have "poetic faith"—meaning that they must be willing to accept that the story they are hearing is a facsimile of reality. In order to encourage a reader's "willing suspension of disbelief," writers strive for **verisimilitude**. (Today, Stephen Colbert would call this "truthiness.") The goal is to be credible and convincing. This can be of a cultural type—a book that portrays the real world is said to have cultural verisimilitude—or of the genre type—a fantasy that portrays an imaginary world with enough internal consistency that it feels real is said to have generic verisimilitude. It doesn't matter how outlandish the world of your story is, it should feel real to the reader.

Use the following tools to strengthen verisimilitude in your characters, settings, and scenes.

Provide specific, concrete sensory details: You can make up an underground tunnel that doesn't exist, but if you describe the smell of sewage and the persistent dripping of water, you draw your reader into a concrete experience that contributes to the sense of reality.

"What you're doing is lying, but you're using the truth in order to make your lies convincing and true. You're using them as seasoning. You're using the truth as a condiment to make an otherwise unconvincing narrative absolutely credible."

Focus on emotions that are true to your characters: Your hero might be fighting an impossible beast, but everyone will be able to relate to their fear.

Incorporate the familiar alongside the unfamiliar: Keeping the reader grounded in things they recognize is just as important as introducing new and interesting elements.

Avoid technical mistakes: If you're writing about the real world, get the facts straight. If you're writing a magical world, stay consistent with the laws of your creation.

Take time to cover objections: If something isn't right in your world, let your characters notice that it isn't right for them either.

Most of the time, truthiness is not something to strive for, but in fiction it serves a higher purpose of conveying emotional truths to your reader in a way that will entertain them, help them through difficult times, make them think differently about the world, or even change their lives.

To understand more about verisimilitude, study the **counterfactual** genre. These books tackle "what if" questions, such as "What if Hitler had won the war?" They set their stories in a familiar reality that is twisted in some meaningful way, coupling the familiar and unfamiliar. The following books provide examples of how writers can finely balance reality and imagination, and transport their readers to amazingly believable worlds.

- *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) by Philip K. Dick—What if America lost World War II?
- *The Alteration* (1975) by Kingsley Amis—What if the Reformation had never happened?
- *Fatherland* (1992) by Robert Harris—What if Hitler had won the war?
- *The Plot Against America* (2004) by Philip Roth—What if the U.S. struck an entente with Hitler?
- *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) by Michael Chabon—What if a Jewish state had been established in Alaska?
- *Underground Airlines* (2016) by Ben Winters—What if slavery had never ended in America?

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Choose a page or scene from your work-in-progress and analyze it for verisimilitude by answering the following questions:

Are your descriptive details specific? Can you make them sensory?

Is your character's behavior in line with their personality? Do their responses make sense for them?

Can you fact-check anything? If so, do it now.

"If you're going to write... you have to be willing to do the equivalent of walking down a street naked. You have to be able to show too much of yourself. You have to be just a little bit more honest than you're comfortable with..."

Essays are a natural way to learn more about individual writers and how they view their subject matter. The voices you'll encounter in essays tend to be more personal than the ones you'll find in novels or short stories. The essay collections below provide plenty of great topics to encourage your own thoughts. Do you agree with the authors' opinions? If not, write a response or an essay of your own. Try to "show too much of yourself."

- *Tremendous Trifles* (1909) by G. K. Chesterton
- *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) by James Baldwin
- *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) by Joan Didion
- *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (1998) by Anne Fadiman
- *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (2004) by Ursula K. Le Guin
- *Consider the Lobster* (2005) by David Foster Wallace
- *The Braindead Megaphone: Essays* (2007) by George Saunders
- *Magic Hours: Essays on Creators and Creation* (2012) by Tom Bissell
- *The Empathy Exams* (2014) by Leslie Jamison
- *The View From the Cheap Seats* (2016) by Neil Gaiman
- *Animals Strike Curious Poses* (2017) by Elena Passarello

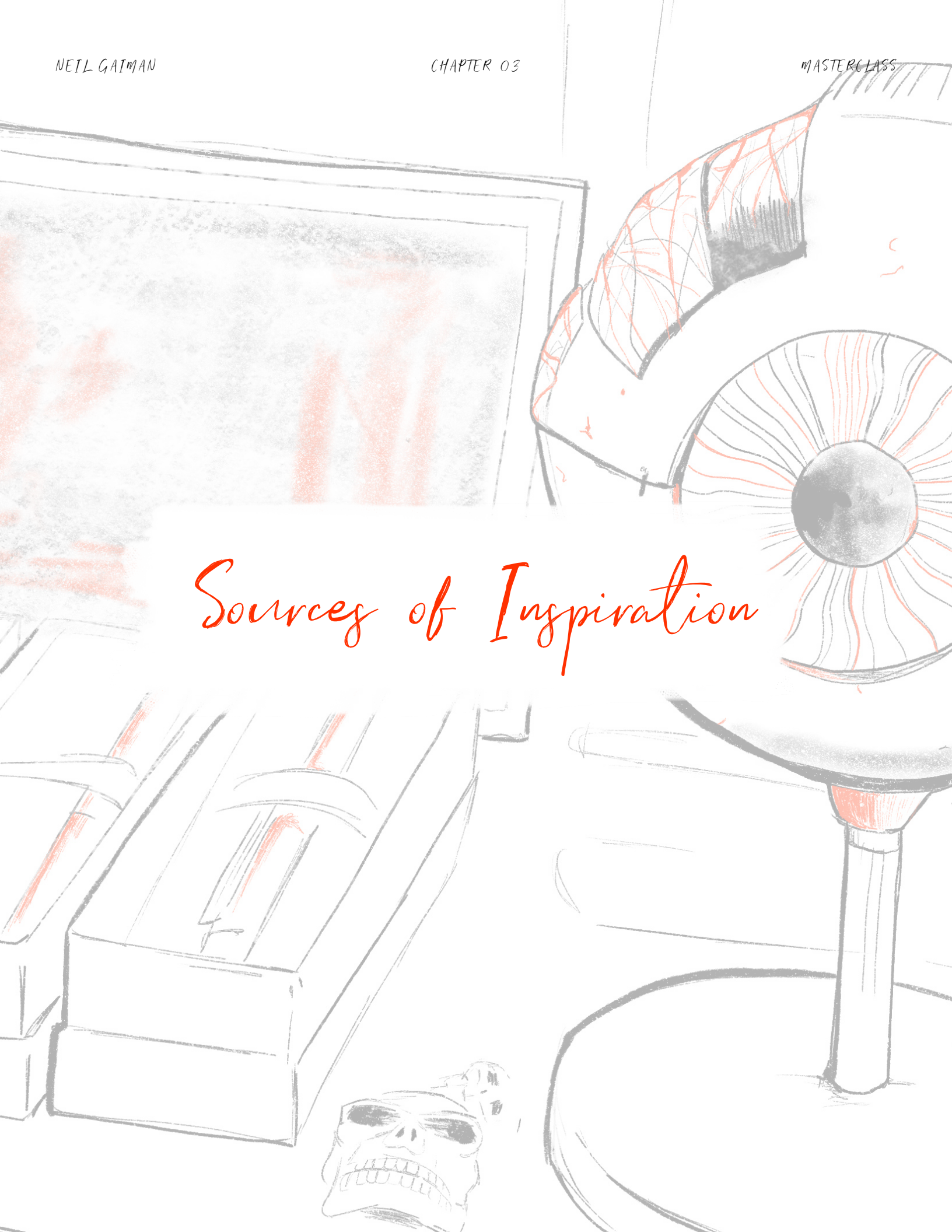
"All fiction has to be as honest as you can make it... because that's what people respond to..."

WRITING EXERCISE

To practice honesty in your writing, choose one of the following moments and write a few paragraphs in your journal about it. As you write, pay attention to your inner register about what you're writing, noting the particular things that make you uneasy. Try to be a little "more honest than you're comfortable with." Remember that being brave doesn't mean you're not scared; it means you do it anyway.

- A time when you were deeply embarrassed.
- When you regret something you did.
- The saddest moment of your life.
- A secret you are afraid to talk about.

Take the work you wrote above and either read it aloud to someone you trust, or read it alone and pretend that you have an audience. Listen to the way you sound and pay attention to the sensations in your body as you're reading the difficult moment. Consider what you're afraid of being judged for, or afraid of saying out loud. Write those things down.



Sources of Inspiration

CHAPTER 03

Sources of Inspiration

"Remember that your influences are all sorts of things. And some of them are going to take you by surprise. But the most important thing that you can do is open yourself to everything."

An **allusion** is a short reference to another story, usually through the use of well-known elements. For example, you can quickly reference *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by mentioning a white rabbit. Allusions generate interest because they set a context for the story you're reading while hinting at the similarities or differences in the two works. Neil uses allusions often, and they are just as wide-ranging as his storytelling interests, referencing Egyptian and Greek mythology, Victorian fairy tales, Beowulf and Norse mythology, Shakespeare, Tolkien, and modern cinema, to name a few. In this chapter, Neil mentions his admiration for the following authors, and sometimes alludes to them in his own work:

James Branch Cabell: American author who wrote fantasy and comedy in the 1920s and '30s. His most enduring work, *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice* (1919), tells the story of pawnbroker-poet Jurgen who journeys through various fantasy worlds to find justice while becoming more and more disillusioned. It is a parody of romance tales and courtly love.

Edward Plunkett, Lord Dunsany: A prolific Anglo-Irish fantasy author. His novel, *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), established some of the most central themes of fantasy writing in the twentieth century: elves, witches, trolls, hidden worlds with different time streams, and a preoccupation with nature and powerful magic. In Neil's *Stardust*, Tristan moves beyond "the fields we know"—a phrase that alludes to *Elfland's Daughter*.

Ursula K. Le Guin: American author who wrote the Earthsea Cycle (1968-2001), which is comprised of six books and numerous short stories, and which tells tales of the fictional fantasy world of Earthsea. LeGuin's work centers on themes of gender, power, responsibility, the natural world, and death. Her novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), was one of the first fantasy novels to influence Neil. In an article he wrote for the Library of America, he said that "the trilogy made me look at the world in a new way, imbued everything with a magic that was so much deeper than the magic I'd encountered before then. This was a magic of words, a magic of true speaking."

P. L. Travers: British author who wrote *Mary Poppins* (1934) and a whole series of books inspired by it (even a cookbook). If you've only seen the Disney movie, it's worth checking out the novels, which are darker and more fantastical. Mary is constantly looking in mirrors to make sure she's real; she can talk to animals; and at one point even dances among the stars. For children, she is the guardian to a world of frightening magic.

Neil suggests many tools for approaching an old story from a new angle.

Change point of view: Choose an alternate character to retell a familiar story. In the novel *Foe* (1986), J.M. Coetzee narrates the tale of Robinson Crusoe from the point of view of Susan Barton, a castaway who washed up on the island in the middle of Crusoe's adventures.

Modernize themes: A lot of classic tales get a gender-based upgrade, where an author will delve into a female character's head from a more modern perspective. Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* (2005) revisits Homer's Odyssey through the eyes of Penelope and her chorus of twelve maids.

Switch a story element: This could mean taking a story to a new location—*Cinder* (2012) by Marissa Meyer re-imagines Cinderella as a cyborg in Beijing—or changing the type of story—In *The Snow Queen* (1980), Joan D. Vinge turns Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale into a space opera.

Make it yours: Take a familiar story and add in a bit of your own background or experience. Mario Puzo did this with panache in *The Godfather* (1969), bringing elements of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* to the world he knew well: Italian immigrants in post-war America.

For a re-envisioning of popular fairy tales, check out some of the following titles. (Titles with asterisks contain stories by Neil.)

- *Red as Blood* (1983) by Tanith Lee
- *Tales of Wonder* (1987) by Jane Yolen
- *Snow White, Blood Red* (1993) by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (ed.)*
- *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1999) by Emma Donoghue
- *The Wilful Eye* (2011) edited by Nan McNab (ed.)
- *Happily Ever After* (2011) by John Klima (ed.)*
- *Clockwork Fairy Tales: A Collection of Steampunk Fables* (2013) by Stephen L. Antczak (ed.)
- *Unnatural Creatures* (2013) by Neil Gaiman (ed.)*
- *Beyond the Woods* (2016) by Paula Guran (ed.)*
- *The Starlit Wood* (2016) by Dominik Parisien and Navah Wolfe (ed.)
- *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories* (2017) by Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin (ed.)*

WRITING EXERCISE

Choose a folk tale or fairy tale that you know well. Select one of the characters from the story for the following exercise and write a few pages about them, using one of the following prompts:

- Pretend you're a therapist treating the character. Write a scene in which you discuss the character's life and problems, then arrive at a diagnosis.
- Write a newspaper article describing the events of the story. For example, Snow White—*Woman Hiding in Woods for Ten Years Found by Wealthy Hiker*. Then write a story for that headline using journalistic objectivity.
- Have your character explain their actions to a jury.

"I think it's really important for a writer to have a compost heap. verything you read, things that you write, things that you listen to, people you encounter, they can all go on the compost heap. And they will rot down. And out of them grow beautiful stories."

In *Writing Down the Bones* (1986), author Natalie Goldberg argues that "it takes a while for our experience to sift through our consciousness" and that our senses "need the richness of sifting" in order that we can "see the rich garden we have inside us and use that for writing." She coined the term "composting" to describe this process of allowing the unconscious and conscious minds to process experience before sharing or re-inventing it in writing. Many writers practice composting in one form or another—usually by collecting various things that inspire them and assembling them in a journal, folder, or online file. Rereading your compost heap can not only give you time to process difficult subjects, it can trigger fresh inspiration and help you make creative leaps by linking up seemingly disparate elements.

WRITING EXERCISE

In your journal, begin creating a compost heap. Title a page "Compost Heap" and write down the things that have captured your attention in the past week or month. These may become the source motivators of your writing, maybe of your career. Any writing project is an undertaking, and novels in particular, because they take so long to write, will require a sustained interest, so be sure to fill this page with your truth: What interests you? This can be anything: a word, a movie, a person, an event, so long as it inspired you. It can be subjects (cactus species, muscle cars, a voyage to Mars) or people/types of people (therapists, spies, your Aunt Germaine). Try to include things from other arts—for example, foods, music, or movies. In the beginning, make a practice of sitting down at least once a day to note things that interest you.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Create a specialized *subset* of your compost heap, which is a lexicon devoted exclusively to your novel. For example, if you're writing about Greenland, gather all the words you can about snow, ice, flora and fauna, geologic formations, or weather occurrences. Research history and arts and science. Write down all of the words you love and that you think could go into your novel.

"You get ideas from two things coming together. You get ideas from things that you have seen and thought and known about and then something else that you've seen and thought and known about, and the realization that you can just collide those things."

One of the big questions Neil raises in this chapter is the origin of ideas and inspiration. Neil posits that ideas come from **confluence**, or the peculiar combinations of thoughts and experiences that are unique to you. Many writers would agree. Others have found ideas in dreams (Stephen King and Stephanie Meyer), in sudden flashes of inspiration (J.K. Rowling), in a casual joke (Kazuo Ishiguro), while doing a mundane task like visiting a yard sale (Donna Tartt) or while grading papers (J.R.R. Tolkien). Still others find inspiration in the people they know (P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, and Ian McEwan). Roald Dahl kept an Ideas Book (his own compost heap) and found an idea for a novel from an old comment he'd written many years before. In her book *Big Magic* (2015), Elizabeth Gilbert goes so far as to say that ideas are a "disembodied, energetic life form" and that creativity "is a force of enchantment...like in the Hogwarts sense." In order to collaborate with these life forms, you must simply engage in "unglamorous, disciplined labor" and write.

Finding Your Voice

CHAPTER 04

Finding Your Voice

"You're going to write short stories that nobody reads, that don't really work. That's okay...After you've written 10,000 words, 30,000 words, 60,000 words, 150,000 words, a million words, you will have your voice because your voice is the stuff you can't help doing."

Your writing will develop its own style and personality, or your **writer's voice**. It is the sum of all the elements of your work that would make it possible for someone to pick up a page of text and recognize that you wrote it. It is not necessarily your speaking voice, rather it's the voice that comes through on the page. On a technical level, it is composed of the choices you make regarding emotional tone, characters, settings, and the textual rhythms of your language like diction, sentence structure, and even punctuation. The sum effect of these things will be unique to you and will reveal your personality and attitude to your audience.

While each writer has their own voice, sometimes a story demands a voice of its own, called a **persona**, which is different from the writer's voice. The persona is the voice that tells the story and can be any narrative point of view from an omniscient, third person to a close first person. You will generally find the persona for a story in the same way you develop a setting or characters. Neil gives three examples of persona in his works:

- The "American transparent" in *American Gods*—common among many authors, this style is so basic that the author seems invisible. If style is made up of "the things you get wrong," then this style is technically perfect, clean, and conservative. It serves the purpose of keeping the focus on the story so that you might even forget that someone is telling a story.

- The old-fashioned "formal" voice in *Stardust*—any writing style with syntax or vocabulary borrowed from an earlier time period. Very often, premodern ways of speaking or writing feel stilted to a modern ear, and this style uses that quality, often to take you back to a historical moment or to a different world.

- The cicerone in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*—this persona is informal, close, and often not very literary. This style can mimic the feeling of being with an actual person who is explaining their story to you.

One of the voices most writers try to avoid is "writerly" voice, which is an attempt to sound literary that can come off as overwritten. This voice involves unnaturally complex sentence structures, too many adjectives or rare words, and lengthy, unnecessary descriptions. Unless a specific character is in fact pompous and views the world that way, work instead to develop your own voice. Don't be afraid to be yourself, no matter how quirky you are. Writing is one of the places where your weirdness is welcome.

WRITING EXERCISES

"You learn more from finishing a failure than you do from writing a success."

On a page in your notebook, describe yourself as a writer. Pretend you are a different person explaining what your work is like to someone who has never read it. This doesn't have to be perfect, just write your immediate thoughts and impressions. If you're struggling with this, re-read a few pieces of your writing and try to describe what they have in common. What similarities exist in your works? Think of the overt ones (i.e. you always use the same genre or same type of characters) as well as the quieter ones (i.e. attitude, emotional registers you use in your fiction, etc).

Give a short selection of your writing to someone else and ask them to describe it in three adjectives. Do they recognize you in the writing?

Sometimes a fear of making mistakes will sabotage your writing process. It may stop you from putting ideas on the page, or it can cause blocks while you're in the middle of a project. To develop confidence, challenge yourself to write a short story in one sitting. You're not allowed to go away from the project until you have a completed draft. It can be any length, but tell a complete story that will satisfy a reader. Don't do too much editing while you write, just let your ideas flow and then structure them once you've got everything on the page.

"Each story has its own voice. But the attitude, the soul, the thing you take away from it, hopefully that's all me. And that can be all you."

For his book *The Sound on the Page* (2004), Ben Yagoda interviewed 40 notable authors about their writer's voices. His collection of essays is the perfect resource for learning about the many ways that writer's voice can be conveyed on the page.

Certain writers are known especially for their voices. Read some of the following authors to sample a wide variety:

Jane Austen: Master of irony and dialogue, Austen's preoccupation with social divisions, and the witty and insightful tone with which she reveals hypocrisy and parodies people contributed heavily to her voice.

Ernest Hemingway: A pioneer of the concise, "masculine" style which came about because of his background in journalism and his general disillusionment about war.

Zora Neale Hurston: Lyrical, spoken style of voice, borrowing heavily from the dialects of her life and experiences. Read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and you can hear the church hymns she grew up with in the rhythms of her sentences.

Kurt Vonnegut: Famous for simplicity of language and a dry wit, his voice has intelligence and a strong sense of decency that comes from his concerns with social equality. (His essay "How to Write With Style" offers sound advice for any writer.)

Raymond Chandler: Famously wry, full of wisecracks, and partial to pithy similes, Chandler's voice grew tougher over time, thanks to his increasing disillusionment and social criticism. His alienation and bleakness came to epitomize the noir genre. Read *The Long Goodbye* (1953) for the richest of his work.

Margaret Atwood: Her highly descriptive style is inspired by her love for poetry, myth, folklore, and the fantastic, and she weaves these elements into greater themes of power, feminism, and technology to produce a distinctly trenchant voice.

The type of writers that appeal to you can also reveal the type of voice you have. For fun, check out "I Write Like," (https://iwl.me/) a free online tool that allows you to analyze your own writing and tells you which authors you most resemble.

WRITING EXERCISE

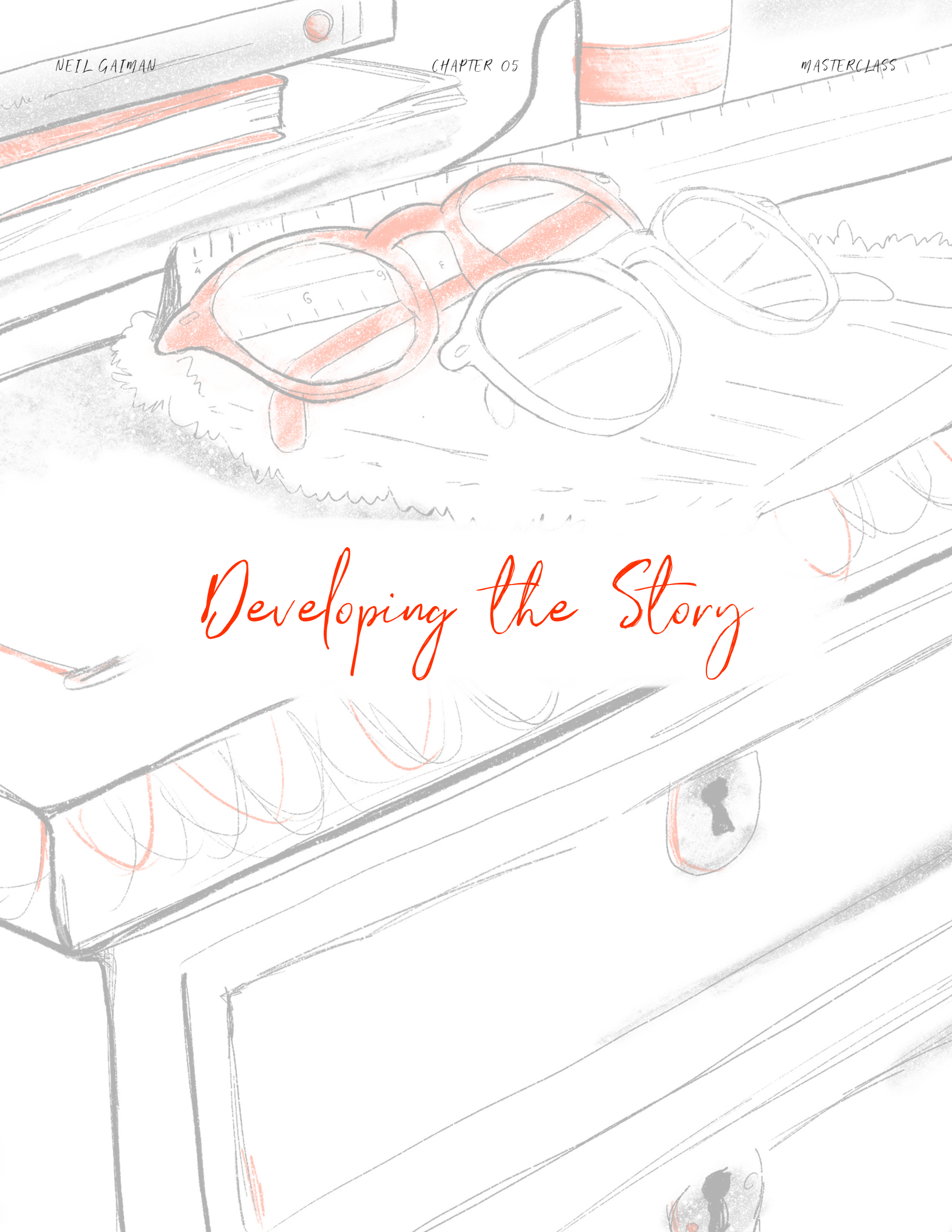
Choose an author whose writing you admire and read a few pages of their work. Now write a passage in a voice that mimics theirs, using characters, settings, and problems of your choice. What makes this author's voice so appealing? How does it make you feel?

Now write a paragraph or more on any topic of your choice. Make an effort to use a voice that feels more natural to you. What sets your voice apart? What tone does it give? Do the characters and setting feel different when you write in your own voice?

READING EXERCISE

William Faulkner once famously advised young writers to "Read everything: Trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it." Part of your apprenticeship is learning what you love and hate.

Go to a library or bookstore and select five books from authors you've never read before (and perhaps know nothing about). Open each book to a random chapter and begin reading, observing which aspects of the writer's voice you enjoy, and which ones you dislike. Make a list of all the qualities you observe and note your feelings about them.



Developing the Story

CHAPTER 05

Developing the Story

"What is a story? Eventually what I decided was, the story is anything fictional that keeps you turning the pages and doesn't leave you feeling cheated at the end."

Every story has a big idea, the thing that you would say your story is about. Deciding on your story's big idea is generally straightforward—it is the thing that prompts you to start writing in the first place. However, this will evolve over time. For Neil, *Neverwhere* came from a desire to write about a world beneath London. He soon realized that the story was about homelessness and the people who are overlooked in big cities. It can be challenging to come up with a fresh big idea that is meaningful to you. Often, it will come about through the merging of disparate topics that you weave together because of your particular obsessions or interests. Keep going back to your compost heap to find those things, and begin to draw threads between your various interests.

WRITING EXERCISE

For those who want to start a novel, on a page in your notebook titled "Brain Dump," write everything you know about your story. Begin with the critical elements like setting, characters, and main dramatic questions or themes. There may not be much to put on the paper yet, but write down whatever wisps of ideas you have, whatever is motivating you, even fragments of thoughts or images. Perhaps you start this assignment intending to write an overview of your story, but instead you get swept away developing details about a certain character—go with that! This kind of free writing will guide you to the things that are important.

"'And then what happened?' Those words, I think, are the most important words there are for a storyteller. Anything you can do to keep people turning the pages is legitimate."

No matter what type of story you're telling, **suspense** is a valuable tool for keeping a reader's attention and interest. Suspense involves raising a **major dramatic question** that the reader wants answered. It is usually based on a character's desire, and if it is *not* answered by the end of the book, the story will not feel complete for the reader. For example, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) is driven by the reader wanting to know: Will Frodo be able to return the ring to Mordor and defeat Sauron? Multiple subplots engage the reader

throughout the book, but this is the central storyline that touches all the others. This "What's Going to Happen?" game drives any story forward. There is an implicit promise that you will answer the questions (at varying paces), but in order to sustain interest, you must continue to raise questions.

"If you get stuck, you can ask yourself what your characters want—and that is like a flashlight. It shines a light on the road ahead and lets you move forward. It's the only question that opens the door to 'What do you do next?'"

Consider the following aspects of suspense writing for your story:

Withhold information. This is the most common way to raise interest. When your character is driving frantically down a dirt road in a Winnebago wearing nothing but his underwear and a gas mask, your audience is going to have questions.

Let your reader know things your characters don't. This is the opposite type of suspense and is known as "dramatic irony." When your reader knows that the bus roaring down the highway is headed for an elevated freeway junction that hasn't been completed yet, it fills the audience with anticipation and dread for what they know is coming: the passengers' horror and shock.

Make the stakes clear. In any story, something of consequence is at stake for your main character. It could be as large as saving the universe, or as small as keeping your family together. Make sure that you give a clear picture of this to your reader. It doesn't matter what the stakes are, as long as they're high for your characters.

Generate conflict. If you always give your characters what they want, your story will lack tension. Only conflict moves a story forward. This is what your characters need in order to grow, so don't let them get off easy. Don't just think of conflict as dramatic action, it can come in any form—it will depend on what your characters want and what stands in their way of getting it. The most important thing to remember is that conflict should increase as the story progresses.

Jane K. Cleland's *Mastering Suspense, Structure, and Plot* (2016) offers an abundance of advice for when to make promises, how to reveal information, what sorts of information should be revealed at what speed, and how to balance the major and minor points of suspense in any story. This book is useful no matter what type of writing you do.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Select a chapter from your work—ideally, your opening chapter—and write down a list of the key questions your reader will have after they've read it. What questions have you raised? What will they want to know soon? What are the bigger questions you're undertaking? These are promises you're making to a reader. Come back to the these promises at a later time and make sure they're fulfilled.

If you don't already know your major dramatic question, title a page in your journal "Major Dramatic Question" and answer the following questions: What is your big idea? What social messages lie beneath your topic? What are the highest stakes for the protagonist of your story? What is the primary question you are raising for the reader (i.e. What issue do you promise the reader you'll resolve by the end of the novel?) You are aiming to find a question that will sum up the main storyline of your novel and will include your main character and their goal. (If you're writing *The Odyssey*, that storyline will be: "Will Odysseus ever make it home?") Once you've found this question, write it on a slip of paper and post it near your workspace. You will probably need to refer back to it along the way.

READING EXERCISE

Read Chapter 1 of *American Gods*, and identify the suspense questions being raised. What are you wondering about? What makes you curious to see what happens next? What things are left unsaid? Finally, take a guess at the book's major dramatic question.

"Remember that characters always, for good or for evil, get what they need. They do not get what they want."

Think of **genre** as a set of expectations that your reader already has, based on the type of story you're telling. In a murder mystery, for example, the reader expects a murder, an investigation, and a resolution of the crime. It doesn't mean you have to provide all of those things; you only have to be aware that your reader will be expecting them, and that if you don't provide them, you risk disappointing your audience. While there are hundreds of genres, it's important to start by understanding the three primary ones: epic, tragic, and comic.

- In classical terms, an **epic story** was an adventure, often written in poetic form, like Homer's *Odyssey*. Today, epic stories tend to be referred to as "**hero's journeys**," and often include works of fantasy or historical fiction. Joseph's Campbell's influential work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), analyzes the monomyth behind this genre.

- **Tragedy** traditionally shows someone's downfall and is supposed to provoke pity and fear. For much of Western history, this type of story was restricted to powerful and wealthy characters only, but in modern times, tragedy occurs with all sorts of protagonists.

- **Comedy** is often built of the same materials as tragedy but ends on a positive note (usually with a wedding). The genre's primary interests are to amuse and entertain, but there is a strong tradition of mocking social conventions, institutions, or beliefs in the popular subcategories of parody, satire, and farce.

For more on stories and genres, watch Kurt Vonnegut's now-famous video lecture "Kurt Vonnegut on the Shapes of Stories.". It outlines six basic types of story trajectories, which is an incredibly useful way to think about stories and genres. Recently, a scientific team at the University of Vermont's Computational Story Lab fed thousands of novels into a computer and confirmed Vonnegut's theory: there are actually six basic types of stories.

In his immensely useful guidebook, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997), Robert McKee devotes a whole chapter to understanding the various types of genres in storytelling. His "Structure and Genre" chapter will help you begin formulating a basic understanding of how different genres are built and what the expectations are for their audiences. For a more in-depth review, check out Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies: a Screenwriter's Guide to Every Story Ever Told* (2007), which is actually a guide to a small number of movies, each of which is analyzed and broken down in terms of genre. This book will help you grasp the basics of popular movies genres like Buddy Love, Monster in the House, and Superheroes.

WRITING EXERCISE

**Note: Neil uses this exercise with his students in the creative writing workshop that he teaches at Bard College. You can do it individually or in a group.*

Print the "Genres" and "Stories" grids on the following two page. Cut out each square. Toss the Genres together in a bowl, and the Stories together in a separate bowl. Choose a Story from the bowl. On a page in your notebook, write a brief outline of the story—the main points of action from beginning to end. Then choose a Genre from the other bowl. (If the Genre is too close to the story you've chosen, select another one.) Now consider how to take the elements of the story and change them into something new, using the new Genre as a guideline.

For more detailed information on each of the genres on the grid, see TVTropes Literature Genre explanations.

WORKSHEET: CHART FOR GENRES

Tragedy	Comedy	Thriller
Fantasy	Mystery	Western
Sports	Adventure	Historical
Superhero	War	Horror
Chick Lit	Magic Realism	Science Fiction

WORKSHEET: CHART FOR STORIES

FAIRY TALES:

- Beauty and the Beast
- The Snow Maiden
- Hansel and Gretel
- Ishtar's Journey to the Underworld

SHAKESPEARE PLAYS:

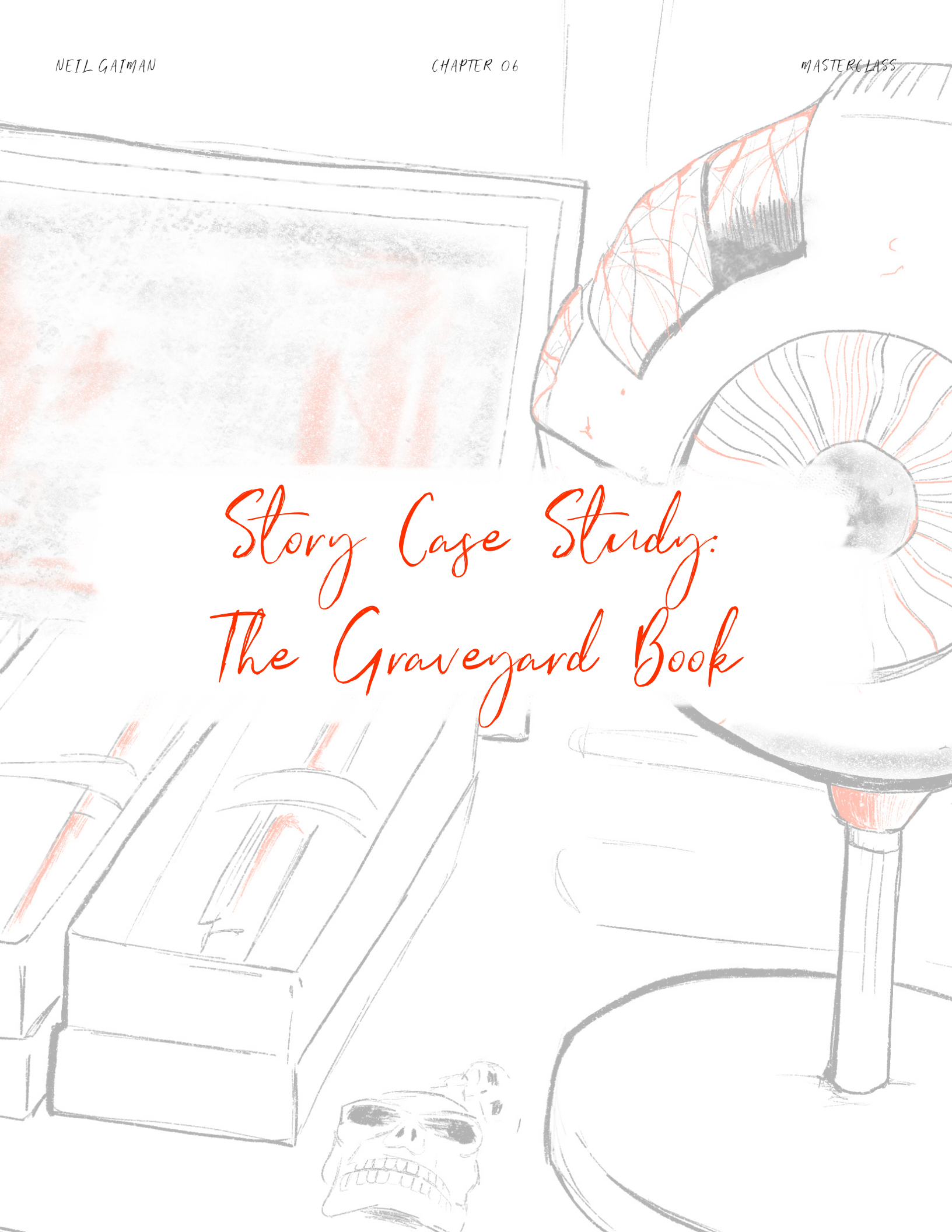
- *Othello*
- *The Tempest*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Hamlet*

MYTHS:

- Hades and Persephone
- Murder of Osiris
- Hercules and Omphale
- Purification of Izanagi
- Odin's Discovery of the Runes

MODERN NOVELS:

- *Invisible Man* (1952)
  By Ralph Ellison
- *Lolita* (1955)
  By Vladimir Nabokov
- *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)
  By Amy Tan
- *My Brilliant Friend* (2012)
  By Elena Ferrante



Story Case Study: The Graveyard Book

CHAPTER 06

Story Case Study: The Graveyard Book

"So what characters want, and what characters need, always drive every story. And they always drive how the character behaves, what's going to happen, how they interact with other characters."

In fiction there are two types of **characters**—flat and round. A flat character is easy to spot. They only have one or two characteristics that are relevant to the story. A round character has more complexity. The biggest difference between these two types of characters is how much the reader understands of their motivations. Round characters are simply those whose motivations you choose to develop more lavishly in your writing. While developing a round character's desires, keep the following points in mind.

- Motivation is revealed in the choices someone makes. The harder the choices, the more possibility you have to reveal the character's deepest nature.
- In choosing between good and evil, people will always choose what *they perceive to be good*. You must know your character's mind in order to understand their beliefs and how they will justify their actions—even the cruel ones.
- Conflict is essential for developing character. If nothing is at stake, then a person's choices don't matter very much, and the audience will begin to lose interest.
- Ideally, your story should increase the conflict for your character, so that their choices and responses evolve throughout.

Description of *The Graveyard Book*

After escaping the brutal murder of his family, a young toddler makes his way to a nearby graveyard, where he is adopted by ghosts, Mr. and Mrs. Owens, who name him Nobody, or "Bod." Bod is given the Freedom of the Graveyard, which allows him to be like the ghosts and pass through solid objects. The story tells of Bod's adventures growing up in the graveyard and of the supernatural abilities he learns (Haunting, Fading, and Dream Walking). Because of a prophecy, the man who killed his parents must return and kill Bod, or the band of assassins will perish.

WRITING EXERCISE

Take one of the simple settings below and write a page about it, trying to undermine the reader's expectations. For example, you're writing about a man at a party who is talking to a beautiful woman. What he wants is probably obvious. Try to lead the reader in a different direction by not revealing his desire up front, or by revealing a surprising motivation.

- A man lying on a hill looking through a rifle scope
- A couple in wedding outfits riding in a car
- A child raking a sandbox next to his nanny
- Two old women sitting on a bench with knitting needles and yarn
- A teenage girl climbing a rock cliff with a man below her

Using the questions below, create a character. This person can be based on people you know or have completely invented. Write a sentence or two describing what the character wants.

- What is their name? Age? Gender?
- What do they look like?
- What's in their purse or pockets?
- What's their favorite thing to do?
- What do they hate?
- What matters to them more than anything in the world?

Using the character you created above, write a conversation or a situation where this person cannot get what they want. You may find other characters emerge from this—let it happen. Try opening the scene at the main point of tension—for instance, in the middle of a fight—and fill in the necessary details as the scene plays out.

"Everything is driven by characters wanting different things, and by those different things colliding. Every moment that one character wants something, and another character wants something mutually exclusive, and they collide—every time that happens, you have a story."

The most interesting characters are never built on a single motivation but on a complex of motives. Scriptwriter Robert McKee talks about the importance of a character's dark side, or their **unconscious desires**. For every outwardly-apparent desire, there may be an inward opposite, which can drive a character in surprising, even horrifying directions. For example, Clarice Starling relies on serial killer Hannibal Lecter to help her catch another killer in *Silence of the Lambs* (1988). But beneath her apparent repulsion for Lecter is an equally compelling admiration for him which comes to border on obsession. It is safely justified by a professional need to understand him, but that unconscious desire—to befriend and even emulate Lecter—is so horrific that she cannot express it until the sequel, *Hannibal* (1999), when the two characters run away together.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

In your journal, write a list of the main character's most important desires. Beside each item, write down the things that stand in the way of your character attaining their desire. Consider especially how other people stand in their way. Repeat this exercise for all of your protagonists, if you have more than one.

Once you've decided on your character's main desires, begin to create an outline of those desires through your story. This is called a **throughline**. Find each instance in your story (or make them up now) when your character either reveals their desire, gets thwarted in attaining it, or changes their desire. Write each scene on a separate index card or slip of paper and arrange the cards in order. Look over the structure and ask yourself: Is this progression working? Where does it get stuck or seem to lag? Is there anything I can do to make it have more impact? Rearrange the cards and experiment with new scene ideas until you are satisfied.

Short Fiction

CHAPTER 07

Short Fiction

"Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds and other minds and other dreams. They're journeys you can make to the far side of the universe and still be back in time for dinner."

Short stories are an excellent place to take **risks**, to create things that interest you but which may not work in a whole novel. For inspiration, check out the following collections of risk-taking, genre-bending stories that are set in alternate worlds, interwoven with magic, reality, and science.

- *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2002) by Ted Chiang
- *Ancient, Ancient: Short Fiction* (2012) by Kiini Ibura Salaam
- *Engraved on the Eye* (2012) by Saladin Ahmed
- *Sorry Please Thank You* (2012) by Charles Yu
- *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2011) by Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer (ed.)
- *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* (2013) by Karen Russell
- *A Blink of the Screen: Collected Shorter Fiction* (2015) by Terry Pratchett
- *The Dark Dark* (2017) by Samantha Hunt
- *Dear Sweet Filthy World* (2017) by Caitlin R. Kiernan

WRITING EXERCISE

Sometimes changing the setting of a story will add intensity to it. Choose a page of writing you've done recently. For those who did the exercise in Chapter 6: Story Case Study: *The Graveyard Book*, where you wrote a page trying to undermine a reader's expectations, go back to that page of writing now. Experiment with your story by switching the scene. For example, if you wrote about a sniper looking through a rifle scope, move him to a crowded airport and see what happens. Try to take a risk here. Come up with a scene that is frightening or upsetting, or just beyond the bounds of what you're comfortable with.

"Short fiction is a fantastic place to learn your craft as a writer."

Traditionally, a book's ending delivers on the promises you've made to the reader throughout the story. When Neil suggests thinking of a short story as the ending of a novel, he means that much of what you're creating in terms of your characters and world will not make it into the final story. Instead, you want to hit the most important moment—the story's **climax**. At the same time, you need to convey enough information that your reader is not lost. In order to do this, consider *in medias res*—a writerly practice that means opening the story in the middle of the action and filling in details later. This takes you straight to your important scene.

WRITING EXERCISE

Answer any of the questions below as briefly as possible, writing down your first response. (If you like, refer back to the Writing Exercise you did in Chapter 2: Truth in Fiction). Then set a timer for 60 seconds. Use one of your answers to write the opening of a short story—one paragraph or more. Now re-set the timer for 30 minutes and finish the story. You don't have much time, so just keep writing. Don't worry about craft or structure. Write until the timer stops. Remember Neil's advice: you can start a short story at any point in the narrative.

- What was the most embarrassing thing you've experienced in the past few years?
- When was the last time you cried, and what caused it?
- What shocked you so much you were speechless?
- What was the very best or worst moment of your childhood?
- Have you fantasized about revenge recently? Against whom?
- Pretend you're on your deathbed, looking back at your life—who did you love the most? Be brutally honest.

"When you're writing short fiction, what you want, whether it's true or not, is to feel like these characters didn't just start to exist the moment the story began. You want to know they've all been in existence all along."

The Art of the Short Story: 52 Great Authors, Their Best Short Fiction, and Their Insights on Writing (2005) edited by Dana Gioia and R.S. Gwynn offers everything you ever wanted to know about the various techniques of short story writing. This wide-ranging selection of authors—encompassing many different backgrounds and time periods—doesn't just present the stories, it features notes from the writers about how they work, what they're trying to convey, and what kinds of tools and techniques work best for them.

If you'd like to take a look at Neil's favorite short story authors and "close-up conjurers," start with the following signature works:

- *The Wall* (1939) by Jean-Paul Sartre
- *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) by Ray Bradbury
- *Fancies and Goodnights* (1951) by John Collier
- *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth, and Other Stories* (1971) by Roger Zelazny
- *Deathbird Stories* (1975) by Harlan Ellison
- *Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002) by Shelley Jackson

"The first place that I start is just with the idea that instead of being paid by the word, I am paying by the word, that the fewer words I can use to tell my story, the better, that compression, that economy, all of these things are good."

Most **economy** in writing comes during editing. When you're beginning a project, it's important to banish your inner critic and allow yourself to write freely. Later, you'll be able to trim. When Neil talks about compressing your story, he means focusing your scenes and descriptions to get the most impact in the shortest amount of space. To do this, you'll need a very clear picture of your story's key moments. In his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argues that bad thinking causes bad writing. When going back to edit and compress his own writing, he asked himself the following questions for each sentence:

What am I trying to say?

What words will express it?

What image or idiom will make it clearer?

Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

WRITING EXERCISE

Choose a page of writing you did recently—or use the story you rewrote in the first writing exercise of this chapter—and condense it by at least a third. If necessary, rewrite it completely, imagining a more economical way to tell the story. Try to keep the elements that appeal to you. Experiment with cutting and trimming until you find something you like.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Choose a chapter opening in your work and cut out any descriptive paragraphs or phrases. Start instead with a phrase of dialogue or an action. Don't be afraid to disorient your reader and drop them into the middle of a scene. Let them be confused for a moment. Take that descriptive writing you cut and weave it into the chapter later. Ask yourself: What does the reader want to know most in this chapter? Whatever it is, it should come at the end of the chapter (or even later), so drag it out.

"Stories you read when you're the right age never quite leave you. You may forget who wrote them or what the story was called. Sometimes you'll forget precisely what happened. But if a story touches you, it will stay with you, haunting the places in your mind that you rarely ever visit."

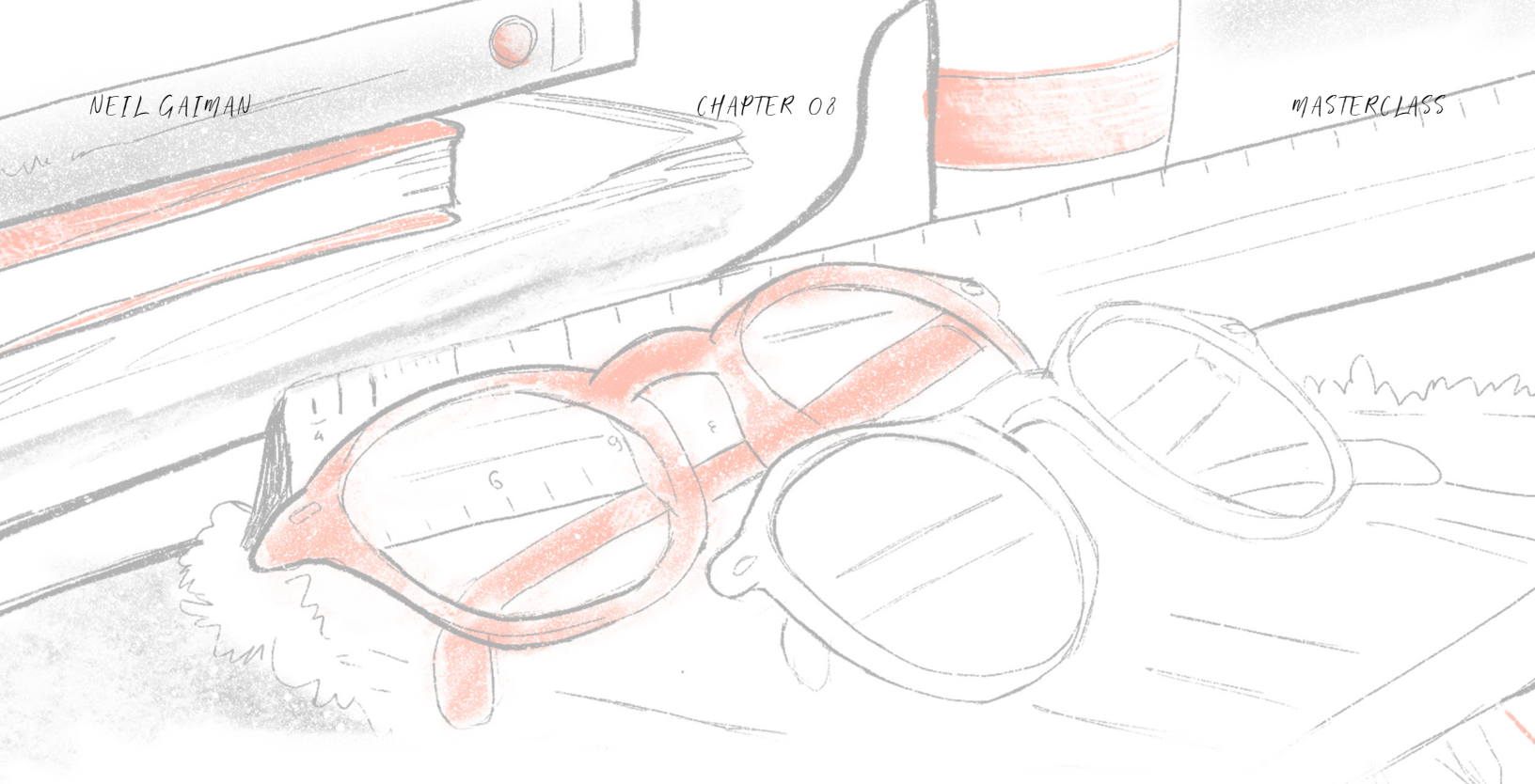
In traditional storytelling, every scene should have a **turn**. This means shifting the emotional charge of the scene to its opposite. For example, if your protagonist is delightedly anticipating the arrival of his fiancée, the scene doesn't turn until something has altered his delight, such as his fiancée showing up with another man. This shifts the emotional charge from positive to negative. However, there is a debate among writers whether or not scenes must turn in a short story. Sometimes your protagonist will resist all change, or decline a critical moment of transformation. Some short stories offer snippets of experience that don't adhere to traditional forms. For a fuller discussion of this topic and of structuring short stories in general, read "The Shapely Story" in Alice LaPlante's *The*

Making of a Story: The Norton Guide to Creative Writing (2007). For more information on the traditional structure of turns, emotional charge, and structuring your narrative, read "The Structure Spectrum" in Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997).

READING EXERCISE

Choose one of the following short stories that you haven't read. (Most are available free online.) Read the first page or two, then stop. Try to imagine what the ending will be, based on what you've read so far and on anything you may already know about the author's writing. Finish the story and compare your imaginary ending with the real one. What elements led you to believe in a certain ending? How did the author surprise you?

- "Toska (Misery)" (1886) by Anton Chekhov, published in *The Schoolmistress and Other Stories*, available on Project Gutenberg
- "The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains" (2010) by Neil Gaiman, published in *52 Stories*
- "Apollo" (2015) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in *The New Yorker*
- "The Snow Train" (2016) by Ken Liu, published in *Lightspeed* magazine
- "The City Born Great" (2016) by N.K. Jemisin, published on Tor.com



Short Fiction Case Study: "March Tale"

CHAPTER 08

Short Fiction Case Study: "March Tale"

"I also know that the moment that I start looking for things, the world is going to give me plot. It is the weird thing about research."

Neil created the following questions for a Blackberry promo, which led him to write *A Calendar of Tales* (2013).

- Why is January so dangerous?
- What's the strangest thing that ever happened to you in February?
- What historical figure does March remind you of?
- What's your happiest memory of April?
- What's the weirdest gift you've ever been given in May?
- Where would you spend a perfect June?
- What's the most unusual thing you have ever seen in July?
- If August could speak, what would it say?
- Tell me something you lost in September that meant a lot to you.
- What mythical creature would you like to meet in October? And why?
- What would you burn in November, if you could?
- Who would you like to see again in December?

"The problem I think that so many of us have, especially the process of writing, is because it creates magic, because when you read the story, you are off in this wonderful, magical place, you can forget that it's a craft. And you can also, especially as a young writer, forget that you simply do it by doing it."

WRITING EXERCISE

On a page in your journal, answer one of Neil's questions from *A Calendar of Tales*. Now write a story from this answer. This can be as long or short as you like.

When you're done with your story, fill out the worksheet at the end of the chapter for your protagonist. This information will sketch out your story's throughline. (For more about unconscious desires, refer back to Chapter 6: Story Case Study: *The Graveyard Book*.) Neil warns against being too nice to your characters, so don't be afraid to hit them with the very worst forces of antagonism you can muster.

Rewrite the story above with the most powerful forces of conflict you've devised from the worksheet.

"When you begin any story, you have an infinite number of forking paths. Every decision, every word, every paragraph is a fork."

Every story decision you make puts you on a path, and the choices for your characters will narrow as the story draws to its conclusion. Let's say you begin a novel with Richard hoping to go to outer space. At this point, your novel could be about a number of things. Perhaps Richard falls in love and discovers that marriage is more important to him. Maybe he gets injured and puts his dreams of space exploration away. Maybe he joins the air force and goes to war instead. In the beginning there are a vast number of **forking paths**. But as the novel progresses, it should become clearer in the reader's mind not only what climax your protagonist must reach but how that climax will probably occur. If you spend 200 pages following Richard through training to become an astronaut, then the reader will be expecting him to get on a rocket—or tragically fail at his quest. Crucially, this resolution is the *only climax* that will satisfy the audience. The climax does not have to mean fireworks, but it does have to mean a profound change, either for your protagonist or for their world. Whatever that change is, you've been building the whole story toward this moment. You've been making a promise to the reader that this conflict would eventually occur—and get resolved—and good storytelling will deliver on its promises.

In his book, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel: A Step-by-Step No Nonsense Guide to Dramatic Storytelling* (1987), James Frey describes the **crucible** effect, which is when an environment or situation becomes inescapable for your characters and forces them toward a story's climax. This crucible usually comes about as a result of a character's decisions, which is a result of the pressures put upon them. Not every story will have a crucible, but most of them do. For example, in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), what if Frodo had decided not to bring the ring to Mordor? Tolkien spends a great deal of time showing that Frodo is the only one who can carry the ring, and suggesting what might happen if he fails. All of this work creates the crucible effect for Frodo, making him (and the reader) feel that he has no choice but to reach Mordor, no matter what it might cost him.

"You can have your plot, you can have some characters, you can have an idea, you can have a starting place. But what's it about?"

When expanding your narrative, you're going to need to create conflict for your protagonist. For this, you'll need forces of **antagonism** that work against them. In genre writing, antagonists are usually arch-villains, but they don't have to be people—they can be any oppositional element that thwarts your character's main

desire. In crafting this conflict, it's helpful to remember some basic principles of antagonism.

- The stronger the forces of antagonism are, the more well-developed your character will become.
- The conflict should be tailored to your protagonist's main desire.
- Antagonism has to increase with time, or you'll lose the reader's interest.

For an in-depth discussion of antagonism and how to amplify it properly in any story, read "The Principle of Antagonism" in Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997).

FOR YOUR NOVEL

On a page in your journal, make a list of the forces of antagonism that are aligned against your protagonist. If you're having trouble identifying them, fill out the worksheet from the Writing Exercises section above. Be sure to include the information from the "Major Dramatic Question" exercise you did in Chapter 5: Developing the Story. Continue working on the forces of antagonism that are aligned against your main character until you feel you've got them at their most powerful and worst.

AN EXCERPT FROM

MARCH TALE

Neil Gaiman

"...only this we know, that she was not executed."
Daniel Defoe, A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates

It was too warm in the great house, and so the two of them went out onto the porch. A spring storm was brewing far to the west. Already the flicker of lightning, and the unpredictable chilly gusts blew about them and cooled them. They sat decorously on the porch swing, the mother and the daughter, and they talked of when the woman's husband would be home, for he had taken ship with a tobacco crop to faraway England.

Mary, who was thirteen, so pretty, so easily startled, said, "I do declare. I am glad that all the pirates have gone to the gallows, and father will come back to us safely."

Her mother's smile was gentle, and it did not fade as she said. "I do not care to talk about pirates, Mary."

SHE WAS DRESSED AS A boy when she was a girl, to cover up her father's scandal. She did not wear a woman's dress until she was on the ship with her father, and with her mother, his serving-girl mistress, whom he would call wife in the New World, and they were on their way from Cork to the Carolinas.

She fell in love for the first time, on that journey, enveloped in unfamiliar cloth, clumsy in her strange skirts. She was eleven, and it was no sailor who took her heart but the ship itself: Anne would sit in the bows, watching the grey Atlantic roll beneath them, listening to the gulls scream, and feeling Ireland recede with each moment, taking with it all the old lies.

She left her love when they landed, with regret, and even as her father prospered in the new land she dreamed of the creak and slap of the sails.

Her father was a good man. He had been pleased when she had returned, and did not speak of her time away: the young man whom she had married, how he had taken her to Providence. She had returned to her family three years after, with a baby at her breast. Her husband had died, she said, and although tales and rumours abounded, even the sharpest of the gossiping tongues did not think to suggest that Annie Riley was the pirate-girl Anne Bonny, Red Rackam's first mate.

"If you had fought like a man, you would not have died like a dog." Those had been Anne Bonny's last words to the man who put the baby in her belly, or so they said.

MRS RILEY WATCHED THE lightning play, and heard the first rumble of distant thunder. Her hair was greying now, and her skin just as fair as any local woman of property.

"It sounds like cannon-fire," said Mary (Anne had named her for her own mother, and for her best friend in the years she was away from the great house).

"Why would you say such things?" asked her mother, primly. "In this house, we do not speak of cannon-fire."

The first of the March rain fell, then, and Mrs Riley surprised her daughter by getting up from the porch swing and leaning into the rain, so it splashed her face like sea-spray. It was quite out of character for a woman of such respectability.

As the rain splashed her face she thought herself there: the captain of her own ship, the cannonade around them, the stench of the gunpowder smoke blowing on the salt breeze. Her ship's deck would be painted red, to mask the blood in battle. The wind would fill her billowing canvas with a snap as loud as a cannon's roar, as they prepared to board the merchant ship, and take whatever they wished, jewels or coin – and burning kisses with her first mate when the madness was done...

"Mother?" said Mary. "I do believe you must be thinking of a great secret. You have such a strange smile on your face."

"Silly girl, *acushla*," said her mother. And then she said, "I was thinking of your father." She spoke the truth, and the March winds blew madness about them.

WORKSHEET: YOUR PROTAGONIST

Character name and brief description.

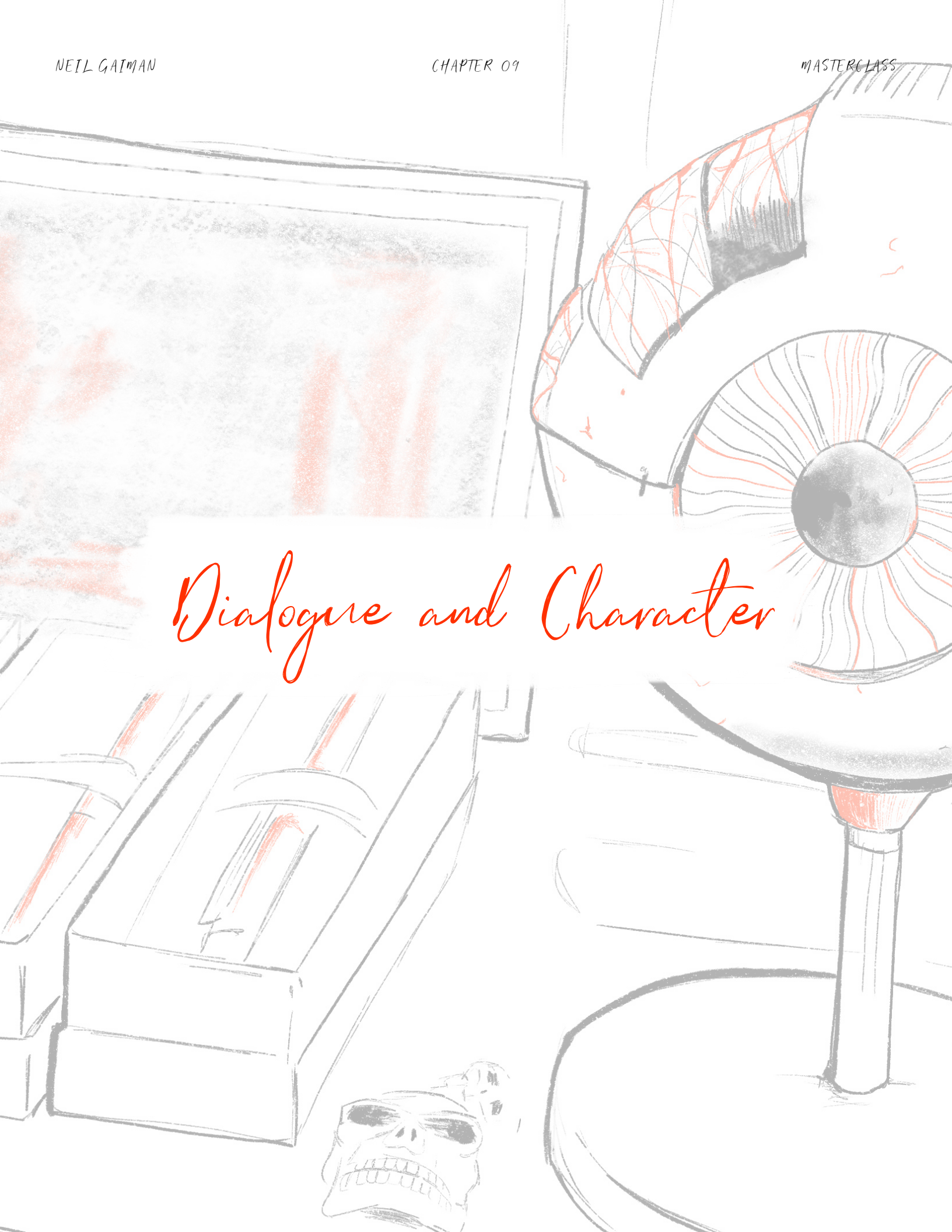
What is their main desire?

What is their unconscious desire? (This may be the inverse, or related to the main desire.)

What is the worst thing that can happen to this character?

What is something even worst that can happen to this character?

What people, institutions, or forces can bring this about? Include a description of how they do that.



Dialogue and Character

CHAPTER 09

Dialogue and Character

"The process of writing good dialogue is a listening process. It's the process of: you write the line before, and then you listen, and find out what comes back at you."

When he's developing characters, Neil doesn't make lists of personality traits. He approaches character by listening to the way people speak and to what they say, and his characters emerge from the content of their speech.

Dialogue serves the triple purpose of revealing character, advancing plot lines, and providing entertainment. Neil's years as a journalist gave him experience listening to people talk. In transcribing quotes, he learned both to be attentive to the styles and rhythms of individual speakers as well as the skill of rendering natural speech into its more formal, written counterpart: textual dialogue.

People don't speak in real life like they do on the page, so there's an art to writing speech to make it feel real. One of its important tools is **compression.** By trimming down your characters' speech (unless they're loquacious, like Mr. Croup), you can convey realistic sounds without dulling the reader. Take a section of your own dialogue and experiment with cutting it using any of these tools.

- Attack wordiness: see how much you can cut and still retain the original meaning and tone.
- Fine-tune your language by using select sentence fragments—"Sounds great" is more natural than "That sounds great."
- Use contractions when possible—"we'll go together" is more comfortable than "we will go together."
- Trim excess filler words, like "uh" and "well."
- Remember it's unusual for people to call each other by name, so police those areas where your characters call each other by name.
- Also, not everything has to be verbal—body language is a real-life communication tool. Instead of having your character shout "I hate you!", show them kick a chair.
- If your dialogue starts to feel repetitive, put your characters in motion—walking, driving, or distracted by their environment.

WRITING EXERCISE

Ask a friend if you can record them speaking for 20 minutes. Transcribe their speech and practice crafting their sentences into fictional dialogue, using the tools of compression above.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Select a section of dialogue from your work-in-progress and apply some of the compression techniques above. Play around with this. If your section includes mostly dialogue, see if you can add in stage directions or brief bits of exposition to provide some balance.

"Dialogue is character. The way that somebody talks, what they say, how they say it is character. And dialogue has to show character. It also has to show plot. And maybe it can be funny along the way."

On a technical level, there are numerous ways to convey **dialogue** in writing. Just remember that at the heart of dialogue is a character's voice.

Direct dialogue is when you quote the character: "I wish I could see you tomorrow," she said.

Indirect is a narration that doesn't show quotes but often gives the feeling of being there: Had she agreed with him already to meet at the restaurant at six o'clock? She couldn't remember. He'd said he had a meeting at five and it might run over.

Summary tells the reader what happened from a distance: They'd discussed meeting up tomorrow.

Internal monologue, though not strictly a type of dialogue, is a technique that conveys a character's voice on the page. It means letting the reader see a character's thoughts as they happen, and it often shows the things they won't say aloud: She stood in front of the restaurant, wondering if he would be late, hoping he would. She realized suddenly that she didn't want to meet him.

Whether you're new or experienced, *The Fiction Writer's Guide to Dialogue* (2015) by John Hough, Jr. will help you craft dialogue that is authentic and natural. It will also help you avoid many common mistakes.

WRITING EXERCISE

Neil likes to find his characters by listening, so try having a conversation with a character of your own. Use the worksheet at the end of this chapter to help shape the basics and get to know your character through their own voice. You can create a new character now or use the one you created in the Writing Exercise of Chapter 6: Story Case Study: *The Graveyard Book*.

Once you've developed your character above, write a one-page description of them. This can be an informational character bio or part of a scene—whatever feels right. Use any of the following techniques to enhance your description:

- Instead of writing a full physical description, let your reader see the character through a single odd feature—a nickname or a tattoo, for example. How did she get it? What's her history with it? How does she feel about it?

- Choose a big event—good or bad—from your character's past and use it to introduce them. How has this event affected their life today? What are the psychological or physical repercussions? Maybe your character quit politics but they can't stop making deals and trying to impress everyone they meet.

- Identify a significant character trait and write down the ways it can be expressed. Then choose one of those ways and build a scene from it. For example, if your character is mildly autistic and has trouble meeting people's gazes, create a scene for them where they have to look someone in the eye.

- What is your character's favorite space? It can often give you insights to describe their house, kitchen, bedroom, office, car, etc. and why it's the place they feel happiest.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Go back to your protagonist's main desire, which you developed in Chapter 6: Story Case Study: *The Graveyard Book*. Write one page of dialogue in which your protagonist talks about this desire. How would they describe it to someone they trust? Write a brief dialogue between your character and this person.

"It's always a slightly strange process. Because there is something genuinely mad about it. If you are writing good characters, believable characters, glorious, larger-than-life characters—they do take on a sort of a life."

A large part of real-life dialogue is non-verbal, and these cues make their way into fiction through the use of **stage direction,** which is any textual reference to the physical movement of the speakers. The term is borrowed from theater, where such directions are necessary tools to help actors and directors envision the physical set-up of a play. In fiction, stage directions can often do just as much as dialogue to convey a character's mood, frame of mind, or responses. They are highlighted in the sample below.

Scott **came into the room and glanced at the paper**. "They misspelled 'corpse'," he said, **grabbing an English muffin and shoving half of it into his mouth**.

"It's not corpse," Leah said. "C-O-R-P is short for 'corporal.'" She was only eleven, and for that Scott **gave her a smack on the back of the head**.

"Hey!" she cried.

Dad **lowered the paper and gave Scott a warning look**.

It's important to keep a balance between two types of narration: dialogue and exposition. Dialogue refers to the things that characters say, while exposition refers to descriptive narration. If you have a very long section of dialogue, it's good to insert brief sections of exposition to keep your reader grounded in time and place—and the reverse is true as well, so break up passages of exposition with brief dialogues. Generally, dialogue tends to speed up the pacing of your story, while exposition will slow things down. **Pacing** means how fast or slow the story is moving *for the reader*. This is determined by the length of a scene and the speed at which you distribute information to your reader. To prevent the pacing of your story from becoming monotonous, strive for a balance between dialogue and exposition.

WRITING EXERCISE

Pick one of the topics below—or create one of your own—and write a brief dialogue between your character and someone else. Make them disagree. Add in descriptive sentences throughout until you feel that it's balanced.

- The contents of the magician's car

- Whether jinnis are real

- Purses for men
- Magical power in the everyday world
- Ancient aliens

"You may need to write about types of people who you do not know. And for them, my advice to anybody starting out is just go find them, go talk to them. Talk to people."

In terms of developing characters, Neil practices a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, you should listen to and trust your characters. You'll need to know what they want, and be flexible enough to accept that their wants might change, and that your novel may take on new dimensions or move in directions that you weren't expecting. On the other hand, you should also research characters. Go out and meet people to feed the compost heap that helps develop your cast. Being a good writer is knowing the times when you are being called upon to imagine, and when you need to immerse yourself in new things.

Although characters come from the writer's head, fully-developed characters can seem to take on a life of their own and even begin to feel somewhat independent of you. Because characters spring from the self, your job is to discover the places in yourself that resonate with your characters. Don't be afraid of the many dimensions of experience you bring to this work, try to accept that part of you may understand the mind of a murderer, for example, and challenge yourself to inhabit the interior worlds of strangers whose gender, age, or cultural background are unlike yours. The better you are able to make these leaps of empathy and insight, the stronger your characters will be on the page.

"You are going into yourself. And you have to not be afraid of yourself. You have to be willing, if you're writing a murderer, if you're a bad person, to go and find that part of you that is the bad person, that is the murderer, that would take pleasure in this thing, and go, okay, what would you say? What would you do? Who are you?"

Ideally, your characters will be distinct enough to be memorable, but for all those minor characters who are emerging in your novel, it's good practice to provide hints that will help the reader distinguish who each character is, so they can remember their various story arcs. Neil often gives his secondary characters a quirk to make them unique and memorable—and thus easily recognizable. He calls these traits **funny hats** and they include:

Physical quirks: In *Neverwhere,* Old Bailey wears a coat of feathers.

Verbal style: Mr. Croup is characterized by his loquaciousness.

A memorable name: If it feels right, move your character out of "Jill" territory and into something different: Lady Door Portico.

Extended metaphor: Richard Mayhew thinks Mr. Croup is fox-like, and this imagery recurs throughout the novel.

Past event: Sometimes a minor character is best-known by a single life event, such as "the girl whose family died" or "the widower."

Last appearance in the story: Easily reference a character by reminding the reader of the last time we saw them. "She recognized the man from the piano store."

Writer's Digest Books' incredibly useful handbook, *Creating Characters: The Complete Guide to Populating Your Fiction* (2014), provides basic and advanced techniques for handling everything character-related, from dialogue to story arcs. For a more detailed look at character development in all types of fiction, read David Corbett's *The Art of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV* (2013).

WRITING EXERCISE

Go to a busy, public place where you can observe other people. Choose one person and invent a few details about them. What's their name? Why are they there? How do they feel? Now write a one-page description of them. Find one detail that will make them distinct for a reader. Show their thoughts, but try to blend it in with the world around them. Don't be afraid to make their inner world completely different from their appearance or surroundings.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Make a list of your characters and give each one a "funny hat." Use some of the techniques mentioned in the Learn More section above.

Pretend a blind person is describing your main character after having met them. How would they explain your character using the other senses? How sympathetic would your character be toward their blindness? Would they be thoughtful, clumsy, rude?

Neverwhere

Richard Mayhew
A businessman who discovers London Below by helping a young woman named Door.

Lady Door of the House of the Arch
A young noblewoman from London Below who is searching for her family's killers and trying to preserve her world from a growing malicious force.

Mr. Croup
Short, brainy assassin hired to finish a job. He is described repeatedly with fox imagery.

Mr. Vandemar
Tall, dull-witted, an assassin partner to Mr. Croup who is associated with wolf imagery.

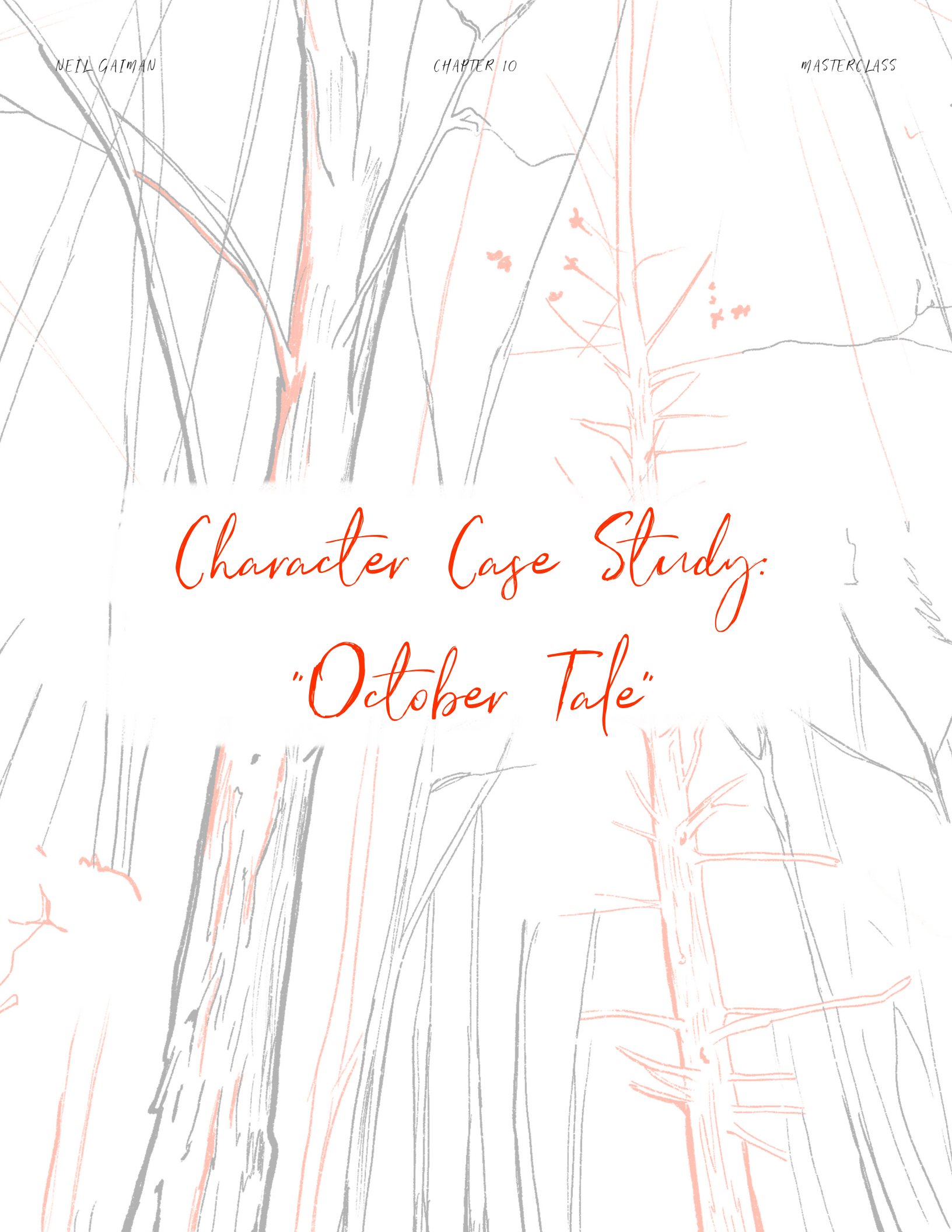
Marquis de Carabas
Door's friend, a dodgy character who may be able to help her escape the assassins.

Old Bailey
A friend of Marquis' who owes him a life-debt. Like a pigeon, he dresses in feathers and lives on rooftops.

WORKSHEET: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Have your character answer the following questions. Make them as long or short as you like.

How do you feel about your looks? Describe yourself.	How old are you?	What three adjectives best describe you?
How do you feel about money?	What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you?	Do you see your parents regularly?
What three objects best describe your childhood? Explain.	Are you religious?	What scientific invention really rocks your world?
What's your worst pet peeve?	What's your favorite food?	Who's the most important person in the world to you right now?



Character Case Study: "October Tale"

CHAPTER 10

Character Case Study: "October Tale"

"A wish-granting genie with no wishes to grant, wandering around a small American town shortly before Halloween, is an odd thing that doesn't quite resolve. It's like a little musical passage that you need to keep reading, because you want to know how this is going to end."

One of the most common pieces of writing advice—"show, don't tell"—is a good rule to keep in mind when introducing characters. You have a choice between **direct characterization**, which is a simple description that tells your reader what a person is like—"Jane was a horrible girlfriend"—and **indirect characterization**, which creates a scene that shows exactly what makes Jane such a horrible partner. The second method is usually more powerful when introducing characters because it allows the reader to experience them firsthand. It requires more of the reader, asking them to the do the work of visualizing the scene and forcing them to ask questions about the character. Neil's jinni coming out of the lamp is indirect characterization: "I stretched my neck to get out the last of the cramp. It didn't just feel good. It felt great actually. I'd been squashed up inside that lamp for so long." It gives a sense of the jinni's relief at being free, and at his previous isolation and loneliness. It wouldn't have been as compelling if Neil had written, "The jinni was relieved to be free."

As you saw in Chapter 5: Developing the Story, one of the keys to keeping a reader's interest is to get them to ask questions about your characters and the situations they face. A common technique for doing this is withholding information, giving the reader just enough to help them understand what's going on, to hint at dangers or a possible situation, but not giving the full story. By painting your story elements in "**light brushstrokes**," you give the reader a clear picture but withhold just enough to keep them guessing at what will happen next. In her book *Word Painting* (1999), Rebecca McClanahan calls this the "striptease" method of drawing out information. Give the reader one detail at a time, luring them toward a greater picture.

WRITING EXERCISES

Using the character you developed in Chapter 9: Dialogue and Character, start to create a scene with them. Neil points to an interesting way to introduce characters: by putting them in an unfamiliar situation. Usually, this creates tension and gives you an opportunity to make your characters come to life for a reader. Come up with a situation that is challenging or emotional for your character and write a one-page scene in your notebook.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Choose a scene from your novel-in-progress in which your characters encounter something interesting. Perhaps they are arriving at a new and dangerous place, or maybe they find something they've been searching for. Instead of telling the reader all at once what they find, use light brushstrokes to build tension. Begin with an incomplete description—just enough to tease the reader's interest. Experiment with just how much information you can withhold and still have the scene make sense to a reader.

Look over the places in your novel where you've introduced a character. Do any of these sections rely too heavily on direct characterization? Is there a way you could show the reader more about your character without having to explain it? Try creating a short scene—even a pulse of a scene will do—in which you reveal a major character trait through action rather than description. Remember that both "show" and "tell" are necessary in any story, it's just a matter of finding the right balance for you.

"The story in which somebody gets to learn better, somebody gets to change their mind, somebody gets to see the world differently—is a beautiful shape for a story."

Robert A. Heinlein said that there were two basic ways to write science fiction—you can write about people or about gadgets. Regarding the people stories, he believed there were three basic types:

- Boy-meets-girl is any story where the major dramatic question involves romance.
- The Little Tailor is any story about a protagonist who goes from zero to hero (or vice versa).
- The man-who-learned-better is what interested Neil in writing "October Tale," in which a jinni gets to see the world a different way.

WRITING EXERCISE

While building your story, you want to encourage confluence. Go back to your compost heap and read over your entries. See if anything you wrote there makes you think of something else. Perhaps an entry will stir an old memory, or make you think of something that happened to you recently. The connections don't have to be logical—trust your instincts.

AN EXCERPT FROM

OCTOBER TALE

Neil Gaiman

"That feels good," I said, and I stretched my neck to get out the last of the cramp.

It didn't just feel good, it felt great, actually. I'd been squashed up inside that lamp for so long. You start to think that nobody's ever going to rub it again.

"You're a genie," said the young lady with the polishing-cloth in her hand.

"I am. You're a smart girl, toots. What gave me away?"

"The appearing in a puff of smoke," she said. "And you look like a genie. You've got the turban and the pointy shoes.

I folded my arms and blinked. Now I was wearing blue jeans, grey sneakers, and a faded grey sweater: the male uniform of this time and this place. I raised a hand to my forehead, and I bowed deeply.

"I am the genie of the lamp," I told her. "Rejoice, O fortunate one. I have it in my power to grant you three wishes. And don't try the 'I wish for more wishes' thing – I won't play and you'll lose a wish. Right. Go for it."

I folded my arms again.

"No," she said. "I mean thanks and all that, but it's fine. I'm good."

"Honey," I said. "Toots. Sweetie. Perhaps you misheard me. I'm a genie. And the three wishes? We're talking anything you want. You ever dreamed of flying? I can give you wings. You want to be wealthy, richer than Croesus? You want power? Just say it. Three wishes. Whatever you want."

"Like I said," she said, "Thanks. I'm fine. Would you like something to drink? You must be parched after spending so much time in that lamp. Wine? Water? Tea?"

"Uh..." Actually, now she came to mention it, I was thirsty. "Do you have any mint tea?"

She made me some mint tea in a teapot that was almost a twin to the lamp in which I'd spent the greater part of the last thousand years.

"Thank you for the tea."

"No problem."

"But I don't get it. Everyone I've ever met, they start asking for things. A fancy house. A harem of gorgeous women – not that you'd want that, of course..."

"I might," she said. "You can't just make assumptions about people. Oh, and don't call me toots, or sweetie or any of those things. My name's Hazel."

"Ah!" I understood. "You want a beautiful woman then? My apologies. You have but to wish. " I folded my arms.

"No," she said. "I'm good. No wishes. How's the tea?"

I told her that the mint tea was the finest I had ever tasted.

She asked me when I had started feeling a need to grant people's wishes, and whether I felt a desperate need to please. She asked about my mother, and I told her that she could not judge me as she would judge mortals, for I was a djinn, powerful and wise, magical and mysterious.

She asked me if I liked hummus, and when I said that I did, she toasted a pita bread, and sliced it up, for me to dip into the hummus.

I dipped my bread slices into the hummus, and ate it with delight. The hummus gave me an idea.

"Just make a wish," I said, helpfully, "and I could have a meal fit for a sultan brought in to you. Each dish would be finer than the one before, and all served upon golden plates. And you could keep the plates afterwards."

"It's good," she said, with a smile. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

We walked together through the town. It felt good to stretch my legs after so many years in the lamp. We wound

up in a public park, sitting on a bench by a lake. It was warm, but gusty, and the autumn leaves fell in flurries each time the wind blew.

I told Hazel about my youth as a djinn, of how we used to eavesdrop on the angels and how they would throw comets at us if they spied us listening. I told her of the bad days of the djinn-wars, and how King Suleiman had imprisoned us inside hollow objects: bottles, lamps, clay pots, that kind of thing.

She told me of her parents, who were both killed in the same plane crash, and who had left her the house. She told me of her job, illustrating children's books, a job she had backed into, accidentally, at the point she realised she would never be a really competent medical illustrator, and of how happy she became whenever she was sent a new book to illustrate. She told me she taught life drawing to adults at the local community college one evening a week.

I saw no obvious flaw in her life, no hole that she could fill by wishing, save one.

"Your life is good," I told her. "But you have no one to share it with. Wish, and I will bring you the perfect man. Or woman. A film star. A rich... person..."

"No need. I'm good," she said.

We walked back to her house, past houses dressed for Hallowe'en.

"This is not right," I told her. "People always want things."

"Not me. I've got everything I need."

"Then what do I do?"

She thought for a moment. Then she pointed at her front yard. "Can you rake the leaves?"

"Is that your wish?"

"Nope. Just something you could do while I'm getting our dinner ready."

I raked the leaves into a heap by the hedge, to stop the wind from blowing it apart. After dinner, I washed up the dishes. I spent the night in Hazel's spare bedroom. It wasn't that she didn't want help. She let me help. I ran errands for her, picked up art supplies and groceries. On days she had been painting for a long time, she let me rub her neck and shoulders. I have good, firm hands.

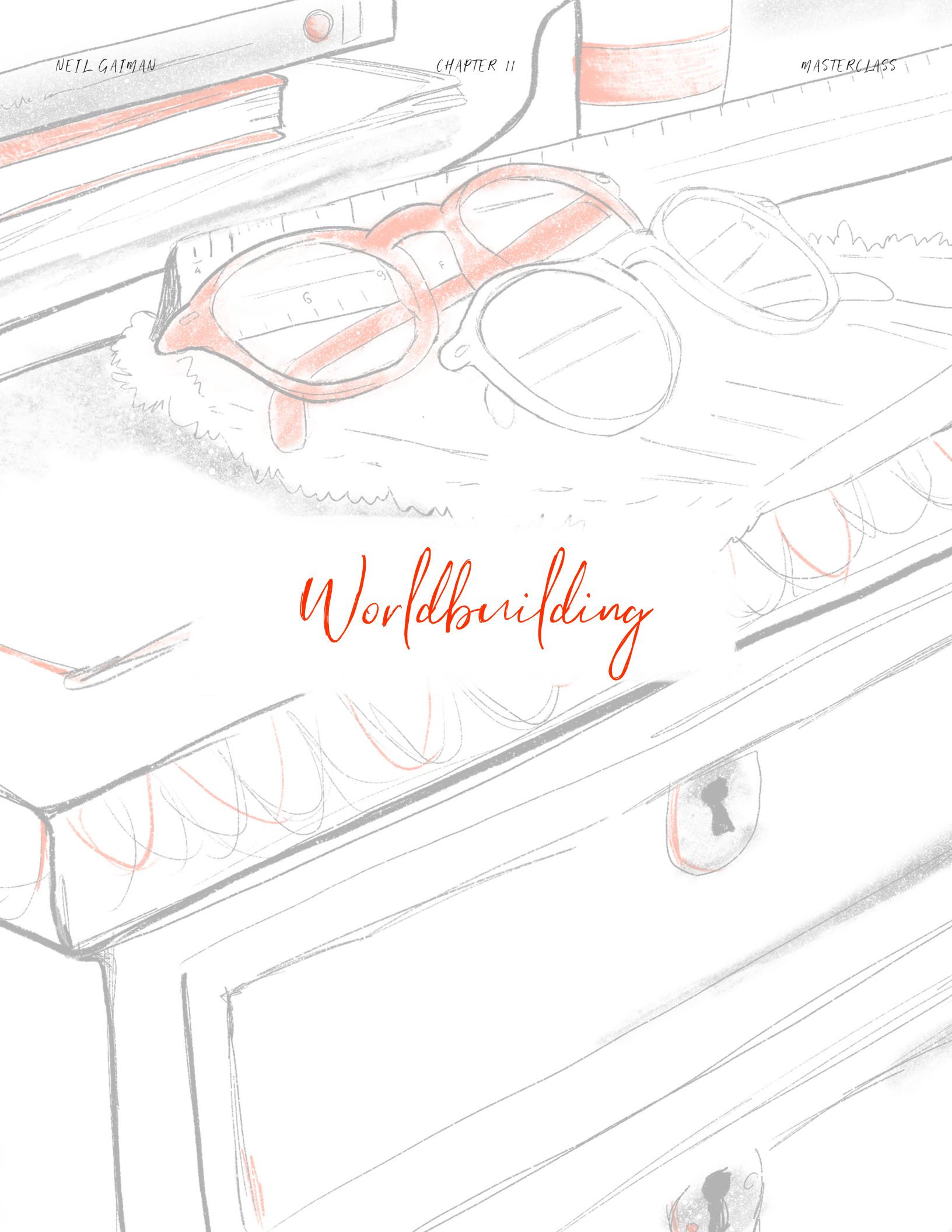
Shortly before Thanksgiving I moved out of the spare bedroom, across the hall, into the main bedroom, and Hazel's bed.

I watched her face this morning as she slept. I stared at the shapes her lips make when she sleeps. The creeping sunlight touched her face, and she opened her eyes and stared at me, and she smiled.

"You know what I never asked," she said. "Is what about you? What would you wish for if I asked what your three wishes were?"

I thought about it for a moment. I put my arm around her, and she snuggled her head into my shoulder.

"It's okay," I told her. "I'm good."



Worldbuilding

CHAPTER 11

Worldbuilding

"The worlds that we build in fiction, they're soap bubbles. They can pop really easily....But that one little moment of reality, that one thing that seems to be absolutely true, gives credence, and gives credibility to all of the things that you don't say."

Sometimes the first step in writing a novel is developing your world. This is not just the actual landscape that your characters will inhabit, but the tone of your story, its major preoccupations and themes, as well as the nature of its morality. You will probably not know all of this up front, but setting down the basics will help you start writing. Research plays a vital role in this development, but you'll also refer to your compost heap and sources of inspiration. Don't be afraid to borrow details from your own life. Leaning on your personal experience and knowledge of things is one of the keys to crafting believable places. Even the smallest moments can help you visualize a world more clearly, and you may find yourself answering odd questions, like where do your fantasy characters go to the bathroom? Along the way, you and your characters will learn the rules and nature of your world.

One part of worldbuilding happens with characters and actions, but a critical part also happens with description. When you're starting out, don't limit yourself. Explore your world to its furthest reaches. Only later will you need to edit. Along the way, focus on the memorable details, and keep them grounded in a character's sensory experience. Everyone probably knows what a tree looks like, so if you're describing one, tell the reader what makes it different or why it's important for your characters.

"There's always a tiny part of you, as a writer, who, metaphorically, or really, is standing there with a notebook, just taking notes."

One of the best tools for revealing your world is having *your characters* observe and respond to its features. You'll want to let your reader know what it feels like for them, what it sounds and smells and tastes like. No matter what kind of world you're creating, this technique can bring more vividness to your writing. But first, you'll want to determine your narrative point of view. Most novels are written in one of two styles: First person, in which the narrator tells their story, ("I turned one hundred years old last week."), or third person, which is the author telling the tale ("He turned one hundred.") While the former can provide

intimacy, it is also limited by the perceptive abilities of the character, who is confined to report only what she would realistically know or think. Third person can offer more flexibility—you can be everywhere, help your reader see everything, and switch between various characters' stories. You can go from complete omniscience (a narrative voice that has access to all information in the novel) to what's called a limited or close third point of view (a narrative that adheres to a single character). This latter style gives you the ability to be inside a character's thoughts, feelings, and sensations, which can give readers a deeper experience of character and scene.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Practice Neil's tip for smuggling details from your own life into your writing. On a page in your notebook, write down three details that remain memorable to you from recent experiences. These can be large or small things—maybe they even seem unimportant, yet you remember them. Be sure to describe them using sensory detail.

Choose one of the details above and have the character you created in Chapter 9: Dialogue and Character describe the detail as if it were part of their own life. Try narrating in first person and third person.

"As far as I'm concerned, all fiction is fantasy. It is all made up. You are creating people who didn't exist, or didn't exist like that, and putting them into situations that they were never in, making them say things they never said. It is an act of magical creation to do that."

Use any of Neil's tools for enhancing your worldbuilding skills:

Create a map of your world. No matter what kind of artistic skills you have, actually drawing your own world can make it more familiar and trigger fresh insights and ideas.

Avoid clichés and rip-offs. You may absolutely love Tolkien's Middle Earth, but it's been re-hashed shamelessly for decades, enough to have become a cliché of its own.

Use confluence. Reach for fresh ideas by combining new things to create something unique.

Come up with details from your own life for inspiration. Make a list of the top ten places you've visited and loved. It doesn't matter what they are, as long as you loved them. Next, make a list of the places you'd like to visit. Then come up with ways to incorporate the best of all these places into your world.

Revisit your notebook. Go back to your compost heap and look for things that inspire you. Sometimes a single word or object can trigger a whole scene or setting in your world.

Remember the rules. Every world has rules, and ideally your characters will discover those rules the hard way. Come up with a quick list of rules that might exist in your world, and remember that you'll probably discover more as you go along.

Do research. If you know you want a scene in a library for your novel, start visiting libraries. You may know everything about libraries already, but being on the scene will give you critical sensory details that you can use later.

Go back to your influences for inspiration. Make a list of your favorite childhood books and authors and try to recall what you loved most about them. Write all those things down, and then brainstorm ways to use that inspiration while avoiding any clichés.

WRITING EXERCISES

Below you'll find Neil's "weird questions" from the class as well as others designed to help with your worldbuilding. Answer any of the following that strike you:

Where do people go to the toilet?

Where do they get food from?

How much food does it take to feed a small city?

How much farmland? Where are these farms?

Where does the food come from? Where does it come in?

What does poverty look like in your world?

"I think that the joy of world building in fiction is honestly the joy of getting to play God. Because as an author, you get to build the world."

You're probably familiar with the literary giants of fantasy worldbuilding—J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, George R.R. Martin—so check out the following, lesser-known greats whose prodigious skills in worldbuilding are worth a few hours of your time and contemplation:

- Naomi Novik: The Temeraire series, which began with *His Majesty's Dragon* (2006), combines nineteenth century naval adventure with fantasy dragons. Novik is known for her worldbuilding, especially her re-imagining of history.
- Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013) showcases historical New York in such a realistic light that you almost forget golems and jinnis aren't real.
- Rin Chupeco could have taken a page from the Neil Gaiman handbook with *The Bone Witch* (2017), which features a world that embraces horror and darkness.
- Leigh Bardugo's Grisha world, which began with *Shadow and Bone* (2012) is masterful. She deftly weaves in all kinds of elements to give her world a full and realistic feeling.
- N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth series features a world driven by climate change. Read *The Fifth Season* (2015) to see how a highly-developed world can be conveyed on the page without drowning the reader in information.

WRITING EXERCISE

Use the worldbuilding worksheet at the end of this chapter to begin developing your world.

"You need to understand, especially if you're creating anything in the world of the fantastic, what the rules of your world are."

Even if the world you're building is exactly like our world, it's going to have **rules**. In the real world, those rules are built-in, since most readers already know what they are. In a fantasy world, the rules may be different—and part of what makes your setting interesting. Maybe magic works differently in your world, or your characters must obey certain laws. Because your

reader doesn't know those laws already, you'll have to make them clear. (Ideally, only the important ones.) It's good not to spell them out directly to your reader, rather let your characters grapple with them. In the best cases, rules create drama and character conflict, so let the rules become apparent from your characters' experiences.

If you're going to have magic in your world, know that a lot of writers argue that magic has to *make sense* or have some sort of internal logic, even cause-and-effect behaviors (all of which undermine very old notions of magic). For those who argue this, placing pseudo-natural **restrictions on magic** is practically a requirement. You don't have to create a super-system that can stand up to scientific scrutiny, but it's good to remember that there are different types of magic. To create any system, consider these laws of magic for crafting a story with this trope.

WRITING EXERCISE

Take the character you developed in Chapter 9: Dialogue and Character (or create a new one now), and imagine them at the location you described above. Begin writing a scene in which the character encounters a problem *that is related to the rules of the setting*. This can be a real-world rule, like gravity or the fact that people can't levitate, or you can make up one of your own. Bend the rules of our world, or create something wildly different. For now, you just need one rule—and try to make it a tough one. Your character should have a problem with it. For example, your character is on a distant space colony. The primary rule is that the air is unbreathable. Create a situation where your character has to go into the unbreathable air without life support. What would happen to them? How long would they survive? What sort of life-hack could they use to get to safety? Let the descriptive details emerge from the character's sensory experience or action. Mix predictable details with those that will surprise the reader.

"So a lot of what you do in world building is you do your homework. You do your research. Go on walks. See things. All of that—and then take notes."

A popular adage for **research** is that worldbuilding should be like an iceberg—90 percent of what you learn or know will remain beneath the surface, only 10 percent should make it onto the page. Often, it will only take a few small details to convince your reader of the credibility of your world. For example, in *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Ray Bradbury introduces a quiet night in a colony on Mars, where "here or there a late supper was prepared in tables where lava bubbled silvery and hushed." Bradbury doesn't explain why lava is silver on Mars, or why it bubbles near tables, but his confidence with this intriguing detail suggests to readers that he knows his world extremely well.

WRITING EXERCISE

Go back to the character you developed in Chapter 9: Dialogue and Character. Imagine a personal space for them—for example, their bedroom, car, or office—and list ten objects that you would find there. Choose the most interesting object and blend it into a description of the space.

"Always know more than you tell."

It has never been easier to find inspiration for worldbuilding. In the early stages, when you're creating mental images, build photo boards on Pinterest, search Instagram for places, or go to Google Street View for actual location information. (The latter has galleries for everything from natural wonders to world-famous

landmarks.) The CIA's World Factbook provides extensive information on every country in the world, and don't forget National Geographic for inspiration on locales and cultures. Once you've laid the groundwork, your research needs may become more specific. Go to your local library, your state library system, or search the digital collections at the Library of Congress. The Internet Archive has an Open Library with tens of thousands of free online titles. When you need specialist advice, ask questions on Quora or Reddit, or reach out to real life specialists via phone or mail, or even in person. And remember, you can find almost anything on YouTube. Finally, you'll want to keep your material in order, so download a research-organizing tool, like Evernote or Google Keep. Whatever you research, keep in mind that you should love it. You're going to be spending a lot of time with this world, so shape it to your tastes and interests.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Consider the following points about your world and write down ideas about how they might relate to your story. In your notebook, note any research interests that arise on a page titled "Research Topics."

A historical event related to your world

An artist, poet, or writer related to your theme

A clothing style

Landscape

A branch of science

A religious or spiritual belief

Important physical locations in that world

"I will always jot down things, little ideas. I may never go back to them. I may never see them again. But once they're jotted down, they're rotting away, usefully, on the compost heap of my imagination. And they're there if I need them."

Occasionally, the physical setting of a novel is not as important as the characters. Maybe your entire novel takes place in one room. Your characters are your "world." In this case, treat your characters as research interests and begin investigating their psychology and lives just as you would any topic. Use the following questions to generate research topics on each character.

- Where does this character live? Does he/she have a family?
- Where does the character work? How do they feel about their job?
- What kinds of friends and social life does this person have?
- How much vacation time does this character have, and where does he/she go to unwind?
- Is this character religious? Does he/she feel strongly about it?
- What interests this character most of all in the world? And how does he/she pursue this interest?

WRITING EXERCISE

On a page in your notebook titled "Research Topics," note the things that are most important to you in developing the setting and story of your novel. Write a list of all the topics in order from most important to least.

WRITING EXERCISE

Neil spent many years visiting graveyards before writing *The Graveyard Book*. Visit a location you've never been to before—either an actual place from a setting you've chosen or simply a place that you find interesting. When you arrive at the location, don't record or photograph or write anything down, just spend some time absorbing it through your senses. Pay attention to the things that strike you most. Go home later and write a description of the place. Remember to include the sensory details—what it felt and smelled and sounded like.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

On an unlined sheet of paper, create a map of your world. Pay attention to detail. Show landscape features like mountains and lakes and roads; mark cities if you have them, and note regions and counties, too. Try to match the feel of your setting. If it's a magical world, show features pertaining to this—a dark magician's fortress, for example.

WORKSHEET: MY WORLD

Answer these basic questions to begin developing your world:

Do they have magic? How do they treat science? How do the two relate?

What is technology like in your world?

What kind of governments exist? Does it have a court system? Law enforcement? A central government? You don't need to understand all the politics, just know who has power and how they treat it.

How much inequality exists in your world?

What are the important historical events that have shaped this world?

How much can doctors do to heal people?

What languages do people speak? How many are there?

What are the rituals of this world?

What is the most significant feature of this world? A building? A landscape? A lifestyle? Describe it here.

Where is your world?

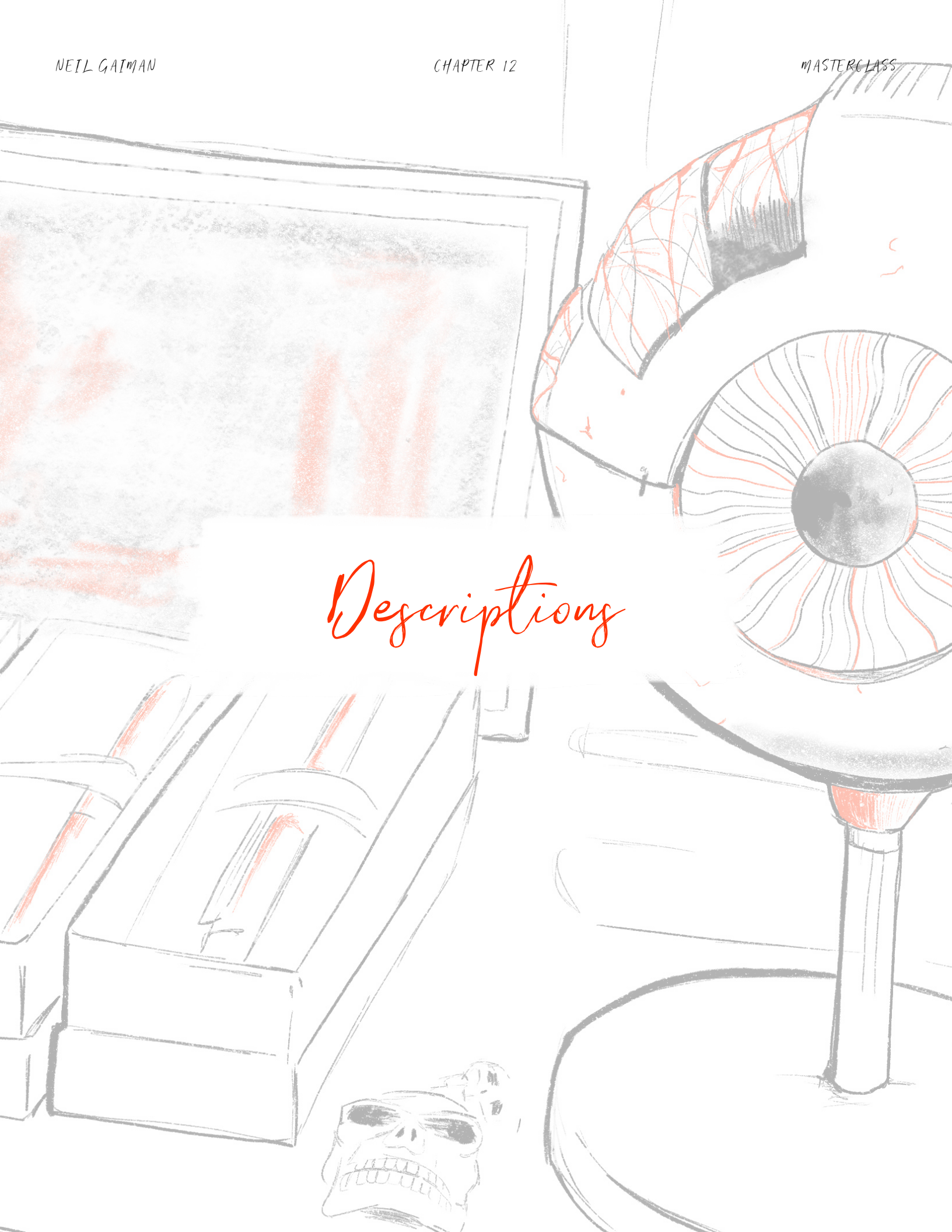
Describe the emotional tone of the world in three adjectives. (i.e. dark, brooding, dangerous.)

What season is it when your story begins? What is the weather like?

What are the elements of your setting like during this time? For example, was that business closed 15 years ago? Did that street have a different name then? Was that statue erected before your characters arrived there?

Does your story center around a major world event—i.e. war, natural disaster? Describe this here.

What cultural details belong to this time? Consider music, literature, entertainment, clothing styles, food trends, lifestyle trends, and big national events or crises that shape public sentiments.



Descriptions

CHAPTER 12

Descriptions

"I do not hold with anybody who says 'no exposition, no description.' You describe what needs to be described. You explain what needs to be explained. You are God.... There are no rules, other than tell a great story."

Two basic types of narration make up exposition. In a **scene,** you show the characters in action or having a conversation. For the reader, it's like being in the action. In **dramatic narration** (or "summary"), you simply describe what the characters did, while the events you're describing seem to occur offstage. You can think of this as the difference between "showing" and "telling," and as you saw in Chapter 10: Character Case Study, you should find a balance to both types of prose—one that is suited to you. To keep a balanced pace, it's good to switch between scene and dramatic narration. Use scenes to speed up the pacing, and be sure to choose the ones that are interesting or necessary. Use dramatic narration when you want to describe things or to move over the less exciting bits. For a thorough study with plenty of concrete examples, see "Showing and Telling" in Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (1982).

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Choose a random chapter from your novel-in-progress. Go over the prose and look carefully at your word choices, getting rid of generic words and choosing concise ones. Now with a highlighter, mark the passages that are scenes, leaving the passages that are dramatic narration unmarked. Is there an imbalance between the two types of narration? If so, add some dramatic narration into scenes, or vice versa. Remember that scenes tend to speed the pacing, and dramatic narration tends to slow it down.

"Find one thing that is memorable, one thing that's important, one thing that's different, and then look at that using a sense. It may be touch, it may be smell. Smell is often ignored in writing, and smell in the real world is subliminal, rolling, evocative, and very, very likely to take you to very strange places."

In his book *The Art of Fiction* (1983), John Gardner says that descriptive details are like the elements of a mathematical proof—they are necessary to convince

the reader. The writer "gives us such details about the streets, stores, weather, politics, and concerns of [the setting] and such details about the looks, gestures, and experiences of his characters that we cannot help believing that the story he tells us is true." Specific and concrete details are critical to successful storytelling, and the best way to make details concrete is by *appealing to the reader's senses*.

Neil uses the following techniques to rev up descriptive prose.

Focus on your character's sensory experience. Use the strongest description sense for the scene. If your character is in a gutter, smell may be more provocative than sight.

Choose memorable details. As Neil said, most people already know what a tree looks like, so describe a tree that has a unique feature, or explain why a particular tree is important to your character.

Find the emotion in it. Description can be dry, but if it carries emotional weight for you or your characters, be sure to include that to engage the reader.

Make your descriptions do more than one thing. You're not just describing a tree, you're moving the story forward by creating a sense of foreboding or developing the character who is looking at the tree.

Reveal less. As you saw in Chapter 10: Character Case Study, painting pictures in light brushstrokes can be evocative because you're asking the reader to do the work of imagining.

Consider withholding information. By revealing details slowly over the course of a scene, you can generate curiosity and interest in your reader.

Do a cold open. Opening your scenes in the middle of the action draws your reader into the story right away. You can then weave in description throughout the scene.

Follow your character's natural attention. Most people take in their surroundings with a traveling gaze, so imagine where their attention will rove. Looking at the world through their eyes in a plausible way will add a subtle effect of believability.

WRITING EXERCISES

In your notebook, make a list of things that disgust you or that you find ugly. Don't be ashamed, just be honest and list as many things as you can think of until you fill the page. On a separate page, write a scene with your character, incorporating the things that disgust you. Stick to concrete, sensory detail, and experiment with this. What happens when you add in too much information? Is it better to show less?

You can do the following assignment by yourself or in a group. On a page in your notebook titled "Green" come up with as many adjectives or descriptive words as you can think of that convey the idea of green. Aim for at least 50 words. Sort the contents of your page into positive greens and negative greens. Do this with other adjectives.

Humor

CHAPTER 13

Humor

"Humor is that moment where you see something that you've always thought, but now somebody has articulated it. And they've articulated it in a way that you've never seen before. And sometimes it's just the joy of the unexpected."

Humor is another crucial tool in setting the tone. It often involves subverting reader expectations, and so leans heavily on surprise and the unexpected. This requires a basic understanding of cliché and how to twist it around, essentially allowing you to generate a reader expectation and then undermine it. Sometimes words themselves are funny, and just as often, their placement in a sentence can make a difference.

While **clichés** are something most writers try to avoid, it's important to recognize them. Humor relies in part on twisting a cliché—transforming or undermining it. You do this by setting up an expectation based on the cliché and then providing a surprise outcome. For example: "What doesn't kill you makes you stranger." In humor writing, this process is called reforming.

You can also reform with structural elements. The whole idea of genre is based on a series of expectations in a story. Genre stories hit those expectations, but attempt to do so in a way that feels fresh—usually with new characters, new settings, or new twists. Sometimes these novel features have a humorous effect. For example, Guy Ritchie's 2009 *Sherlock Holmes* movie took a staid, nineteenth-century character and added CGI to make him a *Matrix*-style fighter, which many audiences found amusing.

You'll probably recognize most clichéd phrases—by definition, they're overused and easy to spot. Story clichés are a little less obvious. These involve stock characters, plot tools, and story structures that readers have overdosed on. All clichés are dependent on your age, background, and cultural context. Maybe comic books are remarkably fresh to you the first time you read one, but people who've read lots of them will spot clichés more quickly.

A **trope** is a story element that any audience will easily recognize. As Robert McKee points out in *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997), "After thousands of years of storytelling, no story is so different that it has no similarity to anything else ever written." While a trope is an element of storytelling, a cliché is when that element has become overdone. Your storyline may have been done before, but that shouldn't stop you from doing it. It simply means you'll have to work harder to make the story feel fresh.

WRITING EXERCISES

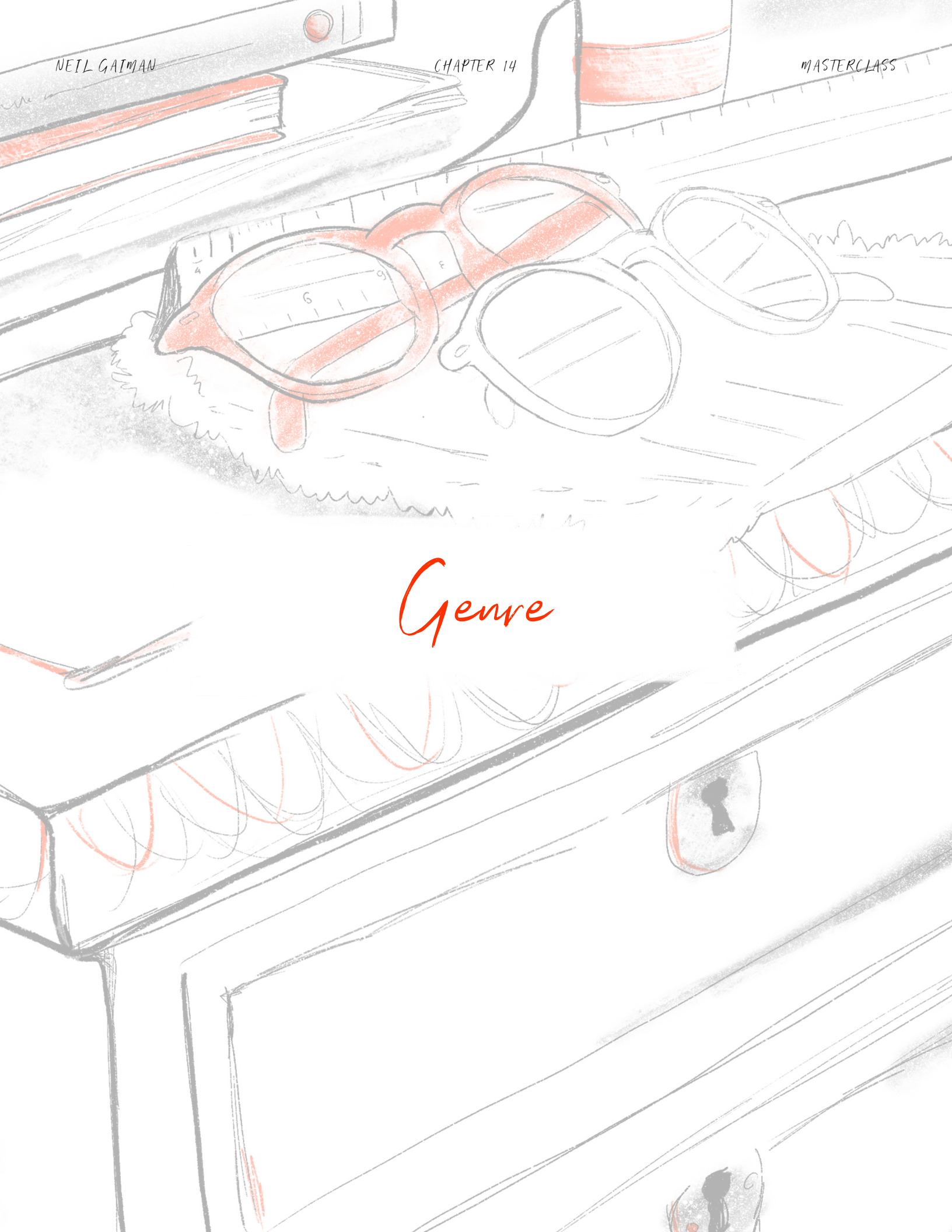
Come up with a clichéd character or choose one from the list below. On one page, describe the character or a scene with the character in it, using any of the humor techniques from this chapter.

- The old wise man who magically has the one tool a protagonist needs to save himself/herself/the universe
- The evil, vain queen who wants to destroy anything good
- The chosen one
- The evil villain (Bonus: include his inept sidekick)
- The abusive, alcoholic father who beats his wife
- The prostitute with a heart of gold
- The thug with a heart of gold
- The disillusioned private detective/police officer

"For me, humor, whether it's broad or whether it's subtle, is always vital."

Consider using one of Neil's humor techniques or any of the ones Neil borrowed from Terry Pratchett:

- Surprise the reader. Twist a cliché or undermine any expectation you've set up.
- Put your funny expressions at the end of a sentence. Humor is often a release of tension, so the sentence builds that tension, and the pay-off happens most naturally at the end.
- Use contrast. Are your characters in a terrifying situation? Add something light, like a man obsessing about his briefcase instead of the T-Rex looming behind him.
- Find funny words. Some words are just funnier than others, so make a list of those that amuse you the most.
- Figgin—a story element that promises to be something horrible or disgusting but which turns out to be humorous, and yet later has a pay-off, or a moment where the item becomes important to the plot.
- Sherbet lemon—minor details you put in a text to make the reader smile. These small pulses are in the text just for humor; they don't necessarily have a pay-off later.



Genre

CHAPTER 14

Genre

"There is a difference between a novel set in the intelligence community and a spy story. And if you don't understand that, you will wind up disappointing your readers, confusing your publishers, and making a general mess of things."

Readers are always looking for something fresh, so you must sail against the expected, but at the same time, readers expect certain things. To navigate these tricky waters, you'll need to understand reader expectations, which means having a grasp of the genre your story belongs to. Only once you've mastered the promises you make will you be able to subvert your audience's expectations and provide the kind of surprises that readers adore.

Any genre—or category of story—is made up of **conventions**. These are specific characters, events, settings, or outcomes that define the type of story you're telling—*and that the reader will be expecting*. For example, a romance is generally made up of two people who fall in love and who cannot express or fulfill that love until the end of the story. You must assume that your audience understands genre thoroughly, and therefore you must understand it more. In every scene you write, you are raising a question or making a promise to your reader. Most people know instinctively what promises are being made. If you've got a dead body in chapter one, and an investigator comes to look at the scene, you're making an implicit promise to the reader that they're going to find out how that person died. You must be able to anticipate the audience's reactions and expectations—only then can you keep their interest and deliver surprise.

When studying the conventions of the genre you're writing in, consider the following elements:

The type of protagonist: Most genres will have a "stock" lead character. A crime drama has an investigator, usually someone gritty, flawed, but eager to see justice done.

Your antagonist: Genre will often determine how badly your bad guy acts. A mystery villain may want to murder a single person, but a thriller antagonist is usually plotting to wipe out the human race.

Secondary characters: This category includes anything from prominent sidekicks to unnamed minor characters. In high fantasy, for example, readers will be expecting elderly, magical helpers, while in crime dramas, a sidekick is often a flat character.

Tone: Readers associate certain moods with certain types of stories. Thrillers tend to be dark and engrossing, they very seldom include comedic elements.

The set-up: Most genres begin with expected set-up scenes. In romance, you meet the two lovers, often separately. In action adventure, you meet a hero in the midst of doing something physically demanding or heroic.

The catalyst: Early in most stories, a powerful change will initiate the main conflict for your protagonist. In horror, an innocent family might move into a haunted house.

The resolution: The details of your story's climax will depend on your story elements, but genre will often determine whether that climax turns out well for your characters.

Another type of convention is a **set piece**, which is an important scene that requires planning. The phrase is borrowed from filmmaking and is a remnant of the days when individual sets had to be built for movies. A scene had to be critical enough to warrant the expense of building an entire set. Eventually, the term came to refer to any scene toward which a story's momentum is driving. (Alfred Hitchcock called these moments "crescendos.") In general, a "set piece" refers to an expected moment in a particular genre—usually one that the reader or viewer can see coming. For example, one of the big action scenes in the *The Matrix* (1999) shows protagonist Neo and his mentor Morpheus training to fight. The scene is a set piece from martial arts movies—in particular, *Tai Chi Master* (1993) and *Fist of Legend* (1994)—that borrows specific movements and design elements that are familiar to the genre's fans.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Choose a few of the literature genres below that appeal to you. On a page in your notebook, write down the expectations you have when you read or watch stories in each of those genres. This can be anything from "boy saves girl with magical device" to "cold, windswept landscape." Include characters you expect, actions you often see, and places you would visit. What moods come up most in these types of stories? What messages or belief systems do the stories in this genre often discuss?

Romance
Science Fiction
Fantasy
Suspense thriller
Mystery novel
Young adult
Horror
Western
Historical
Family saga
Magical realism
Action adventure
Literary fiction

Using the list you made above, rank the story elements from best to worst: those you enjoy most and those you dislike.

"Know safely what the rules are, and then break them with joy."

In subverting any of the above genre conventions, you should be most careful altering the resolution. Readers are notoriously displeased when evil triumphs over good, for example. Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* (1999) provoked widespread disgust for its twisted ending. Clarice Starling, Harris's iconic FBI agent, was the firm moral center in the hunt for serial killers throughout *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), but at the end of *Hannibal,* she capitulated to arch-evil Hannibal Lecter. Some saw this as a character betrayal, but Harris had spent most of the novel alienating Starling from the FBI and developing her obsessive interest in Lecter. The true disappointment stemmed from the outcome: that the bad guy won.

For an important look at genre and its types and functions, read "Structure and Genre" in Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997).

WRITING EXERCISE

Subversions often happen with a "3-beat"—the first mention of something sets the stage, the second mention reinforces it. By the time you're on the third mention, the reader is expecting a repeat of the first two mentions, so you give them a surprise. For example, in Neil's "October Tale", the jinni asks Hazel what she would wish for. He asks again later, and she gives the same answer. The third time offers the twist: Hazel asks the jinni what *he* would wish for. Practice writing a 3-beat using the scene you wrote in Chapter 11: Worldbuilding, or write a new scene with your character now.

Breaking a reader's expectations is a nuanced business. On the one hand, you want to give them what you've promised, and what they're expecting. On the other hand, you want to give them something new and surprising. There are plenty of books out there offering advice for how to write a novel in any genre, but in the end, your own experience will be the best guide. You shouldn't just read a huge collection of novels in your genre, you should study them thoroughly. Take notes on story elements, look at story arcs, even outline the novels and analyze their structures. Then utilize Neil's techniques when constructing your own surprises:

Give readers something they're not expecting. In "October Tale", Neil began with the conventions of a fairy tale, the jinni in a lamp. Readers expect a few things from this type of story: that the jinni will grant a wish, and that whatever a person wishes for will turn out badly for them or teach them a valuable moral lesson. Instead, he undermined that expectation when Hazel chooses not to wish for anything.

Give readers what they want in a way they're not expecting. Another thing readers expect from the jinni-in-the-lamp tale is that the jinni, who has been cooped up for thousands of years, wants freedom. At the beginning of the story, Neil's jinni gets free from the dusty confines of the lamp, but his future is in question: will he remain free from the curse that put him in the lamp in the first place? The readers want to know what becomes of this enslaved being, but instead of having him break free of his magical chains, he finds love with Hazel. This love is unexpected but manages to satisfy the reader's concerns about the jinni's happiness.

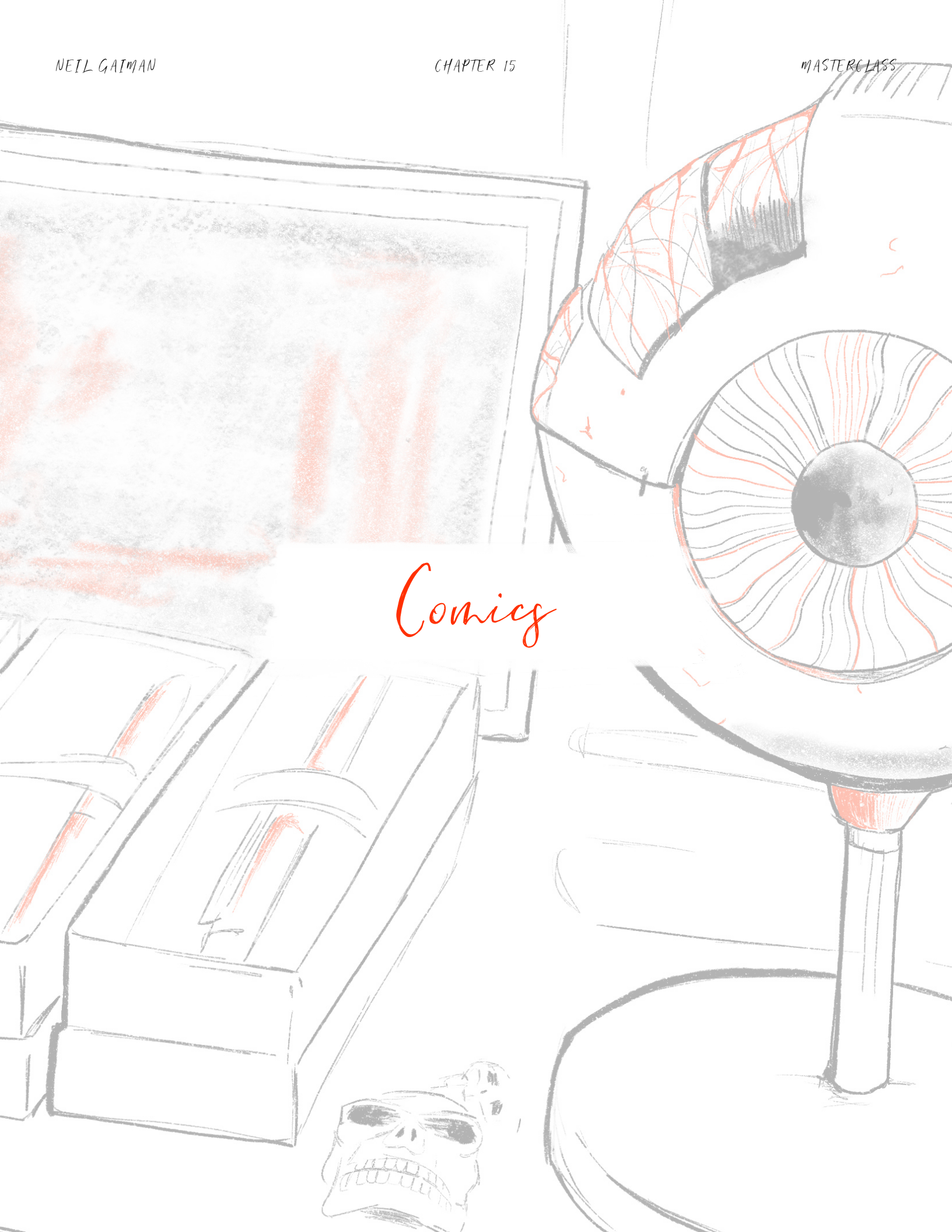
"You can always turn things around. You don't actually ever have to give people the thing they want in the way they're expecting. Actually, they always like it if you give them what they want, in a way that they're not expecting."

FOR YOUR NOVEL

On a page in your notebook, write one paragraph describing the genre of your novel. (It could be more than one.) Make a list of the critical elements that belong in the genre. Now go through the list and compare the elements of your own novel to genre expectations. Which aspects of your story match the elements of the genre?

WORKSHEET: By looking at genre expectations and comparing familiar tropes with your own ideas, you can get a better sense of your own relationship to genre. How far are you willing to go to bend expectations? Do you prefer sticking to tried-and-true story elements? The following chart will be something you can come back to repeatedly as your story develops. If you're interested in subverting genre conventions, the chart will help you brainstorm ways to do that. If you'd like to stick to the basics, use the chart to get a clearer sense of the genre you're working in and how to embrace the form.

	What are the genre expectations of this element?	Are there any set pieces associated with it?	How is mine different/ similiar?
Protagonist			
Antagonist			
Minor Characters			
Tone			
Set-up Scenes			
Catalyst			
Resolution			



Comics

CHAPTER 15

Comics

"When you get to comics you have a whole different area of territory....We get to use the pictures and the words to try and do things inside the head of the reader that you might never be able to do in prose or in film."

Comics are a visual form of storytelling that pair images with text. They are often presented sequentially in **panels**, which are self-contained frames that tell one story **beat** (for example, one moment, one look, one establishing shot of the scenery). The medium is conducive to innovation and artistic expression, allowing comic creators freedom to experiment with the real estate on each page.

Like stories, comics span all types of genres. The **Golden Age of Comic Books**, from 1930 to 1950, introduced the superhero archetype to the canon with the creation of some of the most well-known comic book characters of all time: Batman, Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, to name a few. After World War II, however, the superheroes gave way to other genres including romance, Westerns, and science fiction. The **Modern Age of Comic Books** (aka, the 1980s through present) has experienced a dramatic expansion of form, as independent publishers and the internet have paved the way for previously underrepresented voices to shine through.

READING LIST

From journalism to literary fiction to cancelled seasons of television shows, contemporary comic books can spotlight any subject. They are bold and dark, funny and poignant, and have the same narrative power that other mediums do to move you to tears, make you laugh, or break your heart. The following comic books are considered seminal works; most are available for purchase or as PDFs online. Flip through them to gain a better understanding of how the various aspects of comics—from illustration style to lettering and typography—have evolved throughout the years.

- *God's Man* by Lynd Ward (1929)
- *Action Comics #1* by DC Comics (1938)
- *The Spirit* by Will Eisner (1940)
- *Two-Fisted Tales, No. 25* by Harvey Kurtzman (1951)
- *The Acme Novelty Library No. 6* by Chris Ware (1965)
- *Fantastic Four, No. 51* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (1966)

- *Wimmen's Comix No. 1* by Trina Robbins (1970)
- *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* by Justin Green (1972)
- *Watchmen* by Alan Moore (1986)
- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1980)
- *Cerebus No. 26* by Dave Sim (1981)
- *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes* by Neil Gaiman (1989)
- *Icon No. 1* by Dwayne McDuffie (1993)
- *The Walking Dead No. 1* by Robert Kirkman (2003)
- *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006)
- *Lumberjanes No. 1* by Grace Ellis and Noelle Stevenson (2014)

"My little stick figures are instructions to me. They are only seen by me. If you do it like this, your thumbnails will only be seen by you. You don't ever have to show them to anybody else. You definitely don't have to show them to an artist who can actually draw."

WRITING EXERCISE

Refer back to Chapter 14: Genre to learn more about the conventions and characters that could populate the world of your comic. Select any archetypal character or existing story you might want to retell. Or, if you are already working on a novel, try adapting your characters and setting to comic form as a creativity exercise.

1. **Gather paper.** Anywhere from a handful to 15 sheets, and staple the pieces down the spine.

2. **Create a numbered list of your pages.** This will help give you an idea of what should go on each page. As long as you have a beginning and end jotted down, you'll be able to navigate the rest.

3. **Determine the beats of your story.** A good starting point is to allocate one page per beat, though some beats can occupy more pages. Jot down the story beats next to the corresponding page numbers.

4. **Turn story beats into panels.** Starting at the beginning, determine how you will use each panel to tell that specific part of your story. Be mindful of the amount and type of information you need to present on each page, and try to attribute space accordingly (play with panel size to give more room for beats like establishing shots and less room for beats that don't need to present as much detail).

5. **Sketch out action and note dialogue.** These sketches are seen by you and you only; they can be stick figures or symbols, as long as they make sense to you and show an estimate of what should be in each panel. Think of what your dialogue needs to do to help the reader transition from panel to panel. Write notes to accompany the images in each panel.

6. **Write your script!** Using your thumbnails as a reference, write a script for your story which will eventually be turned over to your artist. Work panel by panel communicating things like framing, point of view, scene and character description, and dialogue. Think of this script as a letter to your artist in which you give them all of the information they will need to visually create the story you have in your head.

"So there are geniuses in comics who write and draw and letter and color and do everything themselves. People like Chris Ware or Art Spiegelman. They are brilliant. I am not that brilliant. So in order to create comics, I need people who can do things."

While it is entirely possible to construct a comic book by yourself, like Neil says—that's a rare talent indeed. Most writers create the story, then collaborate with other artists to bring that story to the page. Consider the various collaborators who contribute to a comic book:

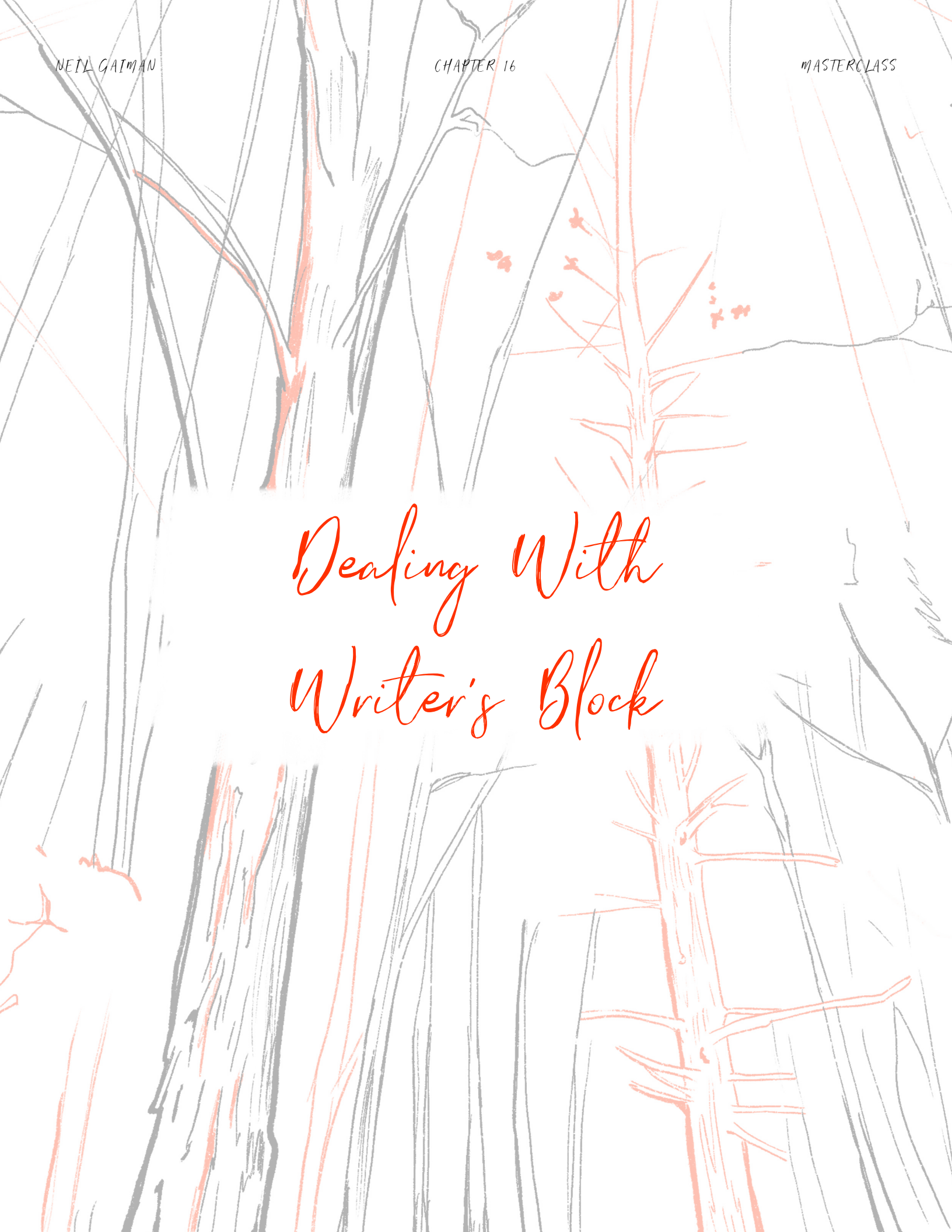
Writer. The writer develops the elements of story: plot, setting, characters, conflict, and dialogue. They also create an outline as well as a script, which serves as a roadmap for the other collaborators.

Editor. Fitzgerald and Hemingway had Maxwell Perkins. Hempel and Chandler had Gordon Lish. Every good writer needs an editor, and Neil's editor is the reason *Sandman #19* is a story with real heart. Ideally, your editor will know you and understand your objectives, but still be able to offer thoughtful criticism, especially if something isn't quite resonating within the story.

Artist. The artist translates the writer's instructions into panel illustrations. The artist has the power to add subtle dimension to simple direction; for example, the line "the character looks away" can be shown in myriad different ways, with either a sorrowful expression on the character's face, the character's face in shadow, or perhaps, the back of the character's head angled just so. The artist enhances the writer's script with her creative interpretations.

Letterer. A letterer conveys the story via typefaces and sizes, and calligraphy. Story titles, sound effects, and speech balloons are all part of the letterer's domain. The letterer also fills in the artist's pencil lines with ink.

Colorist. After the story is drawn and the ink set, the colorist fills in the black and white lines with color. Historically, this was done with brushes and dyes. While some colorists still opt to do things by hand, others use digital tools; neither is better, it just comes down to personal style and preference.



Dealing With Writer's Block

CHAPTER 16

Dealing With Writer's Block

"Every now and again, the mists will clear, and you'll get a wonderful view of the valley on the other side or the town that you're heading towards. You know what's happening. And then the mists will come back in again, and once more you're creeping along. But that's how you write a novel."

Writer's block is often an overwhelming feeling of being stuck. You've written part of a novel, maybe you've even finished an outline, but you just can't move forward. Every time you sit down at your desk, your mind goes blank, or you can't decide what to do next. This experience is common among writers, and there are ample tools for working through it. First, take a break from the work. Do something else for a while, and return a few days (or week, or months) later to view your draft with a fresh eye. Usually, your problems come from an earlier decision you made in the manuscript, so backtrack and look for any part that feels off.

"Start at the beginning and read it through. Very, very often, once you do that, where the story should be becomes obvious. Where you went off the rails becomes obvious. And you did go off the rails. The problem is always earlier."

Always listen to your characters. A lot of feeling blocked comes when a writer tries to force a situation or a reaction on a character, when in fact your character wants to do something else. Follow that instinct with an open mind. If your characters have stopped "talking" to you, write the next thing you know that happens in your story. Writing doesn't have to happen chronologically.

"Maybe you've stopped because if you wrote that scene, you would be writing a scene you don't want to write. Well, why don't you want to write it? Why is it painful for you? What happens if you do write it?"

Self-doubt is a big part of writer's block. Julia Cameron's groundbreaking courses on sustaining creativity led to the creation of *The Artist's Way: A*

Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity (1992). The book's title is misleading: it's actually an extremely practical course for overcoming the beliefs that fuel self-doubt. You may want to read it even when you're not crippled by angst, because it's simply good medicine to challenge your fears at any stage of the process.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

If you've reached that chapter where you're not sure what happens next, take Neil's advice and write the next thing you know. It may be a scene from six chapters in the future. It may even be the ending, but go ahead and write it. Try writing it in your notebook by hand. Sometimes the physical act of writing can stimulate new thinking.

When you're stuck on a scene, try listing all the characters who are not "onstage" at the moment. Describe briefly what each of those characters is doing offstage. Sometimes brainstorming what the novel's other characters are up to can trigger fresh ideas for how to proceed.

"Whether or not you write an outline or you don't write an outline, you are still going to be moving from point to point with a lot of things that you don't know happening on the way."

Being stuck is the perfect time to dive deep into **story structure**. Learning about the basic structures that underlie most stories will often give you the tools you need to carry on, and they will most likely save you from numerous rewrites later.

Common wisdom holds that there are two types of writers. Plotters are those who meticulously outline every book before they write it, and pantsers are those who fly by the seat of their pants, setting off into a novel without a clear map. There are benefits to both styles, and both types can get stuck at any point in their writing. For plotters, problems arise when their characters decide to do something they weren't expecting. It can be difficult to accept that your story isn't what you thought it would be, and there's often a tendency to force your way forward. Pantsers incline toward a different problem: they get lost, usually in the middle section of their work, because they haven't got a clear enough idea of where they're going. Plotters will benefit from a re-thinking of their story structure, and pantsers will often benefit by building some of the architecture their story needs.

- You'll find a wealth of advice on story structure in K. M. Weiland's *Outlining Your Novel: Map Your Way to Success* (2011) and its companion *Outlining Your Novel Workbook: Step-by-Step Exercises for Planning Your Best Book* (2014).

- One of this course's recommended books—*Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997) by Robert McKee—is a veritable bible on structuring stories. It may take you a while to get through all the information in his book, but the longer you spend with it, the more it gives back.

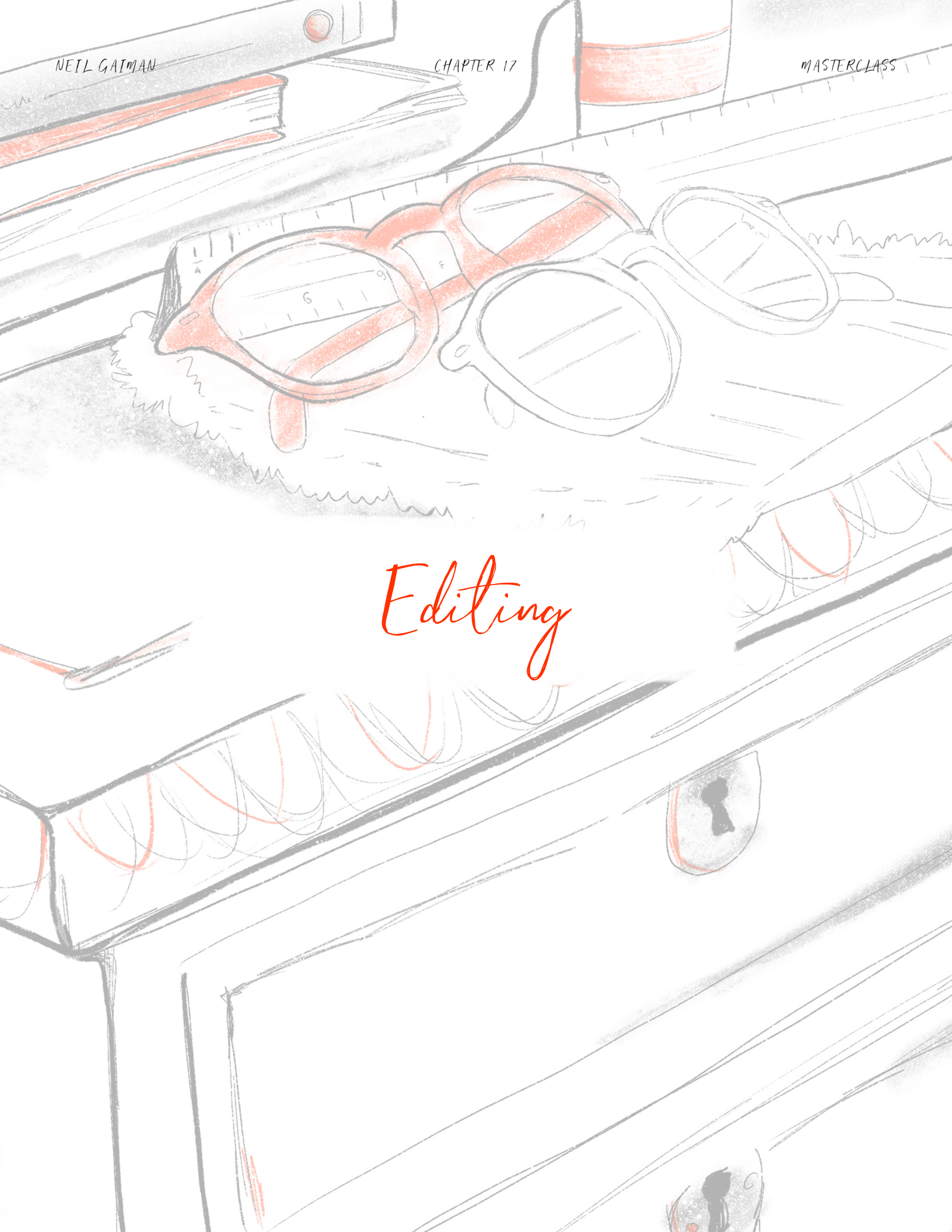
- For a shorter take, *Save the Cat* (2005) by Blake Snyder not only gives you a clear breakdown of the three-act structure, it offers plenty of tips for getting back on track when you're stuck.

Remember Neil's advice for when you're stuck:

- Step away from the work and do something else for a while.
- Return to your project and give it a fresh read. Pretend you've never read it before. Start at the beginning and read it through. This can make it obvious where you've gone off track.
- Remember that your problem usually starts earlier than the place where you're stuck. Backtrack from that place to find a scene or a story decision that feels off.
- Listen to your characters. Don't impose your previous plans on them. It's a good idea to free-write a conversation with your character. Ask them what they need and listen to what they say.
- It can be helpful to create a deadline for yourself. Time pressure can create focus and can force you to make decisions that you may be avoiding.
- If you still can't get past your block, write the next thing you know in your story. It may happen five chapters ahead of where you are, but you can bridge that distance later. Just write.

WRITING EXERCISE

It's remarkable how a little pressure can help you through a block. Perform this simple practice, which is known as the Pomodoro technique: Decide on what you would like to write. This can be a scene, a chapter of your novel, or simply a page of free writing that will help stimulate an idea. Set a timer for 25 minutes and don't stop writing until the timer rings! Finally, take a five-minute break and repeat these three steps, sticking carefully to the clock.



Editing

CHAPTER 17

Editing

"The story is an explosion. And you get to the end of it, and once it's done, then you get to walk around it and you get to look at the shrapnel and the damage it did. And you get to see who died. And you get to see how it worked."

You've finished your novel, and yet there's something overall that is unsatisfying for you—perhaps a character seems flat, maybe their problems seem too trite, or one of your central story points is uninteresting to you. It can be very hard to determine if something is actually boring or if you've just grown sick of it, which is why it's so important to take some time away from a project before editing it.

When you do return to your manuscript to edit it, try to pretend that you're someone who's never read it before. What would their response be? Don't focus on perfection, keep your attention on the story. If you can't get any objectivity, give it to a trusted reader or to someone who will appreciate the type of novel it is. Ask them for advice, but don't automatically accept their suggestions for how to fix things.

"Try and pretend that you, as a writer, and you, as a reader, are two different people."

When you're finally ready to go back to your manuscript, there are certain things you can do to maximize your **editing** strength.

Pretend to be a reader. Be someone else entirely—your best friend, your ideal audience member—but read your book trying to imagine how they will see it.

Take notes on your re-read. It's good practice to print out a hard copy of your manuscript and read it on paper (as most readers eventually will). This not only gives you space to take notes on problem areas, it makes a mysterious difference in how you read stories.

Ask what your story is about. In Chapter 5: Developing the Story, you saw that the major dramatic question usually involved the main character's primary desire. This will often be the driving force in your story. For help determining what your story is about, go to the Writing Assignments below to create a logline for your novel.

Make sure that your story provides a satisfying answer to the major dramatic question. Ask yourself, if you were a new reader of this book, would its ending satisfy you? Would you feel that the promise you started out with has been fulfilled? If not, go back through your manuscript and find ways to buttress your major storyline. This could mean suggestions for significant revisions.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

It can be extremely useful while editing to have an overview of your novel's main storyline. A logline is a single sentence that answers the question: What is my story about? It should encompass the novel's major dramatic question—although it's not posed as a question. Instead, it's a tool to interest the reader. Answer the following questions to help create a logline.

How does your protagonist get involved in the story?

What conflict arises to move the story forward?

What is the world of your story?

What makes this story different, interesting, or suspenseful?

Now write a logline. In 50 words or less, combine the above information into a single sentence. Try not to use your character's name—say *what* they are instead: i.e. a poor student, a frazzled banker. Don't give any spoilers. Use the samples below for guidance.

- After discovering that magic is real, a college student enters the world of his favorite childhood novels to fight a force of evil that has taken residence there. *The Magicians* (2009) by Lev Grossman.

- In order to catch a killer who skins his victims, a young FBI agent must develop a relationship with a serial killer who may be even more dangerous. *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) by Thomas Harris.

- In a town closed off to the rest of the world, seven generations of the Buendía family live through births, deaths, marriages, and the devastating political turmoil that modernity brings. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez.

"You can fix dialogue that isn't quite there. You can fix the beginning of something. But you cannot fix nothingness, so you have to be brave. You have to just start."

Each section of a novel will have its own challenges, and you may struggle with one more than another. Some writers find that their beginnings are too slow, their middles tend to be shapeless and messy, or their endings lack a satisfying note. Consider consulting Nancy Kress's *Beginnings, Middles, & Ends* (1993), a handy guide for navigating your way through any of these problem areas.

"The process of doing your second draft is a process of making it look like you knew what you were doing all along."

Once you're happy with your draft, do a **line edit.** This is not as deep as a regular edit. Here you'll just be looking at language, formatting, and style. One good technique is to identify problem areas that you'd like to improve, then mark all of those areas with a colored highlighter. Set a goal for yourself to get the entire manuscript back to colorless. Look especially for sections where the writing seems different—maybe it's too sloppy, or something is overwritten—or sequences where someone acted out of character. Search for sections that are too heavy on dialogue, or too dense with exposition, and try to balance them out. Let your

instincts guide you to the places where something feels off and go back to them later for correction. These online apps can help considerably:

AutoCrit: an all-purpose tool that will help with story structure, pacing, and language.

SmartEdit: this Microsoft product can spot problem areas and help clean up sloppy diction.

Grammarly: another language tool which suggests way to clean up your prose.

Hemingway App: insert a block of your own text and this app will make it more concise.

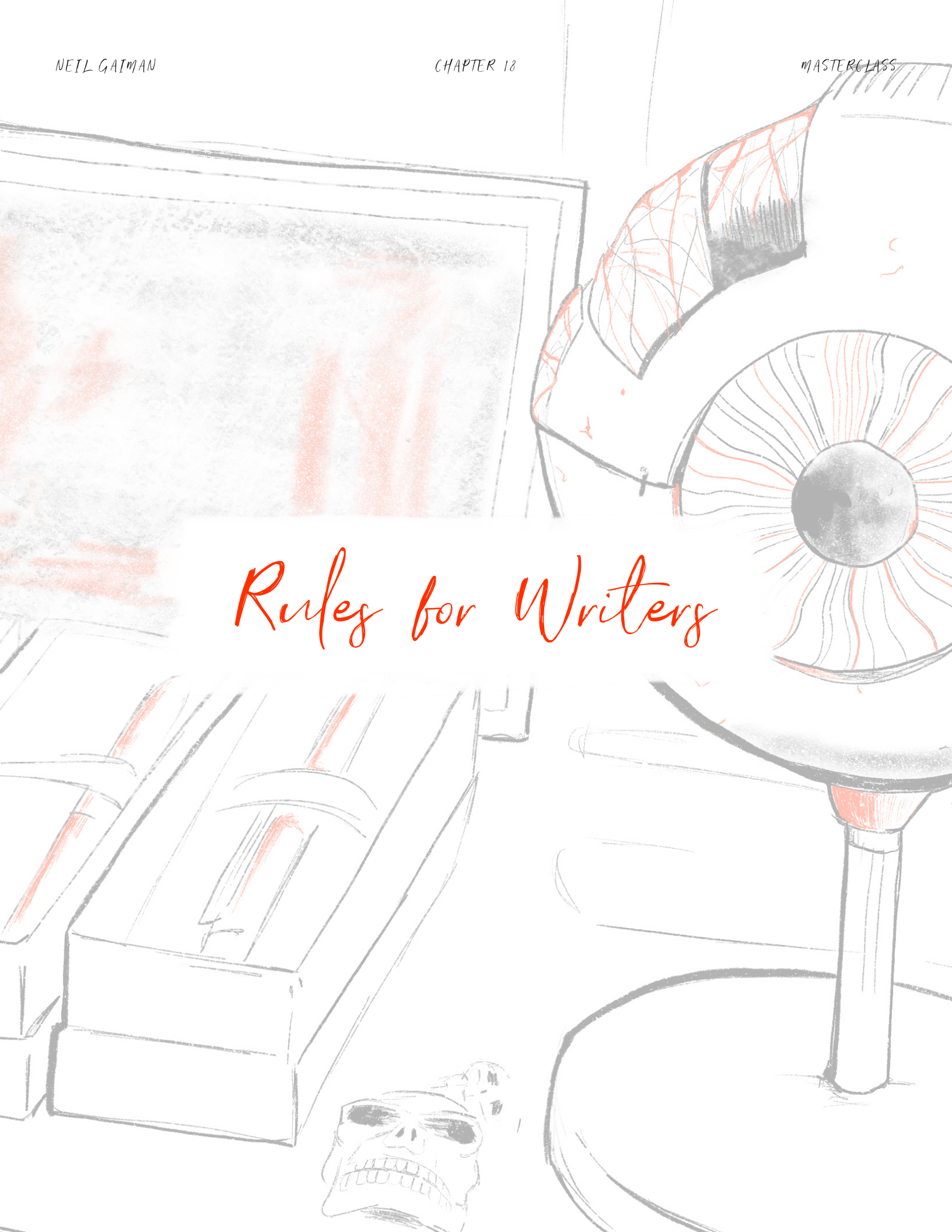
"You always have to remember, when people tell you that something doesn't work for them, that they're right. It doesn't work for them. And that is incredibly important information. You also have to remember that when people tell you what they think is wrong and how you should fix it, that they're almost always wrong."

Once you're ready to share your work, it can be a challenge to find the right reader. If you haven't got one, consider joining Writer's Café online. It's a resource that will help you connect with other writers who are willing to review and edit your work. Usually you'll read their work in exchange. The site also provides writing groups and courses in the craft.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

When you have a complete draft of your novel, use the following checklist for your editing process:

- What is my major dramatic question?
- What areas have problems with pacing? (i.e. too much dialogue, too much exposition, things feel "draggy")
- What areas do I need to work on to buttress my main story line?
- What areas are superfluous and distract from my main story?
- What areas have puzzling problems, or what areas would I appreciate some advice from other people?
- Does my ending answer the major dramatic question?



Rules for Writers

CHAPTER 18

Rules for Writers

"People don't normally list sending a story out into the world as one of those acts of bravery up there with standing up to armed robbers or wild dog attacks. But really, they really are."

It's important to stay organized and devoted to your daily work—this will help you get through the rough patches you're likely to encounter. It can be extremely difficult to get published, and rejection is the norm for most writers. Coping with it will require a balance. You'll need humility to accept that your work can improve, but you'll also need a blazing confidence that will allow your creative inspiration to continue flowing.

Neil shares Heinlein's list of rules—often called Heinlein's Business Rules—because they regard getting published.

1. **You have to write.**
2. **You have to finish what you write.**
3. **You have to send it out to someone who could publish it.**
4. **Refrain from rewriting—except to editorial request.**
5. **When it comes back, send it out again.**
6. **Neil's rule: Then start the next thing.**

Only one of Heinlein's rules is about **process**—number four. Rewriting is a personal decision. As you've seen throughout this class, each writer's process is different. Some like to plan via outlines, others leap right in. Most writers must edit and correct things later, but how much their novel will change over time is a matter of individual preference. Also bear in mind that your first novel or story probably won't be as good as future ones, so it's not necessarily wise to force yourself into a mindset of publishing everything no matter what. There will be stories you just put away forever. Over time, you will develop your skills. Even Heinlein revised his work before sending it out, and you probably will, too. Once you've sent it out, it's important to be wary of agents and editors giving advice that may mess up your original vision, but ultimately that is for you to decide.

"When the magic is happening, when the wind is beneath your wings, when you're lifted up, all of a sudden it can feel like you simply are the first reader. You're the first person ever to be here. You can't get the words down fast enough, because it's just there and all you're doing is describing something that is being put in front of you."

Some authors like to carve out intensely **personal space**. Hilary Mantel disappears for months at a time. Other authors write, no matter the distractions: Jane Austen wrote in a busy family parlor, E.B. White wrote in his crowded living room. Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, and Haruki Murakami all wrote in the early mornings to limit distractions. Maya Angelou famously rented hotel rooms to get away from daily nuisances. Try to find a space that works for you. It should be free of distractions (a definition that will depend upon your tolerance level) and provide a source of inspiration to you.

"People ask me, "How do you cope with rejection?"...And there are only two ways to do it—one of which is you go down. You get sad. You put the thing away. You stop writing. You go and get a real job, go and do something else. And the other is a kind of crazed attitude that actually the most important thing now is to write something so brilliant, so powerful, so good nobody could ever reject it."

In your hunt for an agent, you're going to want to write an excellent query letter. *The Writer's Digest Guide to Query Letters* (2008) by Wendy Burt is the prime place to start. For the best overview of the publishing process, pick up *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published* (2010) by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry. It's thorough and full of insider knowledge.

FOR YOUR NOVEL

Query letters are often difficult to write, even for experienced authors. Prepare the meat of your query by answering the following questions:

- What is the genre, word count, and title of your project?
- What is your logline? (See the assignment in Chapter 16: Editing.) You can expand this to one paragraph, but no more than 200 words. This will be the pitch that will catch an agent's interest.
- Do you have any previous publishing experience? Write two to three sentences about this.

Often, agents also want a synopsis of the novel. On a page in your notebook, write a one-page synopsis in the following format:

- In paragraph one, introduce your main character, their conflict, and the world of your novel.
- In paragraph two, explain the major plot turns that happen to your hero. Pick only the big ones. You can also include a mention of secondary characters (antagonists, sidekicks, or love interests, etc.).
- In paragraph three, describe how the novel's major conflicts are resolved. You must reveal the ending.

"As a writer, you're always going to be rejected, and that's basically healthy."

When rejection begins to weigh you down, the simplest things can keep you going. One of those is **ritual**. Murakami said, "The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it's a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind." If you're feeling deflated, set up a routine for yourself and stick to it. These tools can help you organize and stay on track:

- The online Writing Schedule Calculator can give you an estimate of how long it will take you to write your novel. Answer a few basic questions, and you'll have an idea of what to plan for.

- The Marinara Timer from 352 Inc. is an online, customizable productivity timer that you can use to create sessions for your writing.

- Streaks is an app that allows you to create daily goals for yourself and them gamify those goals by winning credits when you reach certain milestones.

- SquareSpaceNote is another useful app. It will sync all of your electronic information and writing so that you can have everything in one place for when you sit down to write.

For help on building positive routines, check out *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones* (2018) by James Clear. This book is full of practical advice based on the idea that making large-scale changes will happen through small, manageable steps.

The Writer's Responsibilities

CHAPTER 19

The Writer's Responsibilities

"We have to remember that the greatest triumphs and the greatest tragedies of the human race are nothing to do with people being basically good or people being basically evil. They're all to do with people being basically people."

Antagonism is one of the critical tools of storytelling. Stories don't move forward without conflict, and conflict is produced by antagonists. These can be individual villains or forces of society (even forces of nature), but it's important to consider how you treat any antagonist. They should be just as well-developed as your main character, and that will often mean understanding them, or, as Neil says, being willing to allow in other points of view.

"I decided my responsibility is to tell good stories, tell honest stories, tell them to as many people as I can. My responsibility is to encapsulate as much as I can the things I believe, but also...being willing to allow other points of view in."

WRITING EXERCISES

Think of a horrible person, or take one from your novel-in-progress, and try writing a few paragraphs from their POV on the following topics:

A family member they miss

Their most awkward moment

A situation that embarrassed them

Their worst loss

Maybe back in college you had to write an essay and identify your **controlling idea**, the main argument you were making. The same phrase is used in storytelling to describe the message that resonates with readers at the climax of your novel. It can be positive or negative or even ironic, and it will come from you and your beliefs about the world. For a full discussion of controlling ideas see Robert McKee's chapter "Structure and Meaning" in *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997). McKee argues that endings come in three forms: "up" endings express optimism, "down" endings are pessimistic, and ironic endings express "life at its most complete and realistic."

Like Neil, he believes you have one responsibility with your controlling idea, and that is *to tell the truth*. Once you find out what your controlling idea is (see the writing exercise for your novel below) and you find you don't agree with it, toss it out and start again with something honest.

"Everything that happens in the living is going to wind up in the fiction....You are going to need every human being you ever meet."

FOR YOUR NOVEL

To identify your controlling idea, you will need to have decided on an ending for your story. If you have it, then answer the following questions:

- What value comes out as a result of the story's climax? For example, in the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, the climax occurs when the children return home to find their father waiting for them—a father who had previously sanctioned their abandonment. The value is positive, it's a triumph of love in the face of starvation and betrayal.

- Looking back through your story, identify the primary force that caused this value. In the case of *Hansel and Gretel*, the force that brought about the happy ending was the resourcefulness of the children. Instead of allowing bitterness to overcome them, they went into the world alone and found the tools and fortitude and cleverness they needed to survive—and bring much-needed wealth back to their family.

Thus, the controlling idea of *Hansel and Gretel* is: Love triumphs when individuals show resourcefulness and bravery.