PART TWO
ONCE MORE
WITH FEELING
TONE AND ATMOSPHERE

When you meet a person for the first time, many factors shape how you feel about him, how you remember him, whether or not he makes a good impression, and whether or not you’d like to get to know him better. You can tell if a person is interested in you if they’re listening to what you have to say. A good listener asks questions and isn’t simply waiting for you to finish talking so he can insert his anecdote. The people we know and meet create emotional responses in us. The same goes for the books we read. What we take away from a reading experience is how it made us feel.

Get out one of your favorite books, one that sits on your “keeper” shelf. It can be an all-time favorite or a recent read. It should be one you can thumb through and find your favorite pages and passages.

Now take some time to think about the story. It would be a good idea to reread the book and recapture the feelings it created. Come up with an overall impression of the atmosphere of this story. How did the writing and the characters make you feel? You may remember an impression of intrigue or sexual tension. Perhaps a warm sense of family permeated the pages. The mystery of secrets or the thrill of suspense may have left an impression.
An overall tone is something you can’t always find adequate words to explain. But if, when you think about the book, you remember the feeling you got from reading it, it was a tone that made an impression. And this story came to mind when I asked you to think of a favorite book.

My goal is for you to be able to open that book and recognize the word choices, descriptions, and dialogue that left such a strong and lasting imprint. As writers we convey impressions and images and feelings in one way only—through words.

In later chapters I’ll discuss specific word choices.

LEARN WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR EMOTIONS

If available, buy a second copy of your favorite book—buy it used if need be. Use this study copy as a learning tool. I did this with many books when I was learning to write. Back then, I didn’t have a network of writers or information at my fingertips. I read a lot of outdated how-to books from the library and did most of my studying by way of re-reading the books I loved. We can learn a lot from books we appreciate.

Use your extra copy like a textbook. Underline, make notes in the margins, and use highlighters to point out scenes where you reacted emotionally. Analyze what created those feelings: word choices, dialogue, body language, and character setup. The further we go through this section on feelings, the easier it will be for you to recognize those techniques.

Grab your notebook, and keep an emotion journal in one of the sections. Write down your thoughts and observations, and record the ways you see emotion conveyed and the things that make you react. Be alert during conversations with others. Watch television and movies with your eyes and ears tuned in to emotional triggers. Note your reactions and the reactions of others. Be observant. Note how setting creates mood and affects emotions.
You might even want to write down entire passages from other people’s writing so you remember the things that moved you.

**You must understand emotional triggers before you can write them with skill.**

Observing what makes a good story and what triggers reactions is a key part of learning how to create those triggers in your own writing.

Your favorite authors have a unique way of triggering responses in you—and in a lot of other people. Most of those triggers are universal.

If you are obsessive—er, I mean a front-row student—and have access to a copy machine (one of the best investments I ever made, and they last forever; I’m only on my fourth), you might want to copy entire pages and scenes and keep a binder for study.

I said before that we learn best by discovering things on our own, so while I can point you in the right direction and suggest techniques, a lot of your learning will come from discovering things on your own, so be active in this process of learning what affects you emotionally.

**FICTION IS DRAWN FROM REALITY**

Emotion is scary, no doubt about it. Strong feelings make us vulnerable. At first, most of us are hesitant to let emotions bleed onto our pages. You might wonder if a parent will read this and think you’re writing about them. You might hesitate because your friends or other writers will recognize something about your inner fears or vulnerability. If you write love scenes, you might be thinking about the people who will read them and wonder about their reactions. Will they think this is about you?

One of the most irritating questions writers can be asked is if we write from personal experience. Well, of course we write from personal experience! But do we experience and feel all the things that our characters experience and feel? Hardly. My answer is always, “My life is way too boring to write from personal experience.”
I doubt anyone has asked Stephenie Meyer if she created a family of vampires from personal experience. Do we think Stephen King had a supernatural encounter in a deserted hotel or that he cut off his arm to see what phantom sensations were like? Seriously, people. We’re writing fiction from our individual worldviews.

We become these story people, and we imagine what they would feel like or how they would behave given their background and experiences because we’re creative and sensitive. We write from our deep creative wells of imagination, and we have lived and felt enough to be able to imagine how someone would feel in a given situation.

I have a dear friend who is a quadriplegic. I have no firsthand experience about what it’s like to live life from a wheelchair, but Anita does. When I wrote *Sweet Annie*, I asked for her help, and she was a wonderful resource. Many years later, readers still comment about that story, and many say it’s one of their favorite books. Why? I drew on people’s emotions and made them feel what it was like to be Annie Sweetwater.

Miss Marples’ ice cream parlor wasn’t very busy that afternoon, and the pudgy woman herself waited on them. After taking Charmaine’s order, she asked, “And what will she have?” indicating Annie with a nod.

“Well, I don’t know, why don’t you ask her?” Luke replied. “She’s in a wheelchair, but she’s not deaf or stupid.”

This snip of dialogue is only part of what endears Luke to Annie and the reader. It would never have entered my mind to show Annie being treated like a nonentity in a scene, but because it’s real life for my friend Anita, I was able to add more emotional depth.

**Method Writing as a Tool**

You don’t have to have experienced something to imagine how it would feel. No one who sees an AMBER Alert has to question how the parents are feeling. That’s a universal trigger.
One of the many things I do that drives my husband crazy is obsessively watching all the behind-the-scenes clips for movies. I know you’ve seen interviews with actors where they are talking about their character as though it’s a real person. To them, it is. They become that person to take on the role.

It’s method acting. It’s how actors dredge up tears and show drama. They put themselves in that person’s place and experience the scene as though it’s happening to them. You have to know your character inside and out to write like this. Superficial writing will never convey deep emotion. You must first flesh these people out on paper and in your mind. Know everything you need to know about them. Give them backstory. Give them goals. These elements are all part of the complexity that makes up the creation of a story.

Use character charts or grids or interview your story people, but do whatever it takes to know them well. When you come to a scene of action or emotion, close your eyes. Think of the experiences this person has had. Let their life become real to you. Become them. This is how you will know how they will react and how they will feel.

I learned how to method write while working on one of my earliest books, *Rain Shadow*, in which two brothers were angry with each other. The particular scene just felt flat, but I didn’t know why. So I closed my eyes at my desk and sat there, assuming all the experiences of the character in whose viewpoint I was writing. I felt angry about his situation, and my gut reaction—right or wrong—was to hit my brother. As soon as I had the character follow through on that and punch his brother, the whole scene fell into place. I had to become the character in order to understand his reactions to stimuli.

Did you know that *The Notebook* is the story of Nicholas Sparks’s wife’s grandparents? He has a very simplified writing style, but he reaches readers on a deeply emotional level, especially in that book, because the story was real. It was probably painful to write.

We all know what pain feels like. We’ve all lost someone or experienced rejection, and we’ve all laughed at inappropriate moments. We
delve into our own emotions to write about feelings in fictional situations. We’re human. Our readers are human. We connect through feelings. You’re not writing an autobiography; you’re tapping those core emotions as a resource for your characters.

One of your most beneficial learning tools, once it’s developed, is the ability to understand—about yourself—what triggers your own strong emotions.

What works for you? Do you get weepy at Hallmark commercials? They are works of art in themselves, considering how few seconds the writers have to make an emotional impression and how well they do it.

If you’re a comedy writer, what makes you laugh?

If you write in the thriller, mystery, or horror genres, what are your deepest fears?

When you know the answers to those questions, you know the kinds of books you should be writing, and you can learn to write using your strengths.

EXERCISES

Plop that favorite book on your desk or beside your comfy reading chair. Thumb through the pages; make notes in your notebook.

This week, watch your favorite television show and keep track of the dialogue, situations, and elements you find emotional.

You don’t really need permission, but you have mine to watch as many movies as you like while discovering emotional triggers. If you get strange looks from anyone, explain that it’s work! Keep taking notes. One of my notebooks is filled with pages titled “What Worked in [Title of Movie].” I make lists of the things that made the movie work for me. I went to see Australia three times in the theater, and then I bought it the day it came out on DVD. I didn’t see Avatar as many times at the theater, but I did buy it on DVD and watched it repeatedly for a week.

Writers can’t get too crazy. We can always say, “This is for an assignment,” or, “I’m studying.” See? Sounds convincing, doesn’t it?