How to Raise the Emotional Stakes

by Orson Scott Card

Reading a story is not a passive process. While a reader may seem to be sitting still, slowly turning pages, in his own mind he is going through a great many emotions. Underlying all of them is a strong tension. The stronger it is, the more the reader concentrates on finding out what happens next, the more attention he pays.

The amount of tension the reader feels depends partly on her emotional state, her imagination, her ability as a reader. But the strength of the story’s tension also depends on choices you make. Some of these choices have to do with the story’s structure and others are simply outside the scope of this book. However, there are several things you can do with characters to raise the readers’ emotional stake in the story, make them more emotionally involved in what’s happening, make them care more about the outcome.

**SUFFERING**

Pain is a sword with two edges. The character who suffers pain and the character who inflicts it are both made more memorable and more important.

Pain can be either physical or emotional. Great grief and great physical agony, well presented in the tale, can greatly increase the reader’s emotional involvement. Remember, though, that you aren’t using grief to make the reader grieve any more than you’re using physical pain to make the reader bleed. Readers don’t necessarily feel what the characters are feeling—when the villain cries out in his agony of defeat, the reader may be cheering inside. But the intensity of the characters’ feeling, as long as it remains believable and bearable, will greatly intensify the reader’s feelings—whatever they are.

Of course, not all pain is alike. A cut finger doesn’t magnify a character very much. Ghastly physical torture can become unbearable to imagine, so that the reader refuses to remain engaged with the story and you lose him completely. The most powerful uses of physical and emotional pain are somewhere between the trivial and the unbearable.

In Stephen King’s *The Dead Zone*, the main character suffers terribly: A traffic accident puts him in a coma for many years; he loses his career,
the woman he loves, and many years of his life. Furthermore, when he finally recovers, he continues to suffer in body and soul. And with each twinge of pain and grief, the reader's emotional involvement in the story becomes more intense.

Notice that his pain is both physical and emotional. The loss of a loved one can weigh as heavily in the mind of the audience as the loss of a limb. However, physical pain is much easier to use because it doesn’t have to be prepared for. If a character is tortured, as in King’s novel Misery, the audience will wince in sympathetic agony even if they don’t know the character very well—even if they have never seen the character before. Emotional loss does not come so easily. In The Dead Zone, King devoted several pages to creating a warm, valuable love relationship between the main character and the woman he loves. It is at a vital moment in their relationship that he has his terrible traffic accident. Now when he discovers that she married someone else during his coma, the readers know how much he loved her, and so the pain of losing her actually outweighs the physical pain he suffered.

Suffering loses effectiveness with repetition. The first time a character is hit in the head, the pain raises her importance; the third or fourth time, the character becomes comic, and her pain is a joke. Likewise, the first time you mention a character’s grief, it raises his stature and makes the reader more emotionally involved. But if you keep harping on the character’s suffering, the reader begins to feel that the character is whining, and the reader’s emotional involvement decreases.

You can see this with audience reactions to slasher movies—those horror flicks in which the special effects department keeps coming up with cool new ways to dismember the characters. The hideous murders in these movies were originally devised to jack up the audience’s emotions, higher and higher with each death. Rather sooner than they expected, however, many in the audience stopped being horrified and began to laugh. This is not really a sign of the audience’s moral decay or inability to empathize; it’s simply that an audience reaches a point when fictional pain is too difficult to bear. When pain or grief become unbearable in real life, human beings often develop fictions to cope with it—we call it insanity. When pain or grief become unbearable in fiction, readers simply disengage from the story and either abandon the tale or laugh at it.

Does this mean that pain is a sharply limited character device? No—it is almost unlimited in its potential. But you must remember that you increase the power of suffering, not by describing the injury or loss in greater detail, but rather by showing more of its causes and effect. Blood and gore eventually make the audience gag; sobbing and moaning even-
tually earn the audience’s laughter or contempt. On the other hand, if you make us understand how intensely the character loved before losing the loved one or trusted before being betrayed, then his grief will have far greater power, even if you show it with great economy. If you show a character coping with her pain or grief, refusing to succumb to it, then readers will wince or weep for her. Another rule of thumb: If your characters cry, your readers won’t have to; if your characters have good reason to cry, and don’t, your readers will do the weeping.

SACRIFICE
Pain or grief also increase a reader’s intensity in proportion to the character’s degree of choice. Pete has broken his leg on a hike, and Nora has to set it for him. That scene will be painful and will certainly magnify both characters as they cause and suffer pain. But Pete’s pain will be far more powerful if he is alone and has to set the leg himself. As he ties a rope to his ankle, passes it around a tree trunk, braces his good leg and pulls on the end of the rope, the agony which he inflicts on himself will make the scene utterly unforgettable, even if we never see his face, even if his agony is never described at all. This works with emotional suffering as well. The climax of the movie Broadcast News comes when Holly Hunter’s character is forced to choose between her desperate passion for William Hurt’s charming but shallow character and her integrity as a journalist, which up to now has been the foundation of her whole life. When we see her give up her lover in order to preserve her integrity, our emotions are far more intense than they would have been if she had lost him under circumstances beyond her control. Self-chosen suffering for the sake of a greater good—sacrifice, in other words—is far more intense than pain alone.

When one character willingly inflicts pain on another, the torturer becomes as important, in our fear and loathing, as the victim becomes in our sympathy. This is the other side of the coin of sacrifice. If a character is driving a car and accidentally hits and injures a child, it has a powerful effect. But if a character deliberately chooses to cause someone else pain, the effect is even stronger. The audience may hate the character, but the intensity of feeling is much stronger than when the character caused pain without meaning to. It’s no accident that the most memorable character in many stories is the sadistic villain; the hero often seems bland and forgettable by comparison.

JEOPARDY
Jeopardy is anticipated pain or loss. As anyone who has been to a den-
tist knows, the anticipation of pain is often more potent than its actuality. When a character is threatened with something bad, the audience automatically focuses its attention on him. The more helpless the character and the more terrible the danger, the more importance the audience will attach to the character.

That is why children in danger are such powerful characters; so powerful, in fact, that some films become unbearable to watch. The film Poltergeist was strong stuff for that reason. Some horror-movie buffs pooh-poohed the film because “nothing really happened”; nobody got gruesomely killed. What they didn’t realize is that a dozen creative slashings of teenage kids in a spatter movie won’t equal the power of a single scene in which children are being dragged toward terrible death while their mother struggles vainly to try to reach them in time.

The films Alien and Aliens crossed the line for me. The jeopardy simply became unbearable. I had to leave the theater. I have since watched both films in their entirety—but never all at once. I could only watch them in sections, flipping cable channels now and then to break the tension caused by the unrelenting jeopardy.

The greater the jeopardy, the stronger the pain when the dreaded event actually occurs. In the TV movie The Dollmaker, I did not realize how powerfully the jeopardy had affected me until it was too late. Perhaps before I had children I could have borne it, but I have children now, and when the mother runs screaming to try to snatch up her little girl before her legs are run over by a moving train, the tension in me built to a point higher than I have ever experienced in a story. When the wheels finally reach the girl before her mother does, the girl’s pain, combined with the climactic release of the exquisite jeopardy, pushed me over the edge. The first time I saw the film I had to turn off the television and weep. I couldn’t get control of myself for fifteen minutes.

The writer had set up this jeopardy to be as powerful as it could possibly be. The little girl and the mother had already suffered so much emotional pain in the film that the audience already cared deeply about them both. And the reason the girl was off by herself was a painful emotional confrontation. So the audience’s stake in these characters was already strong.

As the jeopardy develops, the girl is absolutely helpless—she has no idea the train is about to move. The mother is powerless to rescue her—how can she stop a train? How can she scream louder than the roaring of the engines? And the power of the train is like the fist of God, it is so irresistible, so uncompromising.

As a result, during the seconds—it feels like half an hour—when the
mother is struggling to get into the train yard, racing to try to reach her daughter, the jeopardy made the characters more important to me, in those few moments, than any characters have ever been in my experience of reading and seeing stories. I could not bear to watch that scene again. I don’t have to. I can relive every moment of it in my memory.

This particular example is more powerful than most jeopardy situations, of course, but it does show how jeopardy works. Jeopardy magnifies the stalker, the savior, and the prey, just as pain and sacrifice magnify sufferer and tormentor alike.

Pain and jeopardy work hand in hand, too. In Stephen King’s Misery, the hero is already in great pain from an automobile accident, but he is in danger of even worse suffering from the insane woman who holds him incommunicado and drugged to the gills in her remote mountain home. The danger of greater pain is constant, as she regulates him by withholding drugs. But then comes the terrible moment when she actually maims him, cutting off first one part of his body, then another. It makes the jeopardy all the more terrible, to know absolutely that she means to carry out her threats.

It’s important to remember that jeopardy only works to increase the audience’s tension if the audience believes that the dreaded event might actually happen. In old-fashioned melodramas, the jeopardy was often grotesque—the hero was tied to a log heading into the sawmill; the heroine was bound to the railroad tracks as the train approached. But the audience eventually realized that there was no chance (in those days) that the storyteller would ever allow the hero to be cut to ribbons by the saw, or the heroine to be spattered along the tracks by the train. Contemporary standards of decorum simply did not allow such things to be shown in a story.

Writers of melodrama, aware that grotesque jeopardy had finally become unbelievable—and therefore laughable—switched tactics. Instead of trying to find ever-more-horrible threats, they used very simple threats, but they made them come true. The first time a writer had the villain jam a burning cigarette into the heroine’s hand, the audience gasped and a threshold was crossed. The villain had proved that he not only could cause pain, he would. His next threat was credible again, and because the audience believed, jeopardy was again a powerful tool for creating tension.

SEXUAL TENSION

Sexual tension is related to jeopardy. In fact, you could call it “jeopardy of sex,” except that presumably your characters desire sex rather more
than they desire pain. Sexual tension is so vital to so many stories that the term romance is now generally used to refer to stories that are about sexual tension. It crosses all cultural boundaries. When a man and woman meet in a story, we assume at least some degree of sexual possibility. If the two characters immediately become important to each other, the sexual tension increases—especially if they become important in a negative sense. Rivalry, contempt, anger—none of them make us doubt for a moment that the sexual possibility is real, and the more intense these negative feelings are, the more sexual tension there is.

However, for sexual tension to make two characters more important, the audience must recognize them as meeting the general social standards of sexual attractiveness. When Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert met in It Happened One Night, the audience instantly recognized them as suitable sex objects.

This does not mean that all participants in sexual tension have to be physically beautiful, though that is certainly the easiest way. If you have made an unbeautiful character important to us for other reasons, we will regard him as sexually attractive despite a lack of physical beauty, and sexual tension will work for him. John Merrick's devotion to the actress played by Anne Bancroft in The Elephant Man was charged with sexual energy, even though actor John Hurt's makeup was repulsive.

On a milder level, the television series L. A. Law brought off a similar effect between the characters played by Jill Eikenberry and Michael Tucker. Tucker is short and pudgy, with a receding hairline, playing meek tax lawyer Stuart Markowitz; Eikenberry is a tall, attractive, compelling woman playing high-powered trial lawyer Ann Kelsey. The audience did not see any sexual possibility between them. In fact, when a drunken Kelsey proposed a night of unwedded bliss to Markowitz at a party, it was comic because it was so unexpected — so odd. Gradually, however, the sexual tension grew as our sympathy with Markowitz grew. We recognized that he was a good man; we identified with him and his attraction to Kelsey; and finally we felt a strong desire to bring them together.

Sexual tension intensifies the audience's involvement with all characters involved. However, as several TV series have discovered to their sorrow, tension dissipates when characters come together in sexual harmony. It isn't like violence, which establishes the villain's credibility and makes the next round of jeopardy even more powerful. Instead, sexual fulfillment has the same effect on sexual tension that the death of the victim has on jeopardy. For that character, at least, the tension is over. The writers of Cheers quickly realized their mistake and split Sam and Diane; the writers of Moonlighting never gave David and Maddie a moment to
enjoy sexual harmony before putting them back in hopeless, hilarious conflict—and the sexual tension remained high, at least for a while.

**SIGNS AND PORTENTS**

Another way to increase the readers’ intensity is to connect a character with the world around her, so that her fate is seen to have much wider consequences than her private loss or gain. King Lear’s climactic moment is linked with a storm, and though we take his attempt to command the wind (“Blow, winds! Crack your cheeks!”) as a sign of madness, the fact is that the wind is blowing, the storm is raging, and we receive the subliminal message that what happens to Lear has cosmic implications. His daughters’ betrayal of their oaths to him, their plotted patricide, is more than a private tragedy—it is a disorder in the world, which must be resolved before the universe can again be at peace.

In tragedy and high romance, the connection between a character and the world around him can be quite open. The ark of the covenant in Raiders of the Lost Ark is more than a secret weapon—its opening represents the unleashing of the power of God. When the villain opens it, the storyteller makes sure we understand that it isn’t a mere boobytrap that kills him. The ark isn’t opened until it is brought to a special holy place, and when the lid comes off, we see spirits spiraling around, terrible winds and fire, finally culminating in a whirlwind that disturbs the very heavens. Likewise, Oedipus’s sins cause a famine, which doesn’t end until he pays the price; storms rage across the moors in Wuthering Heights exactly when the mood of the characters is most turbulent.

Even when you’re trying for more subtlety, however, signs and portents are still vital tools in drawing your reader more intensely into the tale. You simply disguise the cosmic connections a little better. The great storm becomes a gentle drizzle; the flaming sky becomes a sweltering day; the roll of thunder becomes a distant siren in the city; the famine becomes the wilting of a flower in the window. The connection between character and cosmos will still be there, and, often without consciously noticing the portents, the audience will become more intensely involved with what the character does.

You can’t control everything the reader feels, and no two members of your audience will ever be emotionally involved in your story exactly to the same degree. Still, there are some things you can control, and if you use them deftly, without letting them get out of hand, you can lead most of your audience to intense emotional involvement with your characters. The audience won’t necessarily like the characters, but they certainly won’t be indifferent to them.