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Become a PROFESSIONAL AUTHOR COURSE

PART ONE:
WRITE STORIES THAT WORK
Lesson Three:
Your Secret Superpower
Grant P. Hudson

**BECOME A
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CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

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How This Course Works and What to Expect by the End:

The Become a Professional Author Course is made up of three basic parts:

1. Write Stories That Work

In eight Lesson Modules, you will learn the basic structures of all successful fiction and be encouraged through practical exercises to produce stories of your own which grab, glue, guide and control readers' attention.

2. Sell Stories Effectively

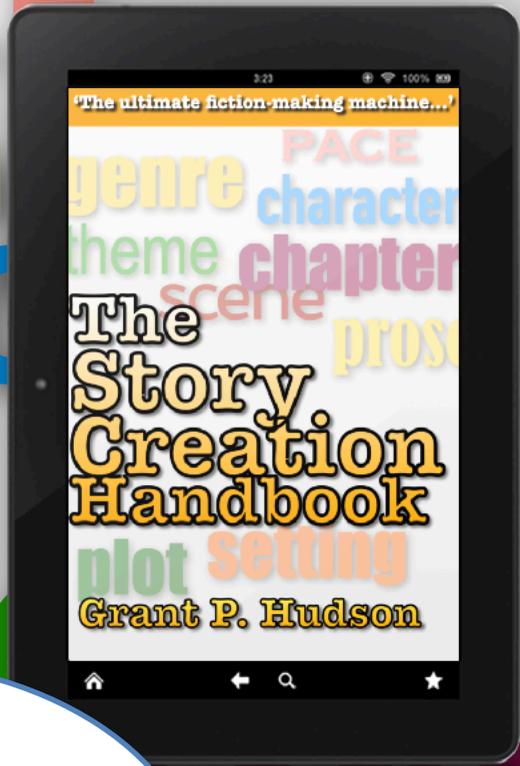
In four Lesson Modules, you will discover how marketing really works and work through several practical exercises so that you will have customers who like, buy and recommend your work to others.

2. How Clarendon House Can Help You

In two Lesson Modules, you will be shown how Clarendon House lays out routes of opportunity for you to get published and acquire a readership of your own.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU DO ALL THE EXERCISES TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY TO ACHIEVE THE MAXIMUM BENEFITS FROM THE COURSE.

‘The ultimate fiction-making machine...’



If you haven't yet done so, [DOWNLOAD YOUR COPY](#) of The Story Creation Handbook for use in prompting stories for exercises.

PACE
genre
theme
plot
setting
chapter
scene
prose
prose

LESSON THREE: YOUR SECRET SUPERPOWER

There's a perpetual power source at the core of successful storytelling. In my book [How Stories Really Work](#), I call it a **vacuum**.

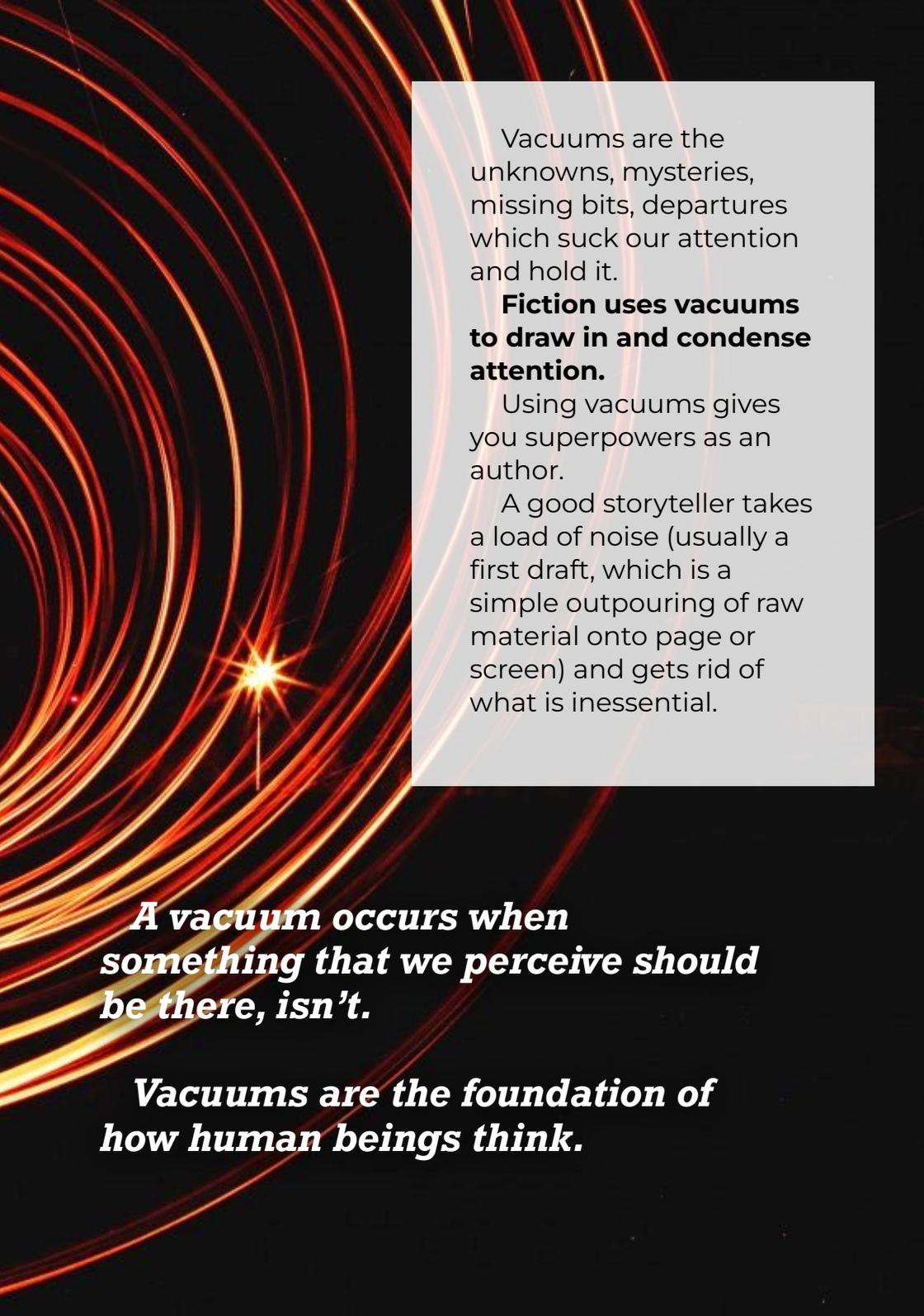
A vacuum sucks in attention like a black hole sucks in light. No reader can look away from a well-constructed vacuum.

Fiction is loaded with vacuums.

When we're not reading fiction, our minds are actively seeking out or drifting towards vacuums in real life.

Right now, sitting here reading this, you have attention on vacuums which are pulling you forward, sticking you to the page, making you wonder and question, and finally leading you to deduce meaning.

Vacuums are the foundation of how human beings think.



Vacuums are the unknowns, mysteries, missing bits, departures which suck our attention and hold it.

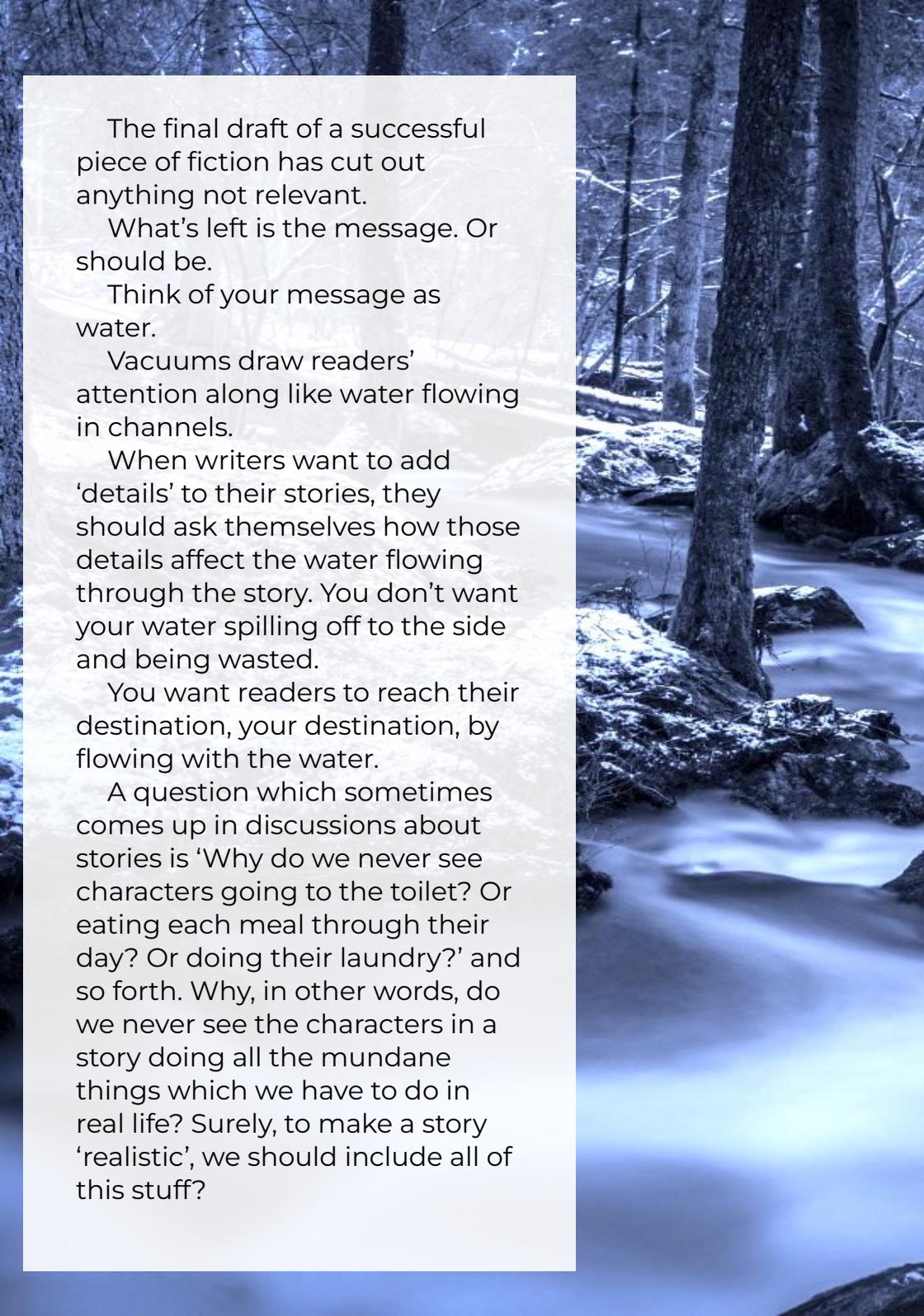
Fiction uses vacuums to draw in and condense attention.

Using vacuums gives you superpowers as an author.

A good storyteller takes a load of noise (usually a first draft, which is a simple outpouring of raw material onto page or screen) and gets rid of what is inessential.

A vacuum occurs when something that we perceive should be there, isn't.

Vacuums are the foundation of how human beings think.



The final draft of a successful piece of fiction has cut out anything not relevant.

What's left is the message. Or should be.

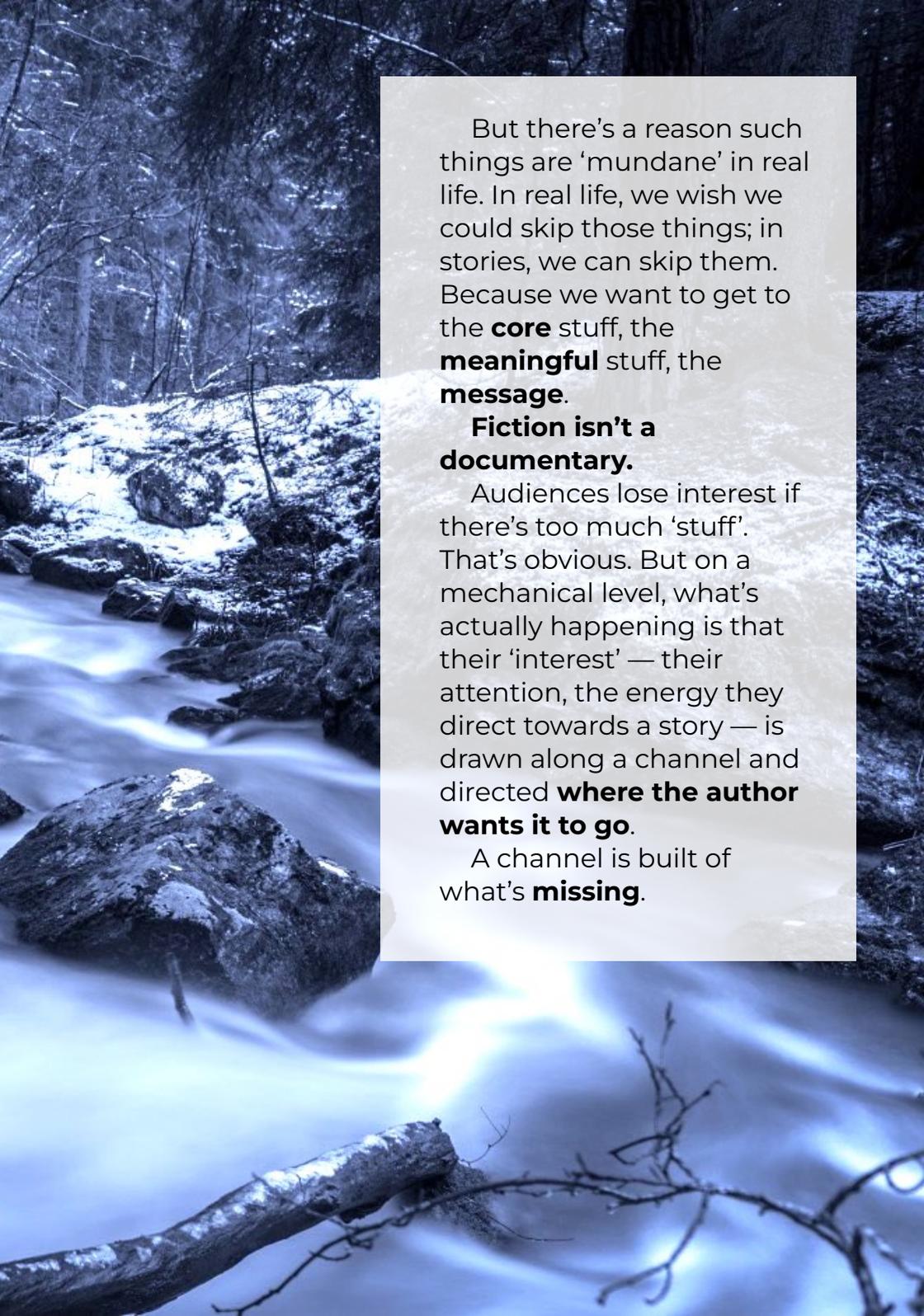
Think of your message as water.

Vacuums draw readers' attention along like water flowing in channels.

When writers want to add 'details' to their stories, they should ask themselves how those details affect the water flowing through the story. You don't want your water spilling off to the side and being wasted.

You want readers to reach their destination, your destination, by flowing with the water.

A question which sometimes comes up in discussions about stories is 'Why do we never see characters going to the toilet? Or eating each meal through their day? Or doing their laundry?' and so forth. Why, in other words, do we never see the characters in a story doing all the mundane things which we have to do in real life? Surely, to make a story 'realistic', we should include all of this stuff?

A photograph of a winter forest scene. A stream flows over large, dark rocks, partially covered in snow. The water is blurred, suggesting movement. The background shows snow-covered trees and a dense forest. The overall tone is cool and serene.

But there's a reason such things are 'mundane' in real life. In real life, we wish we could skip those things; in stories, we can skip them. Because we want to get to the **core** stuff, the **meaningful** stuff, the **message**.

Fiction isn't a documentary.

Audiences lose interest if there's too much 'stuff'. That's obvious. But on a mechanical level, what's actually happening is that their 'interest' — their attention, the energy they direct towards a story — is drawn along a channel and directed **where the author wants it to go**.

A channel is built of what's **missing**.

Vacuums

Have you ever noticed why central characters are often orphans or have one parent missing? You might have concluded 'It's a story trope' and set the question aside: but why is it a trope?

Missing parents are a vacuum. They should be there, but aren't. Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, King Arthur, Frodo, Pip in **Great Expectations**, Scout in **To Kill a Mockingbird**, Pierre Bezuhov in **War and Peace**, Oliver Twist... hundreds of others, the examples are too numerous to list. All of them have at least one parent missing.

Result?

Reader or audience attention snaps in on them; they become central characters, vehicles of attention.

The author doesn't invent a character and then work hard to gain audience sympathy by putting them through adventures — the author creates **vacuums** and sucks in attention, and then calls that a 'character'.





Then — and only then — is the attention of readers settled enough for it to be able to become interested in the adventures which follow.

Central characters suck in enough attention to become vehicles for readers as they journey through the narrative.

When storytellers bombard readers with too much information about a character, the audience is tricked into thinking hard to try to picture this ‘person’, believing for a moment that that is what readers do. Too much ‘character data’ and a reader gives up. Why?

Because in fact a reader doesn’t have to picture a ‘person’ at all to enjoy a story. It’s much simpler and more visceral than that.

A reader just has to perceive a vacuum.

All it takes for Luke Skywalker to hook us into his story is for him to lose his foster-parents

All we need to identify with Harry Potter is to know that his parents are dead.

All King Arthur needs for us to feel closer to him is absent parents.

The same goes for Frodo, Pip, Scout and all the others. We actually know very little about them as 'people'; their authors are usually very sparing with physical descriptions on the page or back stories in films. All we need to know is that something that should be there (in our cultural estimation) isn't.

The vacuum sucks us in, and we track along the line of the plot obediently from that point on.

If human beings had a culture in which parents weren't important, like some species of animal or bug, then missing parents wouldn't work as a vacuum. But because we are a warm and loving lot, the instant a parent disappears we are drawn in.

A vacuum occurs when something that we perceive should be there, isn't.





If your central character lives at home with his or her parents and has a happy family life with all as it should be, readers will daydream, close the book or wander out of the cinema.

Why?

Because a happy, rounded character hasn't been shaped into a vehicle for attention.

Edith Nesbit's **The Railway Children** starts with a happy family, but the plot begins when the father is suddenly arrested and taken to prison.

You can probably think of a thousand more examples.

If a central character doesn't lose their parents early on in the tale, there are other things they can lose which can act to draw our attention towards them and turn them into vehicles.

Bilbo Baggins in **The Hobbit** loses his comfortable hobbit hole; Mole in **Wind in the Willows** similarly leaves his underground home; the four lovers in **A Midsummer Night's Dream** lose the comforts of Athens; Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert's **Dune** loses the pleasant world of Caladan (and soon loses his father). Examples are countless in number.

Anything missing in a sequence or context acts as a vacuum.

Vacuums draw attention.

Enough vacuums built around a character creates an **attention vehicle**.

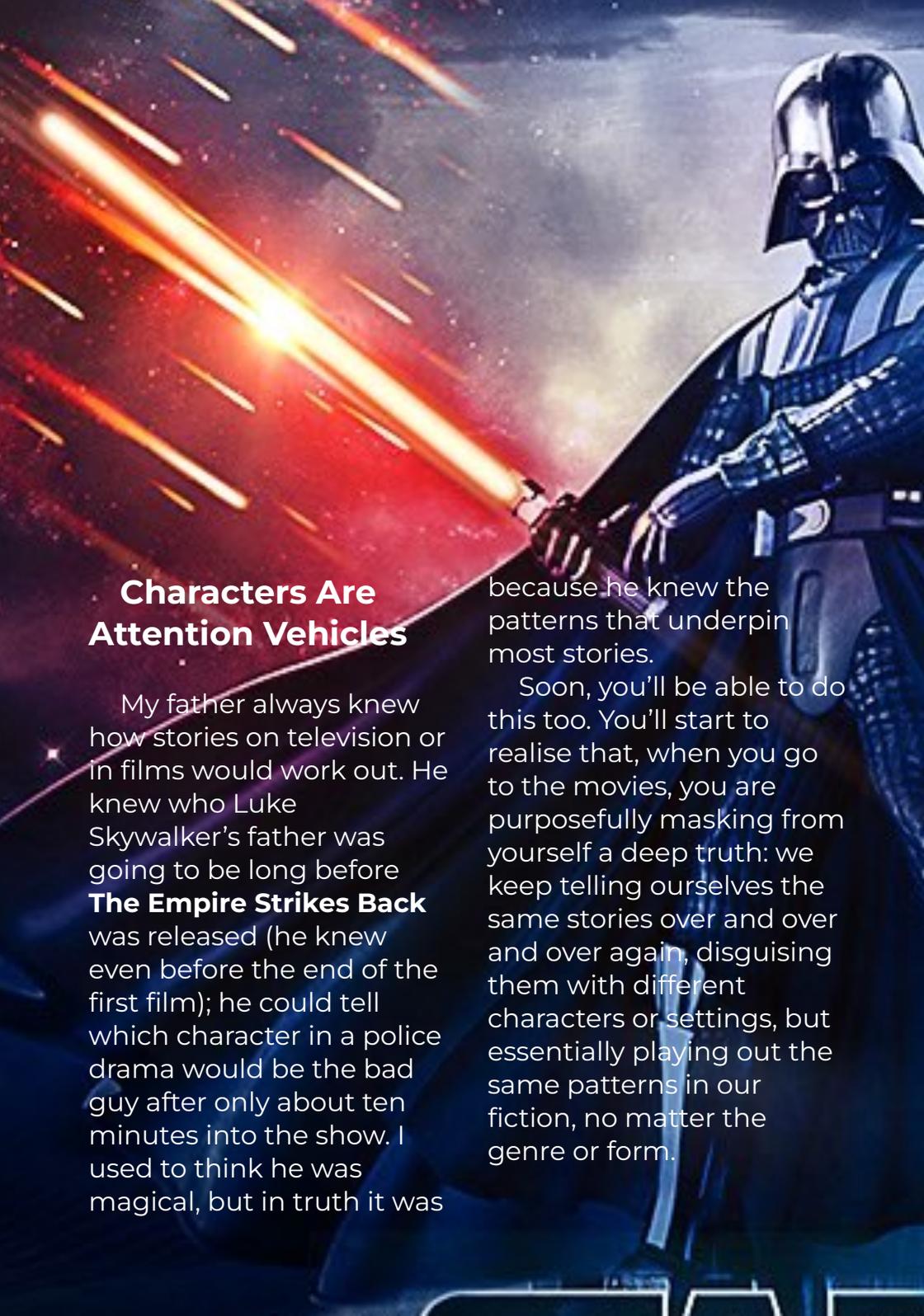
Why do so many writers create noise rather than music?

They think that good writing is about the things that you put into a story, when the reverse is true.

Good writing is about the things that you leave out of a story.

The essence of good fiction is to create simple, relevant vacuums we can be used over and over to attract and glue audience attention to our messages.



The background of the entire page is a dramatic scene featuring Darth Vader. He is shown from the waist up, wearing his iconic black armor and helmet. He holds a glowing orange lightsaber in his right hand, which is positioned diagonally across the frame. The background is a dark, starry space with numerous bright, streaking light trails in shades of orange and red, suggesting a battle or a high-speed chase. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, blacks, and the vibrant oranges of the lightsaber and light trails.

Characters Are Attention Vehicles

My father always knew how stories on television or in films would work out. He knew who Luke Skywalker's father was going to be long before **The Empire Strikes Back** was released (he knew even before the end of the first film); he could tell which character in a police drama would be the bad guy after only about ten minutes into the show. I used to think he was magical, but in truth it was

because he knew the patterns that underpin most stories.

Soon, you'll be able to do this too. You'll start to realise that, when you go to the movies, you are purposefully masking from yourself a deep truth: we keep telling ourselves the same stories over and over and over again, disguising them with different characters or settings, but essentially playing out the same patterns in our fiction, no matter the genre or form.

These patterns exist in readers' minds and expectations. If we want our fiction to reach an audience, we need to be aware of these things.

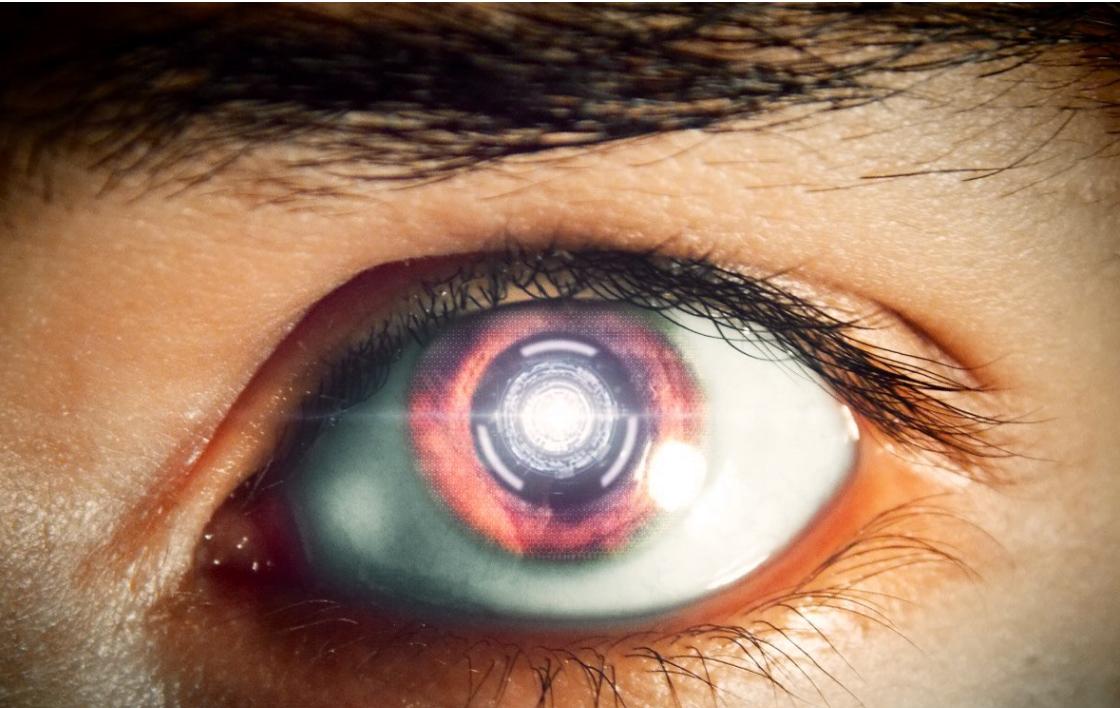
It's not about staying 'conventional' or 'following rules': it's about **using the mechanical principles which make something work.**

You wouldn't expect to play a violin with a hammer, or speak without passing air across vocal cords, or see without receiving light

into your eyes. It's the same with fiction: it follows 'laws' like those of physics. If you want success as a writer of fiction, you need to start using these laws.

Master storytellers can hold an audience's attention for hours, whether through a book, a film, a television series, or a set of short stories.

The good news is that you can learn how to do so too, fairly easily.



Some things are extremely simple.

But one of the first things you need to know, both in storytelling and marketing, is that **you are always in control.**

Audiences must always know where to place their attention.

The main device for this is what we call a 'main character'.

Readers rest their attention on the vehicle of the main character. To do so, you might think that they need to know 'what that character wants', or 'who or what the character has to be overcome to get whatever it is', or 'what terrible thing will happen if the character doesn't succeed, and what wonderful thing will happen if they do'.

This is much more simply stated as:

Readers need to sense something missing that should be there.

**You are
always in
control.**

*Audiences must
always know where
to place their
attention.*



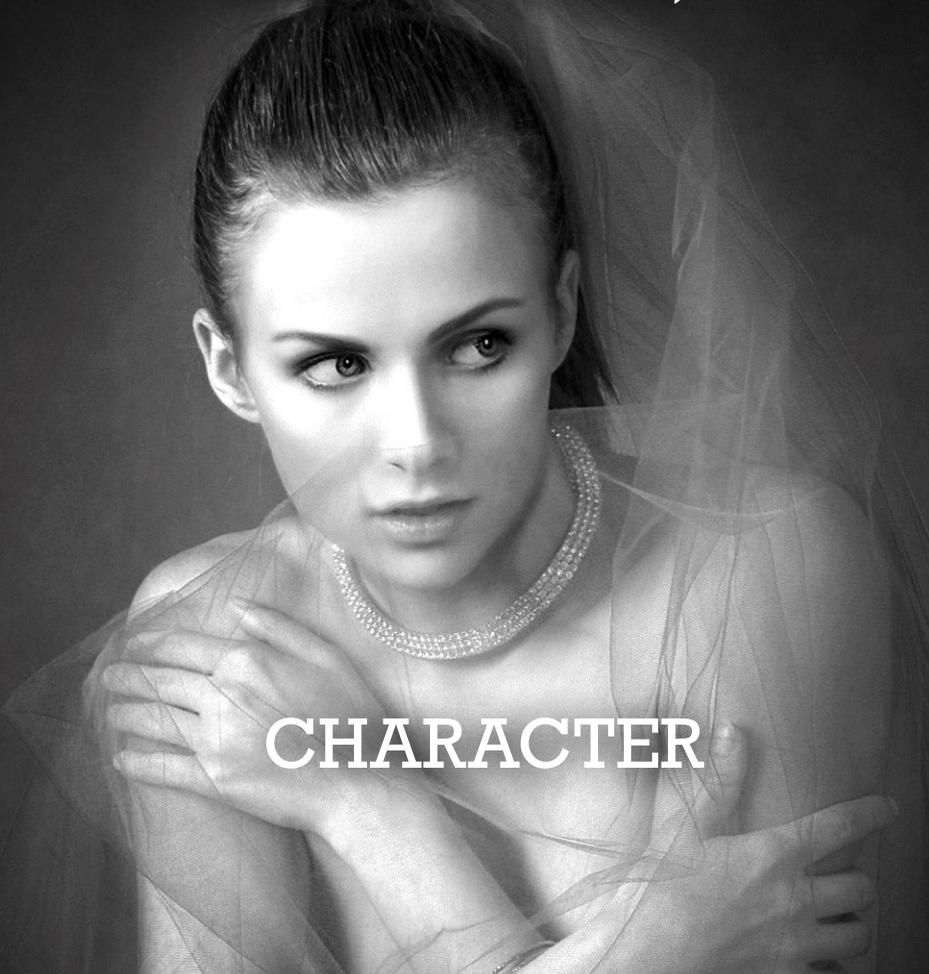


READER

ATTENTION

VACUUM

something missing that ought to be present (or the threat of something present that shouldn't be there)



CHARACTER

Note that the 'central character' can be a villain as well as a hero: many tragedies and some other forms of fiction are centred around 'non-heroic' characters. The nature of the central character doesn't make any difference: the audience still needs to be clear about the above.

The main character is an attention vehicle.

Your readers have a quantity of attention. Unless you create vacuums to guide that attention, they'll put your

book aside and move on. It's not like there's a shortage of choice: millions of books are now published each year.

Whether you're writing a comedy, a romance, an epic fantasy, a science fiction tale, a dark gothic horror novel, a movie about contemporary politics or a family saga, the same principle applies: you have to **build a vehicle which draws in readers' attention.**

Every single time.

Anything else is 'noise'.



**Build a vehicle which
draws in readers'
attention**

That doesn't mean that every reader completely 'becomes' Macbeth all the way through the play, or that we all totally identify with Robert De Niro's taxi driver, or even that we become utterly absorbed into the personage of Harry Potter while we're reading the books. But to some degree we participate in every central character, even if we are just 'perched on their shoulder' during the narrative.

We do so because **vacuums of one kind or another have drawn us close to that character.**

*We participate in a character because **vacuums of one kind or another have drawn us close to that character.***



A story will collapse immediately if readers have not had their attention drawn in in this way.

Elizabeth Bennett may get to go off and marry Darcy; James Bond may sail off into the sunset with a woman; Lara Croft may defeat the bad guys and live to explore another day; readers triumph by getting the full impact (hopefully) of what the author was trying to say in each story.

But only if they have been able to travel ‘inside’ a main character the whole way.

Readers don’t buy the most erudite, the most original, the most verbose or the best structured books: **they buy the ones which most effectively attract and hold their attention.** Mills and Boon pot-boilers have their place in the world of readers because their attention-attraction is very strong.

A photograph of a person sitting on a rocky ledge by a body of water, reading an open book. The person is wearing a brown long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. The background shows a blue sky and a body of water. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

*Readers buy the books
which most effectively
attract and hold their
attention.*

The Basic Points

After spending about 40 years studying hundreds of short stories, movies, novels, plays, musicals and poems across almost every genre in the Western canon, and after having written the five-star-rated **How Stories Really Work** which has helped hundreds of writers all over the world, I have distilled three basic points of Western literature which every successful story needs to cover.

It goes like this:

i) A central character is missing something which should be there. This creates an **attention vehicle** for readers

ii) A **mentor** appears who **programmes** the vehicle with a plan and motivation to act.



iii) The vehicle character goes on a journey, narrowly avoids failure and succeeds in the end.

In tragedies or ironic stories, the character narrowly avoids success and fails. But apart from that one adjustment, this is the pattern you'll find in all successful stories.

Note: in **successful** stories.

You won't find many exceptions to this pattern, because anyone attempting to write a story which deviates from this pattern usually a) never finishes it, b) never gets it published or c) never gets it circulated widely enough for anyone to remember it.

This next statement is almost a tautology:

Unsuccessful stories are unsuccessful precisely because they have not been able to attract and hold enough attention.

You can vary the emphasis; you can alter the viewpoint; you can tweak the sequences; you can play with the form a little — but too much deviation from this pattern will result in failure.



Example # 1: The Lord of the Rings

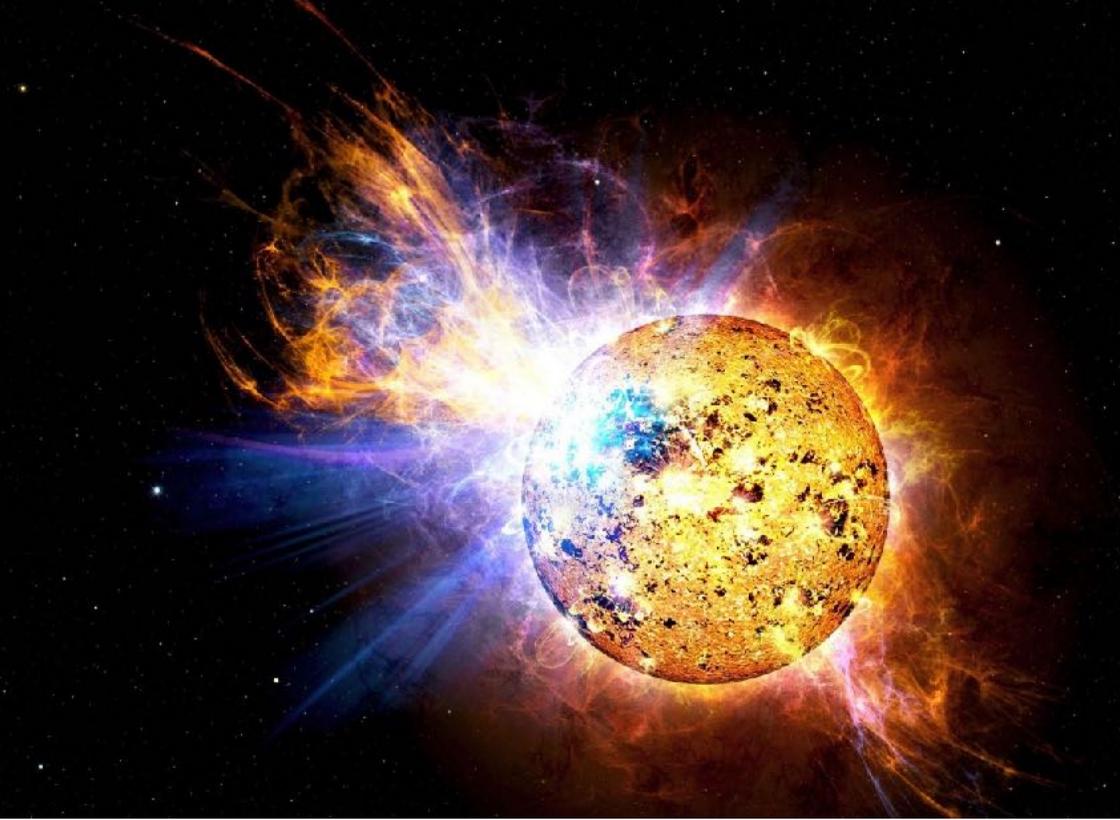
i) Frodo is missing a solution to the One Ring which he has inherited, a super-weapon which threatens to overwhelm him and the entire world. This threatened overwhelm makes him a vehicle for reader attention. (Plus he's an orphan...) He encounters an entire geography and hosts of hostile armies — plus the temptation of the

Ring itself —preventing him from achieving a solution.

ii) Gandalf appears and 'programmes' Frodo with a plan to destroy the Ring, urging the importance of doing so.

iii) Frodo goes on a quest, narrowly avoids failure and the quest succeeds in the end.





**Example # 2: Star Wars:
A New Hope**

i) Luke Skywalker loses his aunt and uncle to the evil Empire attracting and holding audience attention. (Plus he's an orphan...) He also encounters various obstacles to restoring things to how they should be, including the Empire's

super-weapon, the Death Star.

ii) Obi-Wan appears and 'programmes' Luke with a plan and motivation to act to defeat the Death Star.

iii) Luke narrowly avoids failure and succeeds in blowing up the battle station in the end.



Example # 3: Macbeth

i) Macbeth (in his own estimation) is missing out on the rewards of his martial efforts, the throne of Scotland. His psychological vacuum creates a vehicle for our attention. His obstacle — a living king— prevents him from reaching his goal.

ii) The witches appear (along with his wife, Lady Macbeth) and they ‘programme’ him with a plan and motivation to act to murder the king.

iii) As this is a tragedy, Macbeth narrowly avoids success and fails.

Example # 4: Phases 1 to 4 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

i) Various superheroes miss out on personal wholeness in various ways. Plus the whole universe is threatened by Thanos and the Infinity Stones, incredibly powerful gems which can alter reality. (Note also that most of the heroes are orphans or

become orphans in the course of the films...)

ii) Doctor Strange appears and 'programmes' the Avengers with a plan and motivation to act against Thanos.

iii) The Avengers narrowly avoid failure and succeed.



Example # 5: War and Peace

i) Various characters have personal flaws and lack a solution to Napoleon, who is gradually dominating Europe. (Many are orphans or lose their parents during the story.)

ii) General Kutuzov appears and 'programmes'

the Tsar and the Russian people with a plan and motivation to act against Napoleon, which involves many of the characters of the novel in various ways.

iii) Russia narrowly avoids failure and succeeds in the end.



Almost every story you can think of works in this way. Sometimes there are many major characters, as in **War and Peace**; sometimes there are several guides, as can arguably be seen in the Marvel films (Nick Fury, Odin, Howard Stark and others take on the guide role at different times); sometimes it appears that there is no guide, but you will find some kind of guiding idea which appears whether it is personified or not (it usually is).

Sometimes the central character fails, but that's because you're reading or watching a tragedy or an irony, basic genres which depend for their power very much on the audience's familiarity with this underlying pattern of expectations.

But the extremely widespread appearance of this pattern should mean something to every writer struggling for success:

This pattern has been found to work all over the world and over thousands of years and differing genres and forms.



The further a writer drifts from it, the harder audiences have to work to engage with the story. Books or films which vary widely from this pattern are usually regarded as 'avant garde' or 'independent' and have very small audiences.

Hopefully you can begin to see that the reasons for story success are as mechanical as the operations of a vacuum cleaner.

Writers can be as original as they want to be as long as they never forget the mechanics involved.

When you look across the list of recently released movies, for example, you might think you have found what appear to be exceptions to this pattern. But upon closer inspection you'll discover two things:

1. Even those films which appear to veer away from the design have just found a new way of using the same mechanics, and

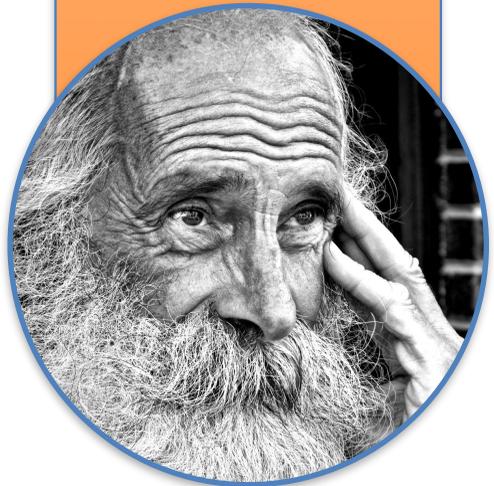
Course Exercise # 9:

Do you have a central character who is missing something?

Is there a mentor who programmes that character?

What happens next?

Make some notes in your Course Log.



2. Films which have genuinely deviated from these mechanics have not done well in terms of ratings or box office receipts.

Creative writers figure out how to use the mechanics in new ways.

This is where 'originality' and 'creativity' come in.

New patterns and completely new ways of telling stories can by all means be tried — but the expectation must be that they will struggle to find audiences, for the simple reason that violins and cars and washing machines and songs only work using certain principles.

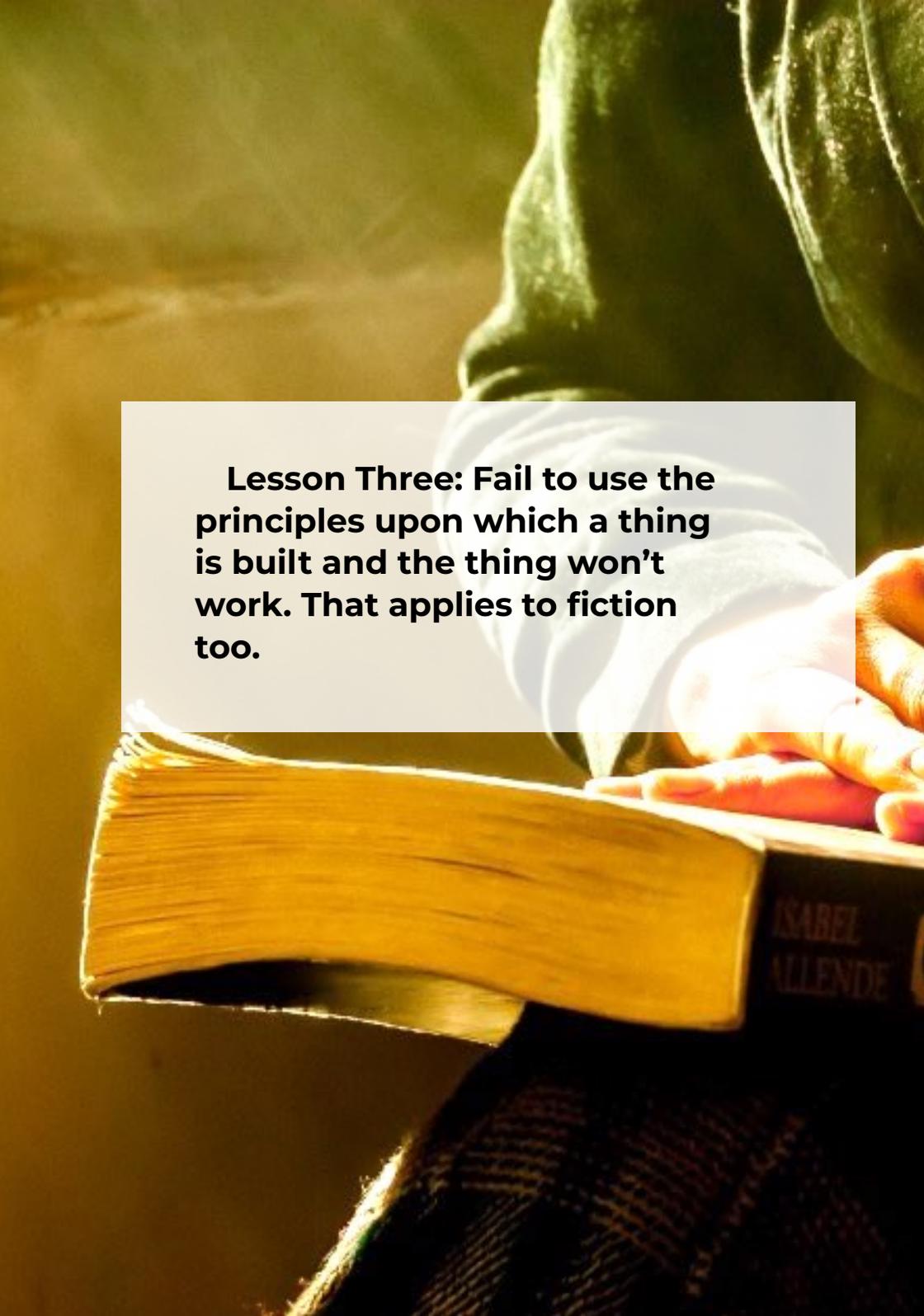


Course Exercise # 10:

Find the most successful piece of fiction you have ever written.

This can be 'success' in terms of commerce, feedback or just the one you're the most pleased with. List out which of the patterns described so far that piece contains.

Take your time and keep looking until you see them. If the piece has been successful in any way, they'll be there.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding an open book. The person is wearing a green hoodie and a white long-sleeved shirt. The book's pages are yellowed with age, and the cover is dark with the name 'ISABEL ALLENDE' visible in gold lettering. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, creating a soft glow around the book and hands.

Lesson Three: Fail to use the principles upon which a thing is built and the thing won't work. That applies to fiction too.

Lesson Three Exercise: DEVELOPING YOUR SUPERPOWER

Take two pieces of fiction which you have written (or use [The Story Creation Handbook](#) if you wish to create new stories as required):



CHARACTER
VACUUMS
something
missing that
ought to be
present (or the
threat of
something
present that
shouldn't be
there)



PROTAGONIST/
ATTENTION
VEHICLE

PROTAGONIST/
ATTENTION
VEHICLE

**Develop each protagonist as an
Attention Vehicle, with vacuums which
attract reader attention.**

**Your next
module:**

**BECOME A
PROFESSIONAL
AUTHOR
COURSE
PART ONE:
WRITE STORIES THAT WORK**

Lesson Four:
Attention Becomes Emotion

Grant P Hudson