



## Protagonists

By  
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We have spoken of protagonists before in this series (*The Art of Writing: "Character in Fiction"*). The time has come for us to speak of them again and at greater length. The protagonist is more than the "hero" of a book or story. He or she is the main character for whom the reader is supposed to feel sympathy, and with whom they are supposed to identify. In other words, the protagonist is the character into whose body the reader slips in order to view the story from the inside.

This then is the reason why protagonists must be sympathetic. For if the reader is going to wear the protagonist like a suit of clothes, then the reader must be made to feel comfortable with their fictional alter ego. Human beings have a deep-seated need to maintain their self-respect and people who don't like themselves can develop serious psychological problems. In extreme cases, lack of self worth can lead people to commit suicide. Since readers are human beings, it follows that they too have a need to like themselves and that they will be reluctant to inhabit the body of a fictional character for whom they do not feel sympathy.

To amplify this point, let us consider a specific example. Perhaps the best movie director of our age, and certainly the most successful, is Steven Spielberg. He has given us *Jaws*; *ET*; *The Extraterrestrial*; and *Schindler's List*. Mr. Spielberg also gave us another movie, one that generally does not appear on his list of credits. That movie was *1941*, a comedy about the panic that ensues in Los Angeles one December evening when a Japanese submarine launches an attack on Hollywood in the days following Pearl Harbor. The movie is a big budget effort with stars such as John Belushi, Ned Beatty, and Dan Aykroyd. It is spectacularly well made, a gem of the cinematographer's art, has a memorable score, and fine performances are given by all concerned. It has one small flaw, however, one that is deadly for a comedy. At no time in the entire movie are you moved to laugh, not even once. None of the jokes, none of the elaborate sight gags, none of the expensive special effects are even a tiny bit funny.

So what went wrong?

I have watched *1941* numerous times because I enjoy the craftsmanship that went into it, the theme music, and the vintage airplanes. I have come to the conclusion that it lacks humor because you basically don't care about any of the characters. With the exception of General "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell, played by Robert Stack, no one in the movie is likeable. Since you don't like them, you don't invest any of your self into

becoming them. It is this feeling of emotional detachment that robs the movie of all of its comedic potential. Like a comic with a bad sense of timing, Spielberg's jokes fall flat.

So the first requirement for protagonists is that they be sympathetic characters. That doesn't mean they have to be handsome or beautiful, or even ordinary looking. They can be malformed, grotesque, and even a little hideous -- but they must contain that inner spark of humanity that allows the readers to say, "there but for the grace of God, go I!" One of the most enduring of all stories is *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In it, the title character is a grotesque figure of a man who rings the bell of the great cathedral in Paris. Physically, Quasimodo isn't someone the rest of us would like to emulate. Yet, we do find ourselves looking at the world through his eyes. Why? Because he loves the beautiful Esmeralda, a love that will never be reciprocated because of the hunchback's physical deformities.

What makes Quasimodo real to us aren't his looks, but his emotions. We understand his pain as he views his love from afar. We understand it because we have experienced similar pain. Who among us has not longed for an unattainable love, or felt the hurt of rejection? Who has never had the experience of being an outsider, of longing for acceptance by the group and not attaining it? We, too, have gazed down on the world from our emotional bell towers and felt the hurt that comes from being excluded.

And because we have experienced the same emotions that Quasimodo experiences, we are able to see eighteenth century Paris through his eyes. He becomes the alter ego through which we live life vicariously. He is the person with whom we identify despite his misshapen form.

That then is the second requirement for a protagonist. The reader must be able to identify with the character. This is not quite the same as being sympathetic to the character. In numerous war movies, there is the scene where the heroes are sneaking up on the enemy camp and they must first silence the guards before they can complete their mission. The person I always feel sorry for is the guard. Here he is walking his post on a cold night, minding his own business, when some rude stranger comes from out of the dark and sticks a knife between his ribs. Yet, though I feel sympathy for guard characters, I don't identify with them. After all, I know they are going to die the moment I spot them on the screen. Why subject myself to needless psychological trauma over something that is both necessary and inevitable?

To give the readers a character they can identify with requires that you go beyond merely creating sympathy. You must give the reader a reason to assume your protagonist's identity in order that they can watch the story through the protagonist's eyes. They must find in the character something of themselves.

To understand this point, let us consider a recent vintage and rather forgettable movie in which the director faced an especially difficult problem in making the audience identify with one of the protagonists in the story. I refer to *I.Q.*, a light romantic comedy in which Walter Matthau plays Albert Einstein, Meg Ryan plays his mathematical genius niece (a stretch considering Ms. Ryan's looks), and Tim Robbins plays a garage mechanic who falls in love with Einstein's niece. The story is about how Albert Einstein, unhappy with his niece's choice of a pompous psychologist for a fiancée, helps the Tim Robbins character win her love.

Whoever wrote the screenplay set a Herculean task for himself when he chose to make Albert Einstein one of the protagonists. We've all heard of Einstein, of course, one

of the great minds of our time and perhaps of all time. We know that he was an Austrian Jew who immigrated to the United States to escape Nazi persecution, that he worked at Princeton University, and that he had something to do with the invention of the atom bomb. That is about all we know of him, except possibly that he was the author of the equation  $E=MC^2$ , which has something to do with atomic physics.

Since Einstein is an historic personage, and a very famous one at that, the screenwriter and director have a more difficult problem getting people to like him than they would if he were a fictional character. The reason for this is that we all come to the movie with some preconception of what the real Albert Einstein was like, and few of us are predisposed to identify with him. This is not to say that we think he was a monster or unworthy. The opposite is more the case. Most of us have placed him on such a high pedestal that we believe him to be beyond the understanding of mere mortals. "How can little old me ever identify with the great Albert Einstein?" people undoubtedly ask themselves subconsciously the moment the Einstein character appears on the screen.

The screenwriter and director approached this problem by having Walter Matthau play him as a lovable, eccentric cupid -- a characterization that would probably have infuriated the real Einstein. By showing him not as a great thinker, but rather as a caring uncle willing to do anything to keep his niece from making the mistake of marrying the wrong man, they humanize him. Suddenly, he doesn't seem quite so distant to us. We begin to see that here is a person of flesh and blood who is just like us save for his frizzy hairdo. No longer are we looking at the Master of Relativity. Now we see him as an avuncular old man who only wants happiness for someone he loves.

In his scheme to make a match between the Meg Ryan and Tim Robbins characters. Three comic sidekicks, Leo Szilard and two other brilliant mathematicians from the first half of the century, abet him. The real mathematicians would undoubtedly have been as outraged as Einstein by the way they are portrayed in the movie, but luckily, since they are all dead, they aren't in any position to sue for slander. Their function is to look a little buffoonish in order to make the Albert Einstein character seem less so. By seeing Einstein as a normal human being, people begin to identify with him in the film. And once they identify with him, the director has done his job. Albert Einstein has been converted from cultural icon to protagonist!

There is one last thing that is required of every protagonist. They must have a flaw, one that bears directly on the problem at hand. "Wait a minute!" you exclaim. "My hero has to be flawed? Doesn't that make him a non-hero?"

No, just the opposite. It is your hero's flaws that make him human and approachable, that give him depth, and ultimately, that make your story work.

Let us continue our tour of literature and the movies by considering one of the most famous characters in all of fiction, the dour prince of Denmark, he of the agonizing soliloquy that begins, "To be, or not to be. That is the question..."

*Hamlet* is probably William Shakespeare's best play, and certainly one of his most popular. As a story, it has everything: love, murder, intrigue, incest, insanity, gravediggers, swordplay, a play within the play, ghosts, skulls, ... did I mention gravediggers? What author couldn't do something with that collection of elements? Of course, the question really comes down to "What author would dare do anything with them?" After all, the Bard of Avon pretty much mined out that particular vein of literature, ruining it for the rest of us.

On the surface, Hamlet appears to have just about everything a person could want. He's young, handsome, and rich! Not a bad combination to begin life. So what's his problem, his flaw? The answer, of course, is that he lacks the one attribute that could actually make his situation better -- decisiveness. The Prince of Denmark is cursed with an indecisive nature that causes him to think when he should act, to hesitate when he should be making haste. He can't make up his mind what he should do about his uncle and his mother after they murder his father. Instead of confronting the two incestuous lovers, he feigns madness and hatches plots. (If not incest by today's standards, the Queen's marriage to her dead husband's brother was certainly so by the standards of Elizabethan England.) Because he would rather sojourn with himself and speak to his dead father's ghost than act, Hamlet sets up a situation that ends in the death of practically everyone on stage at the end of the play. It would have been better if he'd surprised the two lovers in bed and run them both through with a sword in the first act, but then the play would not still be playing some 500 years after its initial debut.

No, the Prince of Denmark is laid low, not by his enemies, but rather by his inner flaws. To be fair, he is actually laid low from being stabbed by a poison sword blade, but it wouldn't have happened if he'd had the fortitude to stand up to his mother and uncle immediately. Because of his flaws, Hamlet is one of the great tragic heroes of literature. Had his strengths prevailed, he would just have been another eminently forgettable action hero.

But if the protagonist-hero has flaws, how does one distinguish him or her from the antagonist-villain? Aren't they then pretty much interchangeable? Actually, they are. Whether a particular character is protagonist or antagonist depends on the treatment he or she receives from the writer. This simple fact is best understood in the saying, "History is written by the victor." After all, we Americans are taught that Benedict Arnold was a great traitor, yet British students learn that he was a patriot and hero worthy of being buried in Westminster Abbey. And, in fact, either side can be the heroes or the villains in almost any story. It's just a matter of viewpoint and the skill of the writer.

Let us now move from *Hamlet* to a more contemporary work that was written for the same purpose, namely the desire to put paying customers' butts in theater seats. I refer to George Lucas's 1976 cinematic sensation *Star Wars*, which most people reading this (and everyone else on the planet) has seen at least three times. If you have not yet seen it, then you may want to go to your video store and rent a copy in order to make sense of the following discussion. So, please spool up *Star Wars* in that private in-brain movie projector that we all carry around in our heads, and hit the play button.

The first thing we see following the initial title are the words, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." This, of course, is a contemporary version of the standard opening for those timeless tales we are told as children, which invariably begin, "Once upon a time..."

The purpose of this opening is to divorce the story from modern times, thereby placing the reader or viewer in the proper frame of mind to absorb this particular pack of lies. And make no mistake about it. A writer of fiction is a professional liar and needs to be a good one if he or she expects to make a living at it.

There follows a long scrolling plane of text that tells us what we are about to see is Episode IV, *A New Hope*. Most people find this strange since there were no Episodes I, II, or III. Actually, what Lucas is trying to evoke with this opening is the feeling of the

Saturday-matinee serials of the 1940s and 1950s that both he and I watched each week in our respective movie theaters. Reading along with the scrolling text, we learn that the Alliance is in rebellion against the “evil Empire” and that the Empire’s “sinister agents” are in pursuit of Princess Leia as she races home with the plans to the Empire’s ultimate weapon, the Death Star. “Evil empire?” “Sinister agents?” Not exactly unbiased reporting, is it?

Let us stop here a moment and ask ourselves a question. We all think of the Rebel Alliance as being the good guys and the Empire as being the bad guys, but why should we care? What business is it of ours who rules over a distant galaxy long ago? It's not like either group is the Republicans or Democrats, you know. To ask us to take sides in the Empire/Alliance dispute is like asking whether we favor Hannibal or Scipio in the Second Punic War. We know who won from history, of course, but "Frankly, my dear, we don't give a damn!"

Nor is it obvious that we should prefer the Alliance because of their politics. After all, Princess Leia *is* a princess, for God's sake! So far all we have are two groups of royalists fighting it out for control of the galaxy. If anything, all of us good democrats (small "d") should be about as neutral with regard to this fight as a Buddhist is about the troubles in Northern Ireland. Besides, who says that democracy is the best form of government for aliens like Wookies and those big salamander-headed things that appear in the second and third movies? It certainly isn't the best form of government for terrestrial bees. So what right have we to impose our views on a bunch of alien species?

Yet, despite having every reason to be neutral in this fight, we all quickly take the Alliance's side and begin to identify with their cause. Why? The reason, of course, is George Lucas's skill at separating the protagonists from the antagonists, something he does without delay. In addition to the loaded adjectives in the scrolling introduction, there is the basic situation to align our sympathies. The rebel Alliance is in a fight with the Empire. Despite its international celebrity, *Star Wars* is at its heart an American movie. In fact, it is an American *western* movie transplanted into space. We are taught in the United States to be proud of our revolutionary heritage. Thus, in the case where someone is rebelling against an "empire," we are inclined to root for the rebels and not the imperials. As noted in the Benedict Arnold example cited above, however, British moviegoers may have a different reaction.

After the text scrolls off into infinity, the camera shifts down and we are treated to a view of Tatooine and its moons for a moment before a small spaceship comes into view. That memorable shot of the Imperial Star Destroyer slowly emerging from out of the theater overhead begins a few seconds later. Almost from the first instant we see the ships, it is clear that the small “consular ship” is under attack by the behemoth star destroyer. It’s a replay of David and Goliath all over again, except this time it takes David almost two hours to achieve victory. Because we all have a romantic and unrealistic attraction for the underdog, that view of the tiny ship being drawn up into the belly of the behemoth is a clue to which side we are on. (A pithy saying: “*The fight isn't always to the strong, nor the race to the swift; but that's the way to bet!*”)

Next comes the fight in the passageways of the freighter. On the one hand we see lightly armed, determined, and recognizably human crewmen defending the small ship. On the other, the white armored, robot-like Imperial storm troopers are attacking the tiny ship. Once again we have the underdog Alliance fighting bravely against the

overwhelming power of the Empire. Of course, the freighter crew loses the fight. Their loss is not in vain, however. While they have been keeping the storm troopers at bay, the princess, she of the hairy earmuffs, has fed the secret plans into R2D2, the robot that looks like a mobile, torpedo-shaped garbage can. While the squat domed robot and his tall gold-mirrored companion escape, the princess tries to fight off the storm troopers and is stunned unconscious for her troubles. (What? How dare they shoot a woman! What kind of barbarians are they?)

All of these events tend to focus our sympathies on the side of the defenders (the Alliance) and against that of the attackers (the Empire). At this point (less than 2 minutes into the movie, any lingering doubts we might have as to our loyalties are immediately dispelled when we get our first look at Darth Vader.

A digression: When my eldest son was about four years old, we took him to Disneyland for the first time. Like most children, it didn't take him long to get into the spirit of the place. It got so that he would run ahead of us as we walked up to an attraction. That is, until we got to the Haunted House. It was a rainy day and crowds were light, so as we walked across the veranda toward the doorway that is the entrance to the attraction, he ran ahead as he had done all day. We lost sight of him for approximately three seconds. At the end of that time, he popped out as quickly as he had entered, and ran directly into my arms. Despite his tender age and total lack of sophistication in such matters, one look inside the haunted house told him that it was scary and he wanted nothing to do with it.

That is the precise reaction most people have to their first view of Darth Vader as he comes striding out of the smoky haze that fills the freighter's airlock. I don't know how long George Lucas spent designing Vader's costume, but however long it was, the time was well spent. We don't know the identity of this stranger in black wearing the Nazi-style helmet, but we know that we don't like him. We react the same way that a mouse reacts to a snake. And if his looks don't convince us that here is the villain of the piece, the raspy breathing that fills the sound track should do the trick. Even James Earl Jones's mellifluous tones sound menacing when issuing from Darth Vader's black mask.

There is nothing about Darth Vader that we like. We don't like the way he breathes, we don't like the way the storm troopers snap to attention in his presence, we don't like the way he picks up the hapless freighter captain and crushes his windpipe when the captain refuses to answer his questions.

Seldom has a movie director fixed an audience's sympathies as quickly as George Lucas does in *Star Wars*. One thing that helps is that one side consists solely of attractive human beings and the other of masked automatons. When it comes to choosing up sides, most of us will go with the human beings every time. And all of this happens before we meet the character George Lucas considers the main protagonist, Luke Skywalker.

Once having gotten us oriented, Lucas never lets up. We follow the adventures of the two robots, meet Luke Skywalker, Obiwan Kenobi, Han Solo, and Chewbacca, in quick order. Along the way, the Imperial storm troopers manage to kill Luke's aunt and uncle, a truly despicable act, in one of the more grisly scenes in the movie. Having captured the princess, the Empire then blows up her home world of Alderaan, and schedules her for "termination." With each atrocity we root ever more powerfully for the Alliance, and specifically for the three attractive characters who make up the movie's troika of protagonists. (Another aside: George Lucas claims that he had 4-2/3 sets of

prospective Luke-Leia-Han trios and that he asked Harrison Ford, then an out of work actor and carpenter, to stand in so that he could fill out the fifth set of prospective protagonists. And the rest is, as they say, film history!)

You would think that all of this would be enough, but of course, it wouldn't be *Star Wars* if Lucas had stopped there. No, after all of the characters have been introduced and the fact firmly established that the Empire is run by evil people, we are introduced to the primary plot device designed to make us render a value judgment regarding which side gains our sympathies.

While en route to the about-to-be-destroyed Alderan, Ben Kenobi explains the concept of the force to Luke Skywalker (and, of course, to us, the audience.) It is The Force which is the clincher concerning who is right and who is wrong in this morality play. For Old Ben has been faithful to The Force and remained true, while Darth Vader has been "seduced by the dark side." Ben lives in pious poverty as a hermit on Tatooine, while Darth Vader has the penultimate power in the Empire. (Who said that crime doesn't pay?)

The Force provides you with a value system by which to judge Alliance and Empire. The Alliance is good and the Empire evil. One side uses The Force and the other misuses it. And having learned this fact, we react as the director intends. Just as we did as children, we sit in the dark, enraptured by the flickering images as we root for the white hats and boo the black hats. Never mind the fact that many of the black hats wear snow-white armor. It's a familiar morality play and we have no difficulty following its subtext.

On the voyage to Alderan, the issues become clear. The protagonists, Luke, Leia (still in jail at that point), and Han, are all young and attractive and dedicated to defeating the evil empire. True, Han is in it for the money, but we all know in the end that he will save Luke Skywalker out of altruism rather than profit motive. The villains are Darth Vader and his endless horde of faceless imperial troops. Even those whose faces we can see leave us cold. A sterner bunch of humorless automatons I've yet to meet. Don't any of these people ever laugh? Even without the funereal expressions, we would know that they are the villains of the piece. After all, they travel the universe, blowing up planets filled with billions of innocent people. Nice folks wouldn't do that.

What of our protagonists flaws? There is Han Solo's aforementioned love of money, of course. As for Luke, he's a farm boy who doesn't want to farm any longer. He wants to do great things in the fight against the Empire. However, his biggest flaw is his inability to let the power of The Force flow through him. We see this when he duels with the robot sphere aboard the *Millennium Falcon* en route to Alderan. As Obiwan Kenobi tells him, to be a true Jedi Knight, he will have to surrender control to The Force. The princess's flaw is that she can tend to be a little bossy at times. Of course, that is why Han Solo loves her so.

The movie ends in a desperate struggle. As the Death Star maneuvers into firing position to destroy the moon where the Alliance has their secret base, Luke and his companions fling themselves and their tiny ships recklessly at the foe. Darting close to the hull of the giant metal fortress, Alliance fighters seek one particular exhaust vent leading into the Death Star's fiery heart. Luke maneuvers into the long metal canyon leading to the exhaust port and as ships are shot out of the sky around him, lets fly with a

missile. The missile fails to hit the port, impacting instead on the metal wall below it. He tries again, this time with Han Solo and the *Millennium Falcon* covering his advance.

As he approaches the target for a second try, he is overcome with the power of The Force pulsing through him. Listening to the silent words of his dead mentor, he shuts down his targeting computer and launches by instinct alone. The missile goes in and the Death Star explodes even while charging its primary weapon to destroy the rebel base. The minions of the Empire are all killed, all that is except Darth Vader, who goes spinning off into space toward the sequel.

In that moment when he learned to trust his instincts, Luke Skywalker transitioned into manhood. He has put the doubts of childhood behind him and learned to trust his instincts as the first step on the long journey to becoming a Jedi knight. Thus it ever will be with protagonists. Despite all of their bungling, pettiness, and shortcomings, they must always win in the end. For it is through the protagonists eyes rather than our own that we, the audience, perceive the movie.

And so it is with readers. The protagonists overcome their inherent flaws and win through to victory because they are us, and there is nothing we enjoy more than winning.

May it ever be so!

The End

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For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

### **5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00**

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

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As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

## 7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$5.00

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

## 8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

*Starhopper* was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

## 9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

## 10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

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Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

## Non-Fiction Books

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### **12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00**

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

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