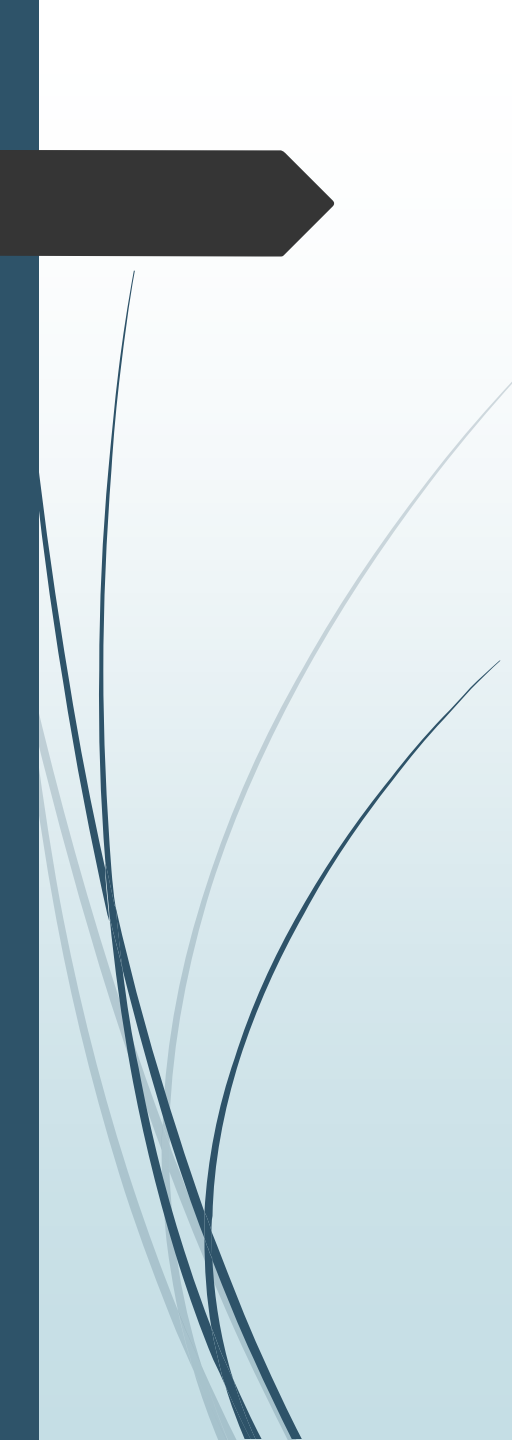




Adding Layers to Create More Powerful Stories

David Rodeback

August 2026—Quills



➤ 1, 4, 2, 18

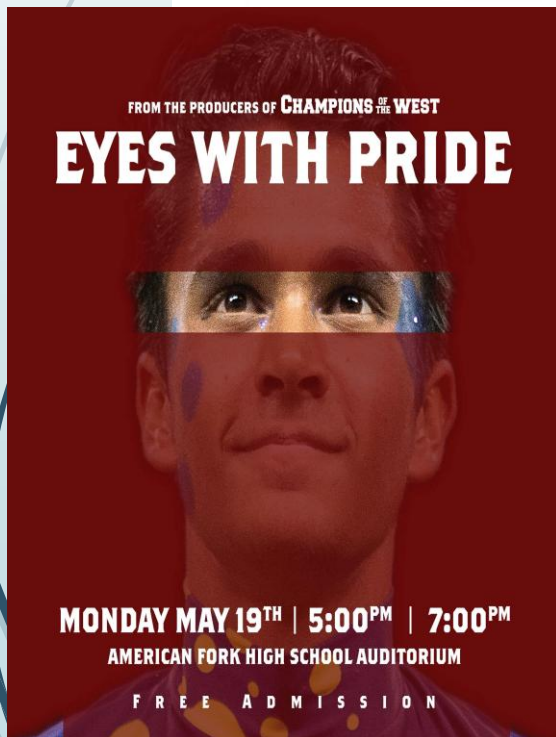
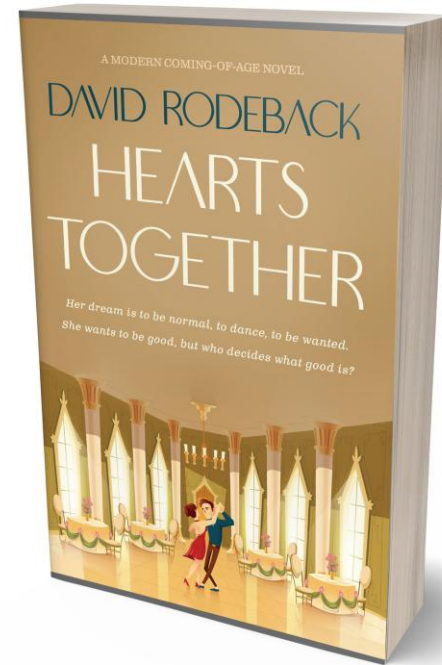
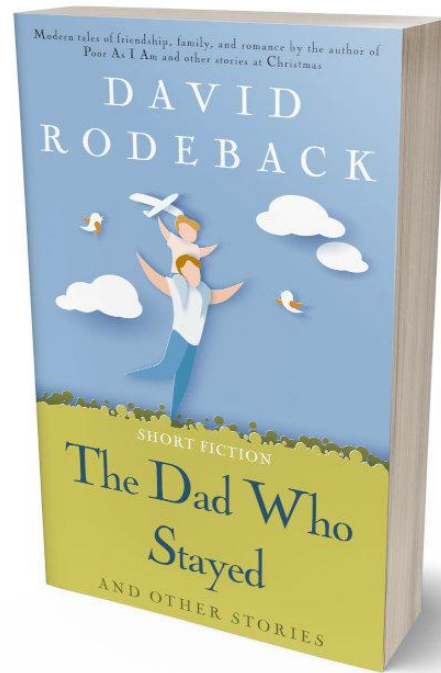
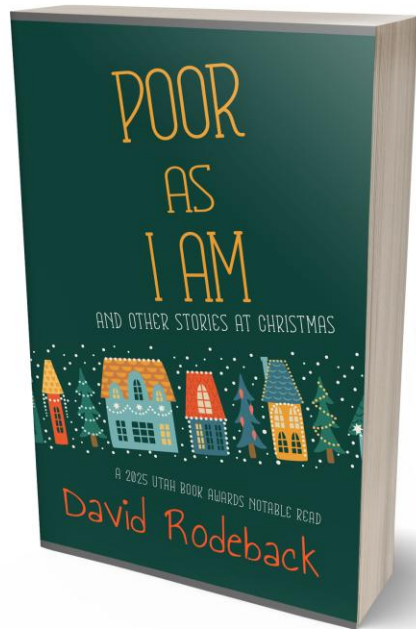
➤ American Fork, West Valley City

➤ Writing, Russian language, Russian literature

➤ Contemporary, realistic fiction, long and short

➤ A book-length biographical essay

➤ 2025 LUW Writer of the Year



American Fork Citizen


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OPINION **OPINION: We Still Need Public Libraries**


 Published 2 months ago on February 2, 2026
 By AF Citizen

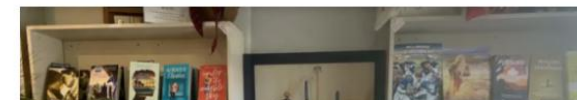
OPINION / 4 weeks ago **OPINION: How to solve the NBA's tanking problem**

I love basketball, and I'm a Utah Jazz fan, but I've

Lehi Free Press

OPINION **OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025**


 Published 7 months ago on January 12, 2025
 By AF Citizen



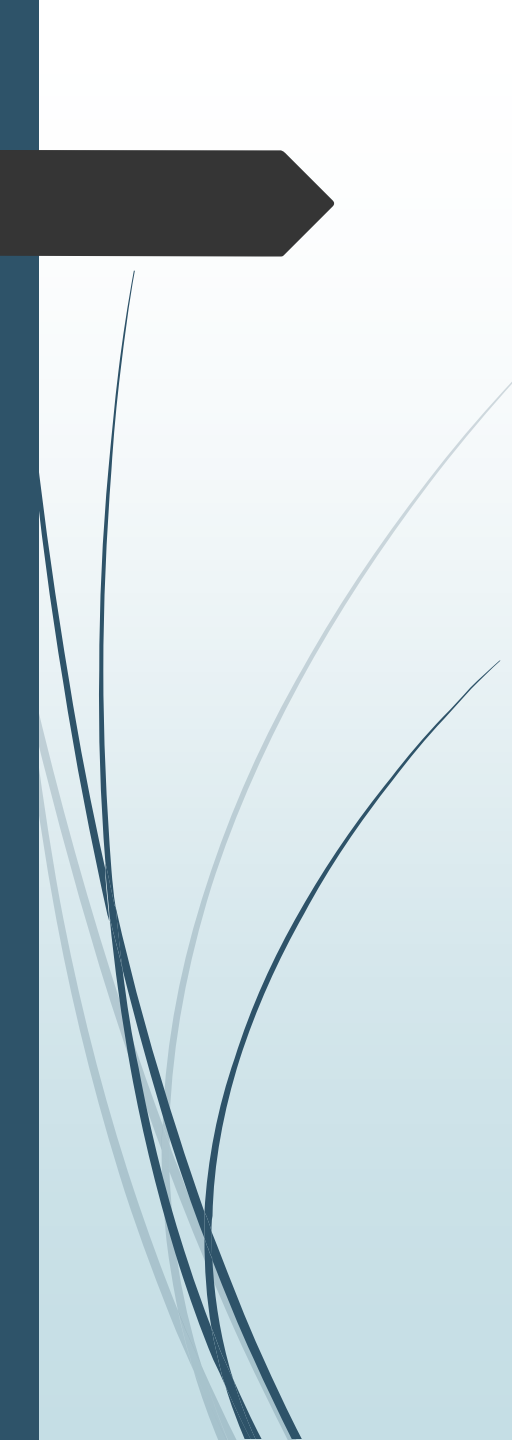
“

Blessed are they who see
beautiful things in humble places
where other people see nothing.

”

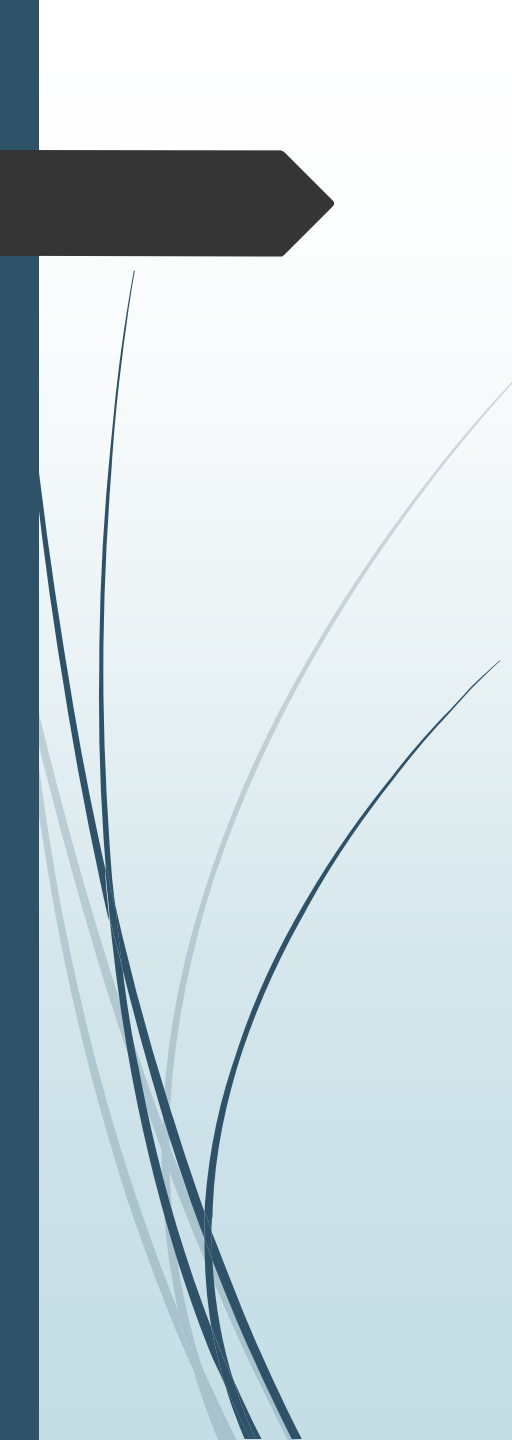
— *Camille Pissarro*





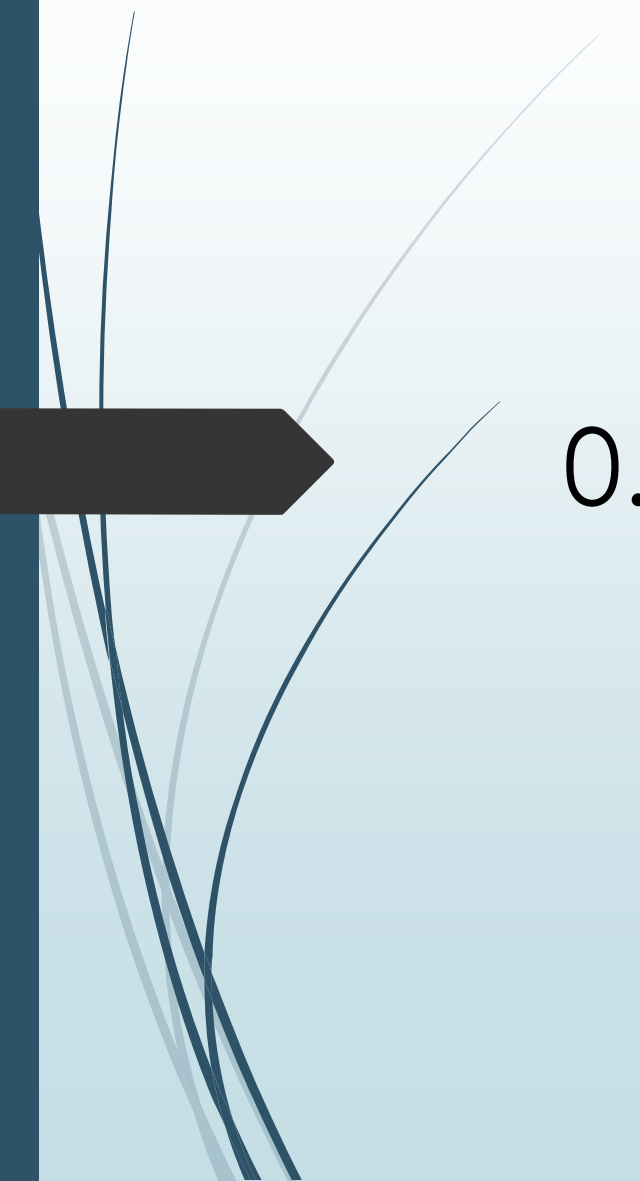
The map

- Introduction, including two metaphors
- List many kinds of layers
- Notice layers
- Layered themes in a novel
- Notice more layers
- Emotional layers
- Notice even more layers (if time)
- Ask me anything
- Housekeeping: contact info, where to find my books, etc.



Three disclaimers

- Mostly: tools and skills you already use, things you already know and do.
- Topic and content as advertised; approach a little different.
- Some layers grow naturally in a first draft. Some are born of revision and critique. Your process may vary.



0. Introduction

French pastry



A Musical Metaphor



Tchaikovsky
1812 Festival Overture
Op. 49

Largo ♩ = 60

Banda
(ad libitum)
Fl. Piccolo
2 Flauti
2 Oboi

Largo ♩ = 60

Violini I
Violini II
Viole
Violoncelli
Contrabassi

Viole
Violoncelli
Contrabassi

1) В автографе и изд. Юргенсона есть примечание: „Колокола должны быть большие; от их безразличия; быть в них следует, подражая праздничному перестуку.“
2) В автографе „Bombardone“ и примечание, имеющееся и в изд. Юргенсона: „Инструмент, употребляемый в театрах для изображения пушечного выстрела.“
3) В автографе и изд. Юргенсона есть примечание: „Если состав оркестра позволит, то желательно, чтобы это место исполнялось 8-ю виолончелями и 4-мя альтами, по 2 на каждый голос.“

15

Picc. *ff*

Fl. *ff*

Ob. *ff*

C. l. *ff*

Cl. *ff*

Fg. *ff*

Cr. *ff*

Pst. *marcatissimo*

Trb. *marcatissimo*

Trbn. e Tb. *ff*

Tp. *ff*

Trgl. *ff*

Tuo. *ff*

Cn.

Archi *ff*

330



So many layers

Musical layers, layers within layers

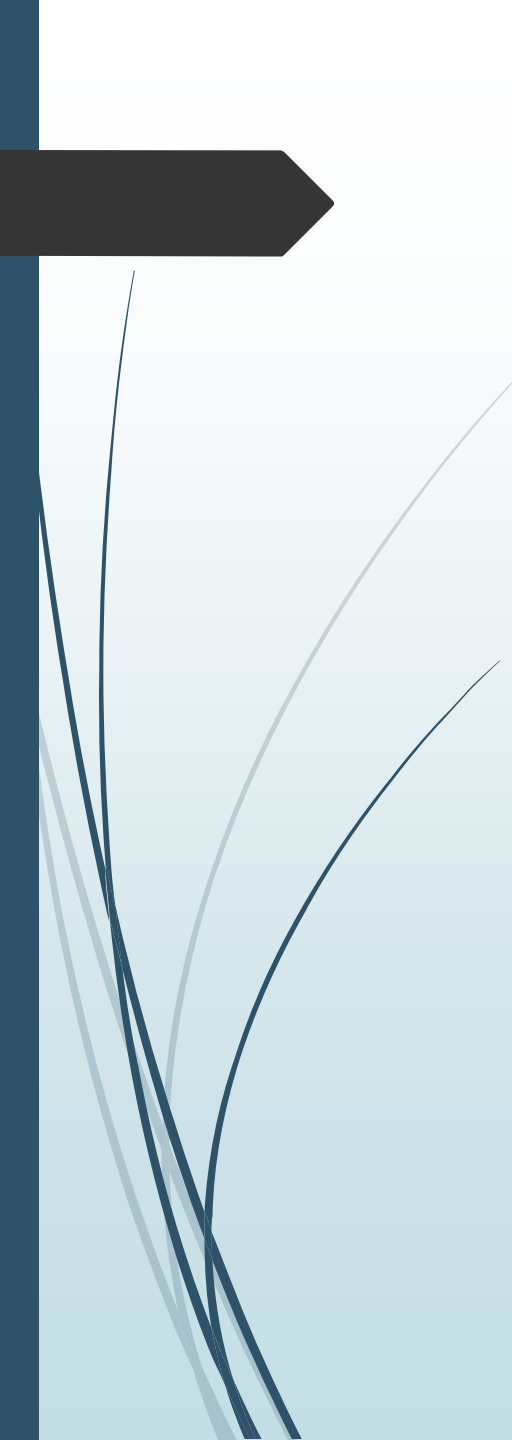
Biographical layers

Historical layers

Geographical layers

Layers can be simple, fragmented, loud, soft, grand, discordant, mellifluous, synergistic, antagonistic, interwoven, alone.

It's positively *symphonic*.



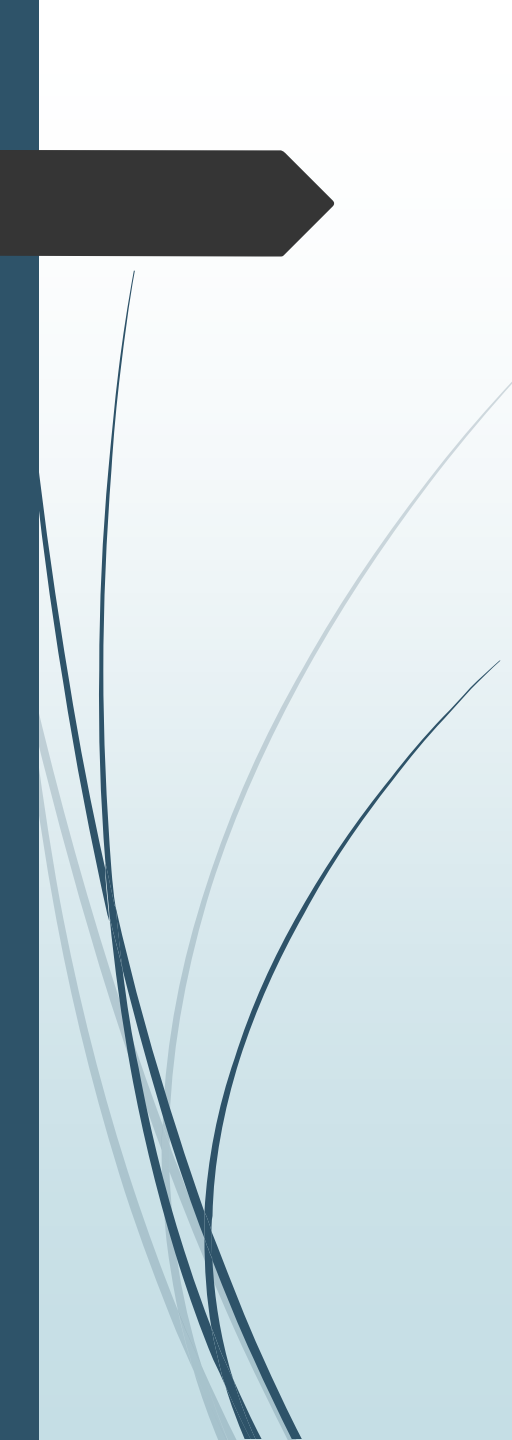
The end of the introduction: Why add layers?

- Layers add depth and complexity to our story
- Real life is a layered experience
- Sometimes we want to view a thing from multiple angles
- Sometimes we have more than one thing to say
- Layers engage the reader's heart and mind on multiple levels at once, creating a powerful, immersive experience.
- If one layer doesn't hook a given reader immediately, another layer might.



1. In which we **list** layers

(an incomplete list)



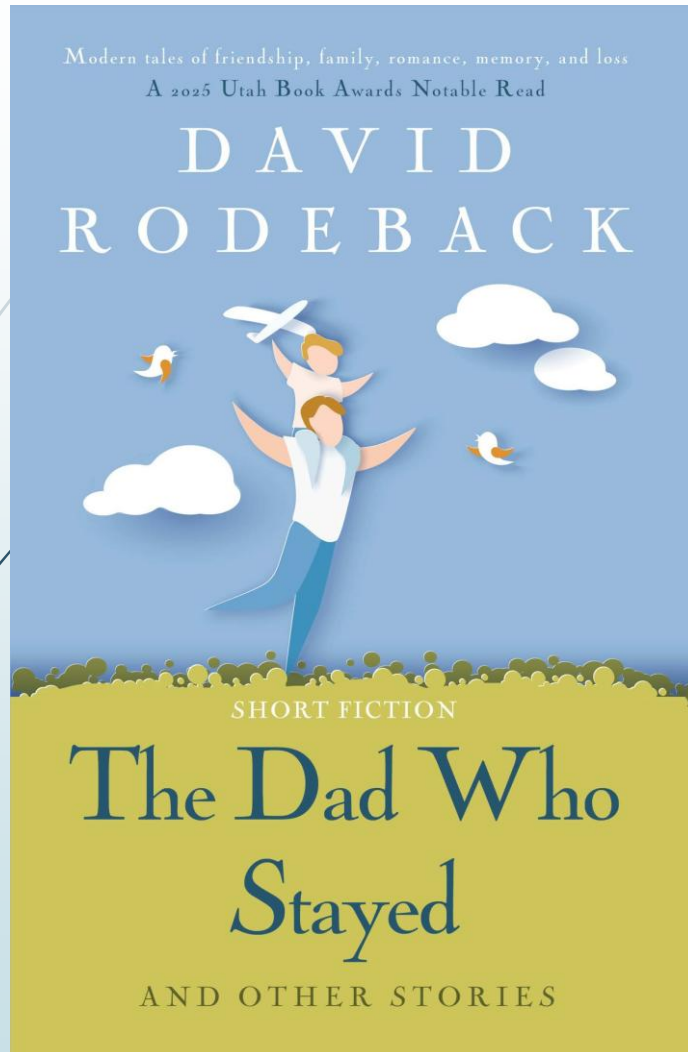
Stories and/or scenes may have . . .

- Temporal layers (historical, biographical, flashback, memory, immediate)
- Spatial layers (setting)
- Thematic layers (multiple major and minor themes)
- Plot layers (major plots and subplots)
- Sensory layers (the five senses)
- Tonal layers
- Emotional layers
- Behavioral layers (e.g. inebriation)
- Characters (layers of characters and characters with layers)
- Stylistic layers (diction, syntax, punctuation, etc.)
- Layers of metaphor
- Allusion



1. In which we **notice** layers

(the first pages of a short story)



Missed You

MINDY AND HER DEAREST friend, Diana, asked the server to recommend a local wine to accompany the curry at the posh new restaurant near the waterfront. He had them taste a 2019 Bainbridge Island Siegerrebe, “one of the Puget Sound’s best and most distinctive offerings.” They found it spicy, fragrant, and irresistible. Ordinarily they’d each have ordered a glass, but it was Friday evening, so they ordered the bottle.

Both women found the first glass relaxing. After that, the effects diverged. The second glass turned Diana into a philosopher; some things hadn’t changed since they were college roommates. Mindy’s second glass depressed her; that hadn’t changed either. Her cocktail at the bar before they were seated probably hadn’t helped. Diana had wisely sipped a ginger ale.



(Ya basic . . .)

Over dinner and a bottle of wine, Mindy's friend Diana told her, "Divorcing our men has been good for both of us."

"I still want a man," Mindy griped.

"Me too," said Diana. "A better one."

"Sam must have cheated on me with a dozen women," Mindy said, "and I was oblivious until the last six months."

"Men suck," declared Diana. "And we're running out of wine."

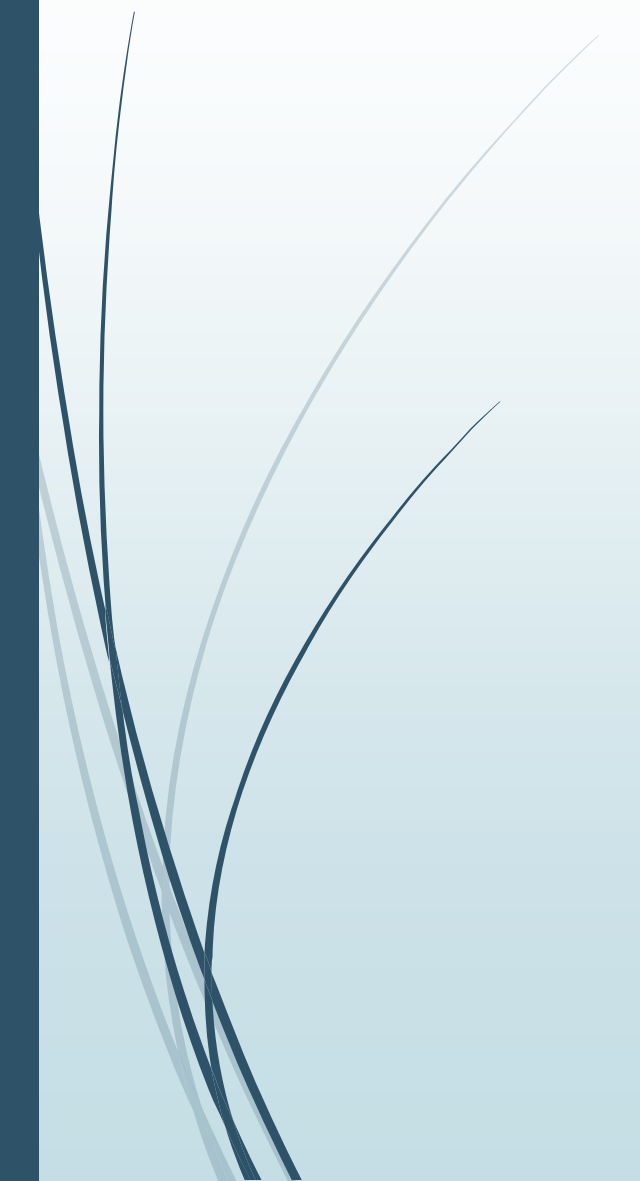
Mindy raised her glass. "One final toast. To Diana, Mindy, and better men, if they exist."

Diana clinked her glass against her friend's.

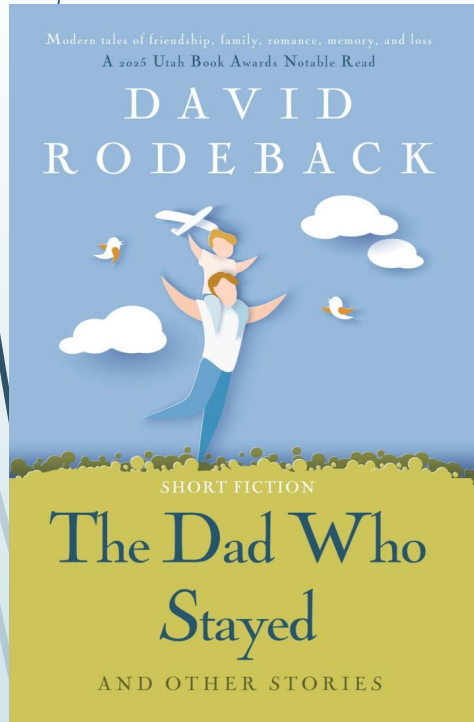


(basic)

Over dinner and a bottle of wine, Mindy's friend Diana



(The real story)



Mindy and her dearest friend, Diana, asked the server to recommend a local wine to accompany the curry at the posh new restaurant near the waterfront. He had them taste a 2019 Bainbridge Island Siegerrebe, “one of the Puget Sound’s best and most distinctive offerings.” They found it spicy, fragrant, and irresistible. Ordinarily they’d each have ordered a glass, but it was Friday evening, so they ordered the bottle.

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(basic)

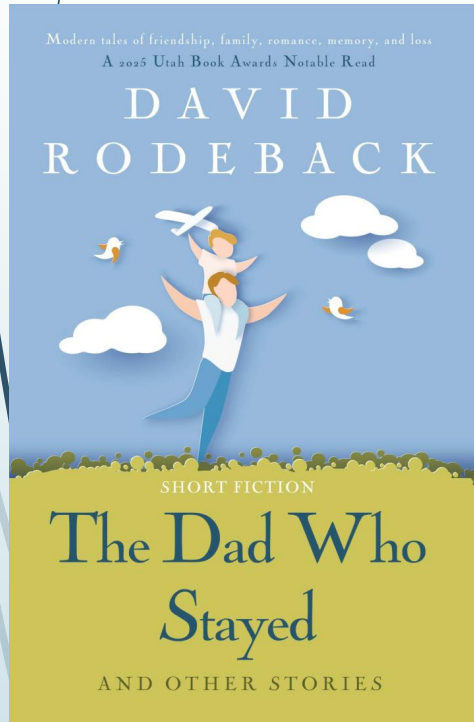
... “Divorcing our men has been good for both of us.”

“I still want a man,” Mindy griped.

“Me too,” said Diana. “A better one.”

“Sam must have cheated on me with a dozen women,” Mindy said, “and I was oblivious until the last six months.”

(the real story)



“I’ve been thinking,” Diana declared. “Men cannot possibly be the meaning of life. If they were, dumping ours would not have felt so liberating.”

“I still want one,” Mindy griped.

“Me too,” said Diana. “A better one. Ours were not the pinnacle, the Space Needle, the Washington Monument of upright, modern manhood.”

“I didn’t divorce Sam to feel liberated,” Mindy said. “It was because he felt so liberated. He must have shared his pinnacle with a dozen other women in the four years we were married. I was oblivious for the first three and a half.” She suppressed a hiccup. “Years, not women.”



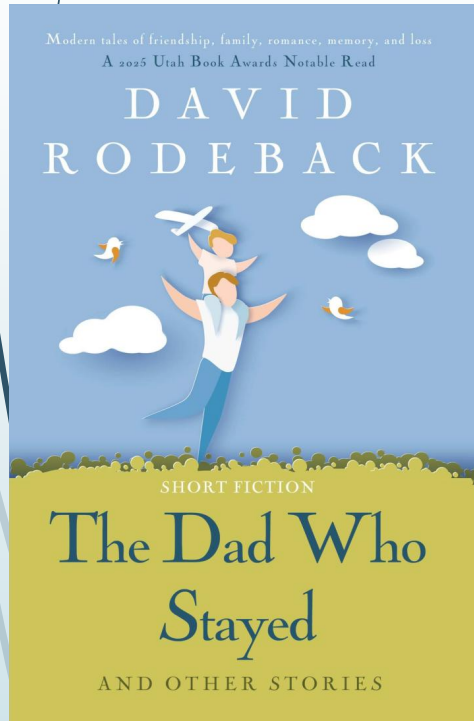
(basic)

“Men suck,” declared Diana. “And we’re running out of wine.”

Mindy raised her glass. “One final toast. To Diana, Mindy, and better men, if they exist.”

Diana clinked her glass against her friend’s.

(the real story)

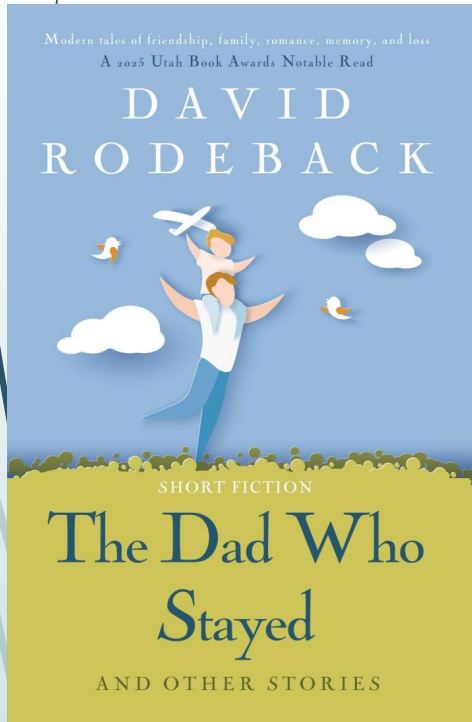


Diana half-filled both their glasses with the rest of the wine. “Men suck. And we’re out of wine, which also sucks. Being out of it sucks. The wine itself does not suck.”

Mindy raised her glass. “Better make it last. A tiny toast: to the infinite suckitude of greater Seattle’s men. But not all of them, Mindy hopes with historically unwarranted optimism.”

Diana raised hers. “To the infinitude of male suckitude. And Mindy’s undying optimism.”

(the real story)



They clicked their glasses together, took a sip, and regarded each other with languid stares.

“I’m not sure *infinitude* is a word,” Mindy said solemnly.

“And *suckitude* is?”

“It should be.”

“You need a man who gets you,” said Diana after a long silence. “Not just your face and smile and figure. Which is looking pretty good for our age. Your figure. And face.”

“So do you. And yours too.” Mindy raised her glass again. “Tiny toast: to our pretty good but tragically unappreciated figures. And faces.”



2. In which we consider some themes of a long novel

(You don't have to have read it.)

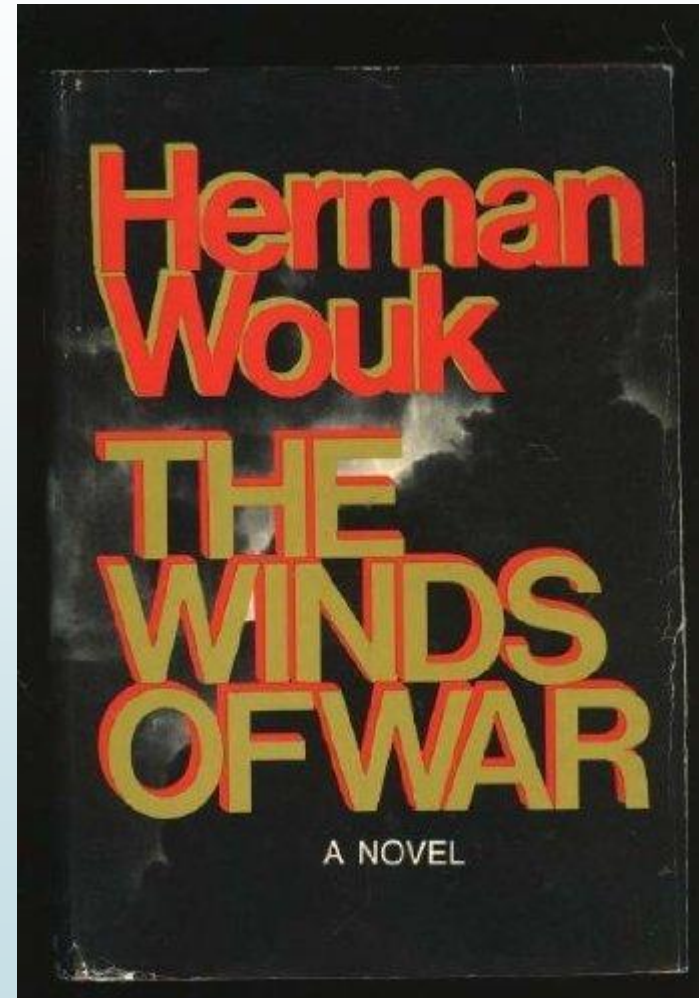
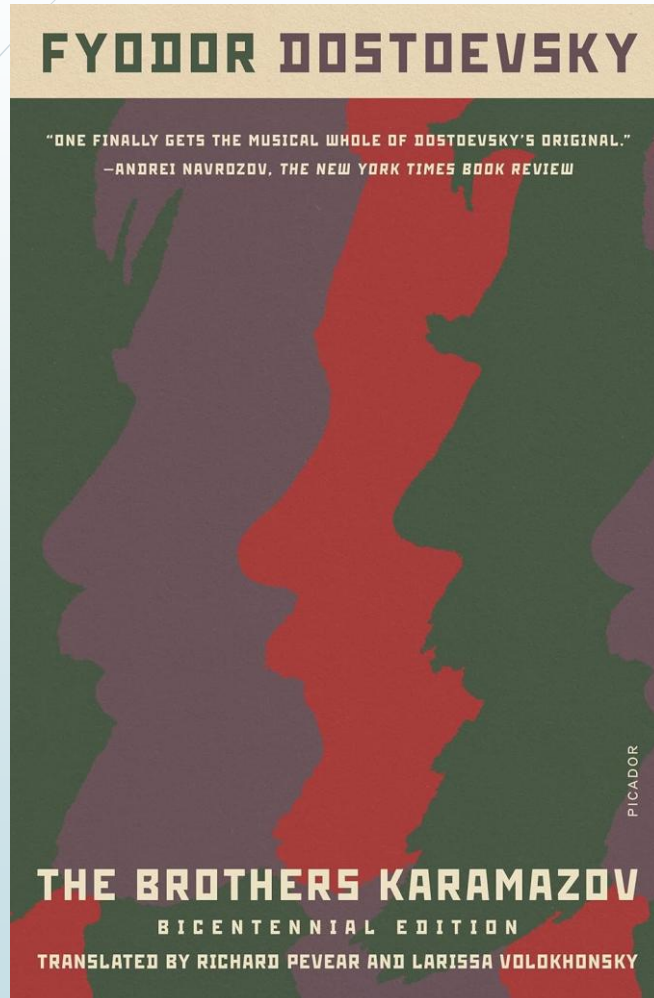


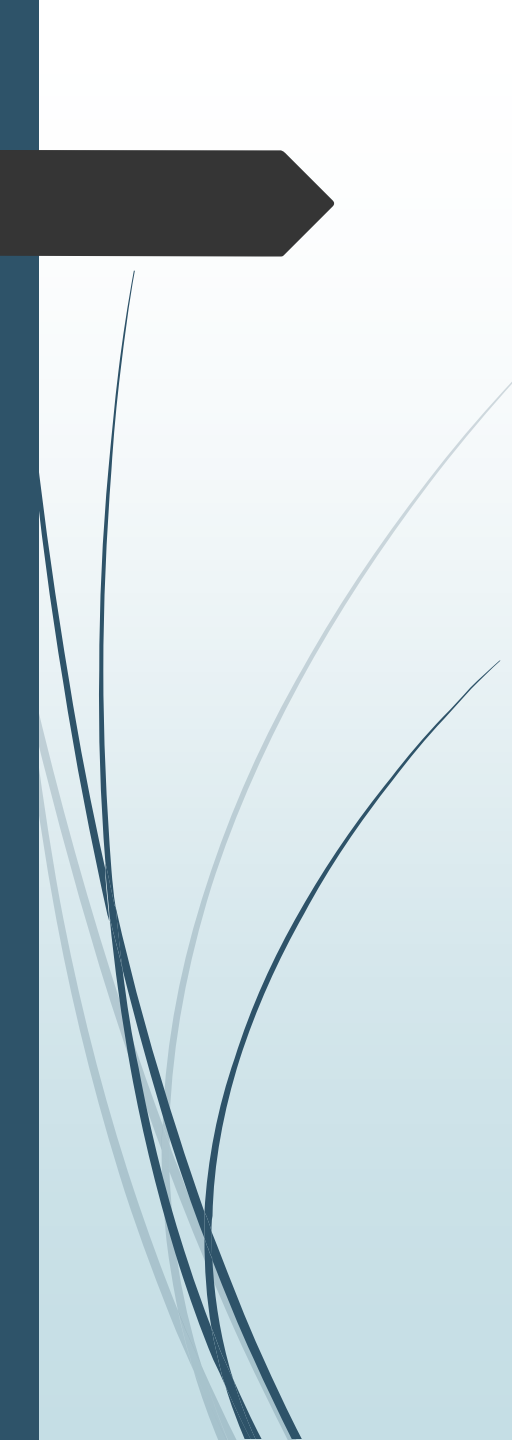
But first, an anecdote about themes

- Planning themes
- Discovering themes
- What happened at Good AF* Writers one evening

*AF is for American Fork

I had a choice





Major themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*

- Religious faith vs. intellectual doubt (the existence of God)
- Christian love vs. logic
- Truth vs. reason
- Reason vs. emotion and instinct
- Guilt, moral responsibility, legal responsibility, and “all is permitted”
- Fatherhood, parricide, generational conflict
- Free will, suffering, and theodicy
- Poverty and wealth
- Unselfish love vs. selfish, possessive love
- Natural beauty vs. artifice
- Russian nationalism vs. Westernization
- Interconnectedness of all humanity
- Suffering and redemption



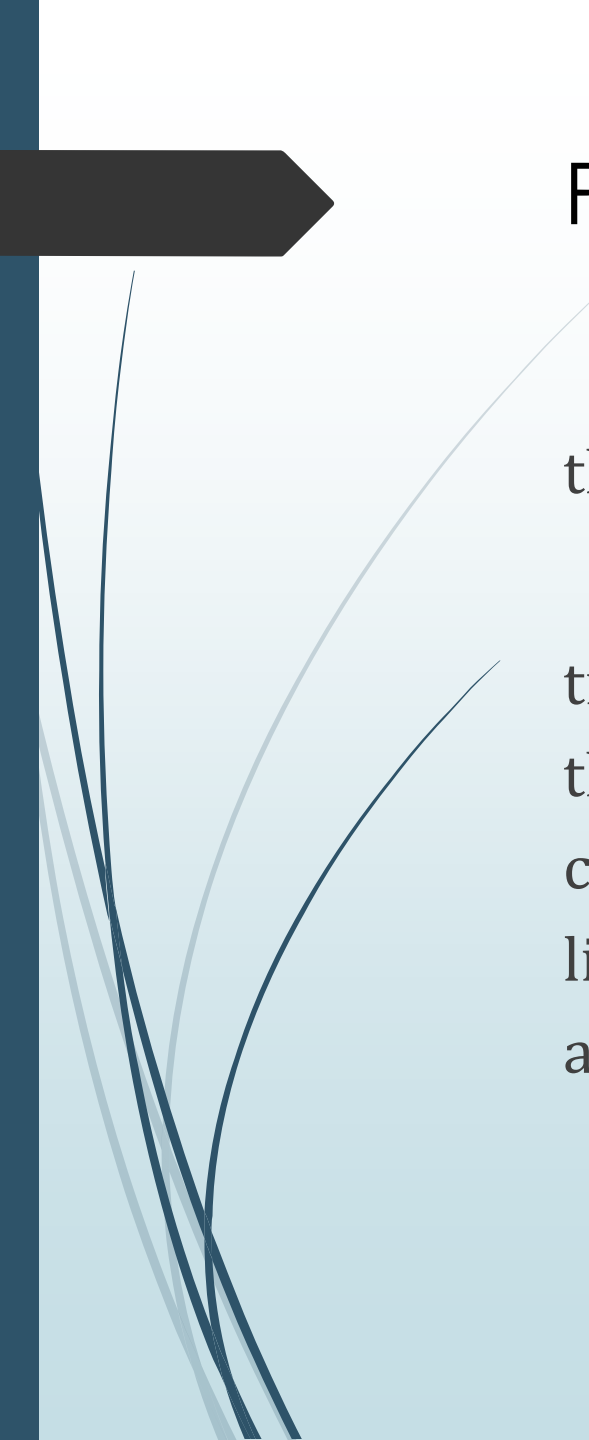
3. In which we discern themes in the first page of a (different) long Russian novel

(from a different century too)

LIFE AND FATE
VASILY GROSSMAN

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT CHANDLER



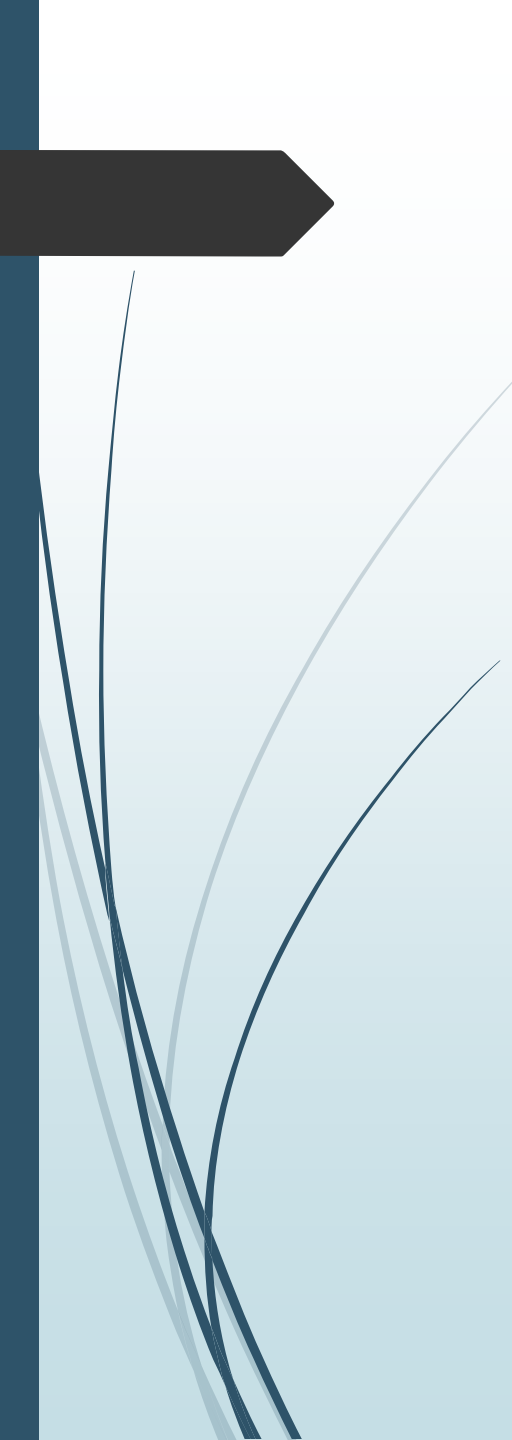


Page 1 of Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*

There was a low mist. You could see the glare of headlamps on the high-voltage cables beside the road.

It hadn't rained, but the ground was still wet with dew; the traffic-lights cast blurred red spots on the asphalt. You could sense the breath of the camp from miles away. Roads, railway tracks and cables all gradually converged on it. This was a world of straight lines: a grid of rectangles and parallelograms imposed on the autumn sky, on the mist and the earth itself.

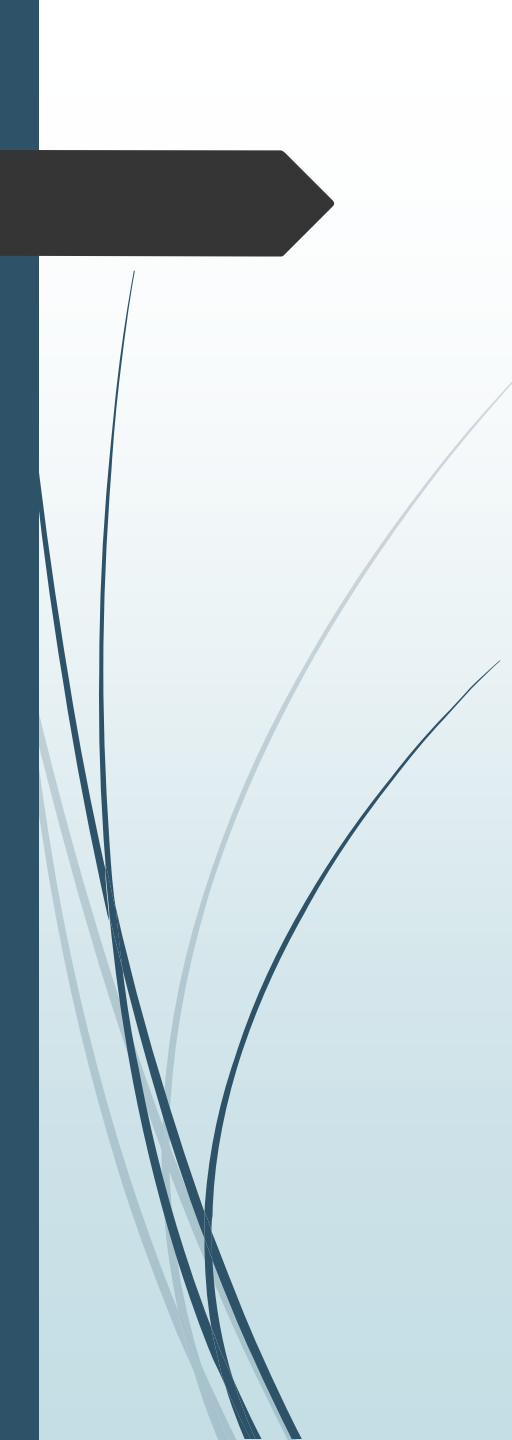
Distant sirens gave faint, drawn-out wails.



(cont.)

The road drew alongside the railway line. For a while the column of trucks carrying paper sacks of cement moved at the same speed as an endless train of freight wagons. The truck-drivers in their military greatcoats never once looked at the wagons or at the pale blurred faces inside them.

Then the fence of the camp appeared out of the mist: endless lines of wire strung between reinforced-concrete posts. The wooden barrack-huts stretched out in long broad streets. Their very uniformity was an expression of the inhuman character of this vast camp.

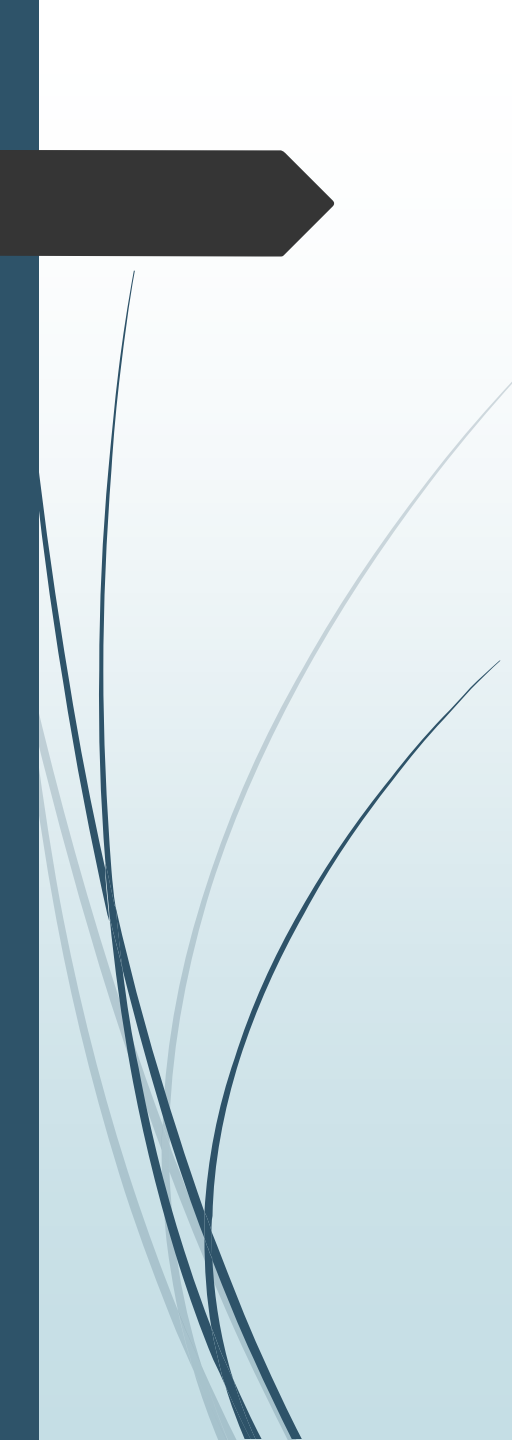


(cont.)

Among a million Russian huts you will never find even two that are exactly the same. Everything that lives is unique. It is unimaginable that two people, or two briar-roses, should be identical . . . If you attempt to erase the peculiarities and individuality of life by violence, then life itself must suffocate.

(POV switches to a train driver.)

. . . From the distance came the hoot of an approaching train. The driver turned to his mate. 'That's Zucker. I can tell by the whistle. He's already unloaded. Now he's taking the empty wagons back to Munich.'



(cont.)

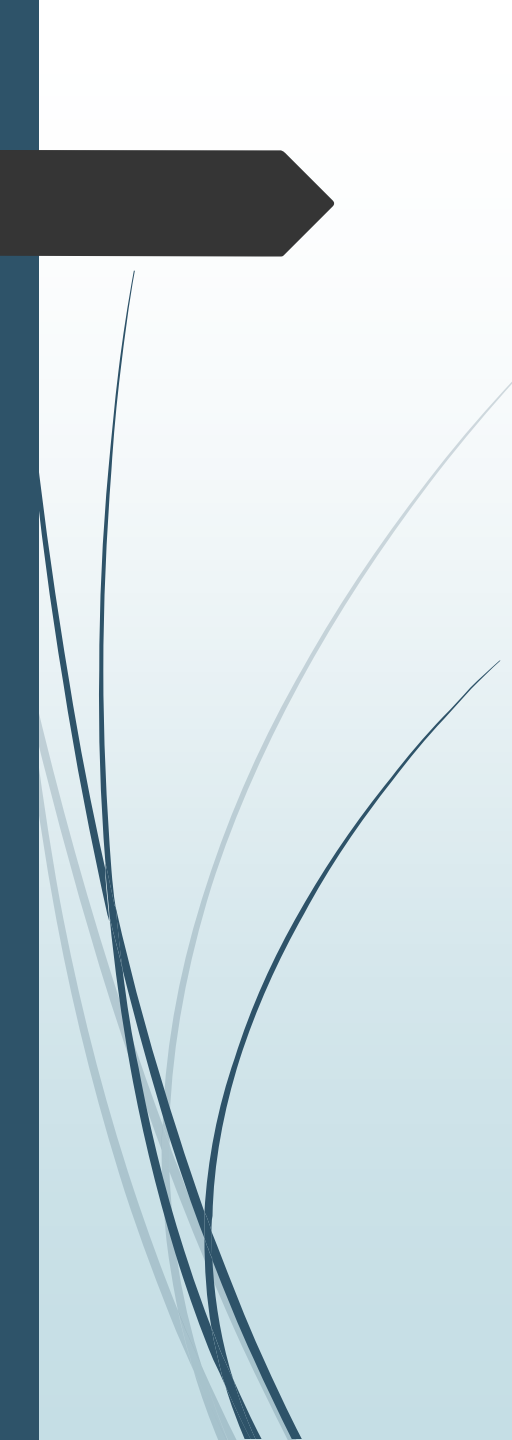
There was a deafening roar as the two trains met. The air was torn apart, patches of grey flashed between the wagons—and then the torn shreds of space and grey autumn light were woven together into a seamless cloth.

... ‘Honestly, comrade Apfel,’ said the mate excitedly, ‘if it wasn’t for all this disinfecting the wagons, we’d be back home by supper-time. As it is, we’ll be out till four in the morning. As though they couldn’t be disinfected back at the junction!’



4. Emotional layers

A technique from Donald Mass



IRL

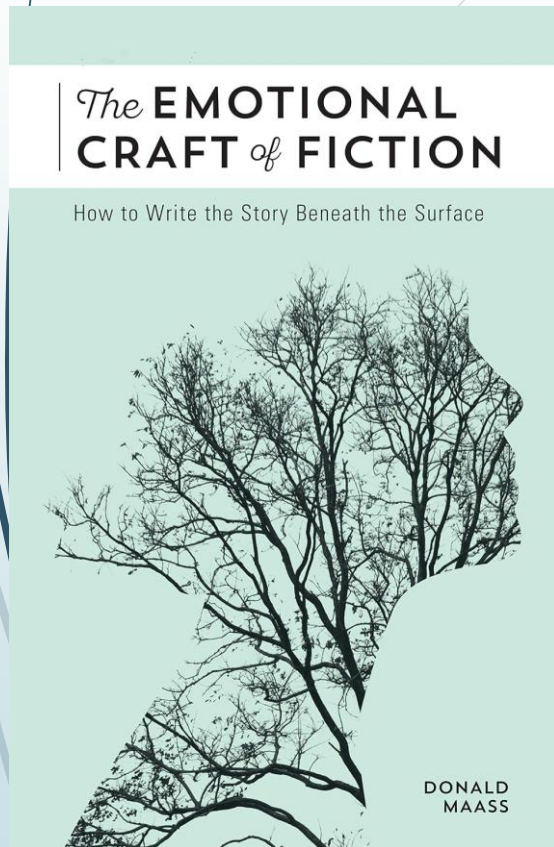
Father passed away.

- Preparing to speak at his funeral.
- Will speak longer, because brother can't come, because his wife's in the hospital.

What might I be feeling?

(Don't worry; you won't offend me.)

Donald Maass



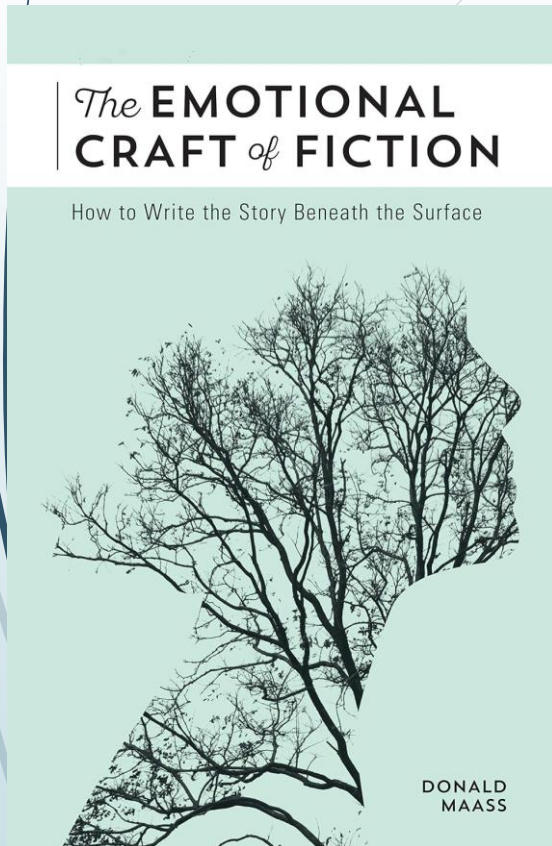
The feelings that writers first choose to write are often obvious, easy, and safe. These are the feelings writers believe they *ought* to use. . . . They work only with primary emotions because that is what everyone feels, which is true, but this is also a limited view.

So how does one create emotional surprise? . . . Can emotions feel right and connect with us even when we don't see them coming? . . .

. . . The obvious emotion will not have the desired effect.

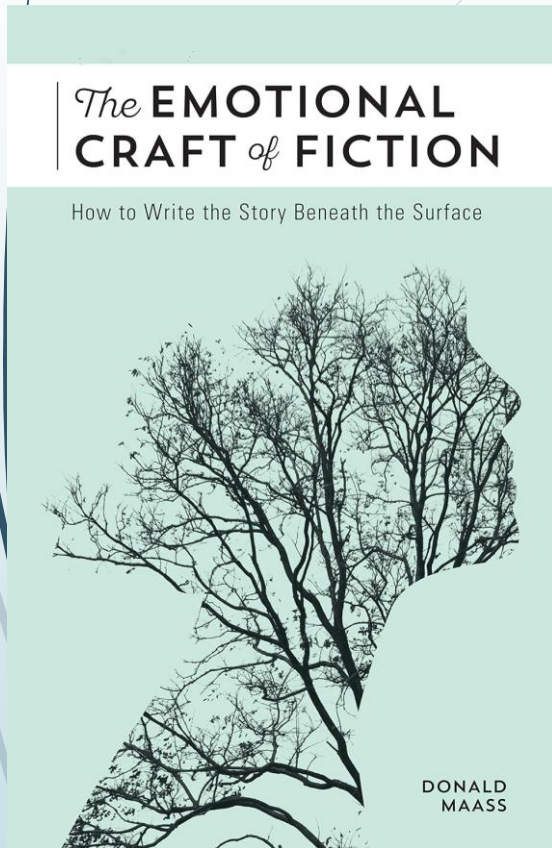
[Portray] a feeling we don't expect. . . . [When the author goes] sideways from an expected feeling, we cannot help but feel something ourselves.

Exercise



1. Select any moment in your story when your protagonist feels something strongly. Identify the feeling. Next, ask your protagonist, “What else are you feeling at this moment?” Write that down, too. Then ask, “Okay, what else are you feeling now?” Write that down.

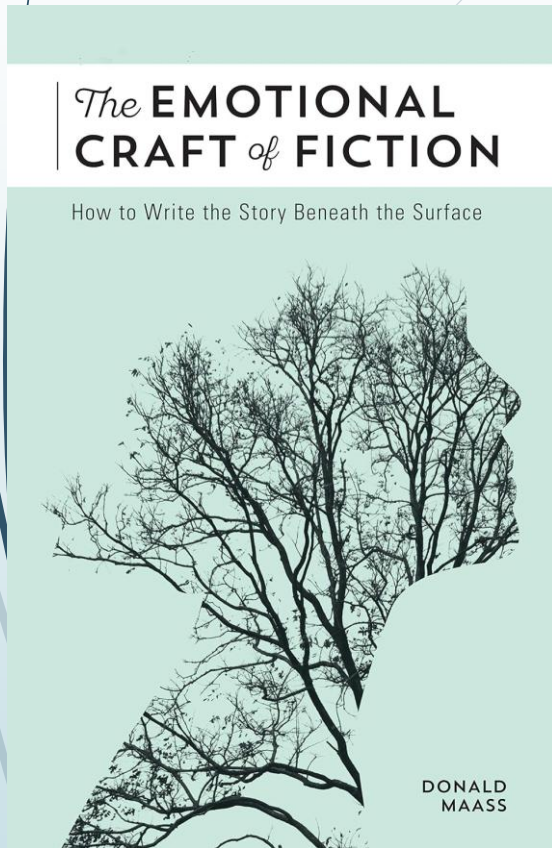
Exercise



2. Now begin to work with that third, lower-layer emotion. Examine it.

- What does it feel like to have this feeling?
- Is it good or bad to feel this? Why?
- What would a better person feel instead?
- Why is this the only possible thing to feel at this moment?

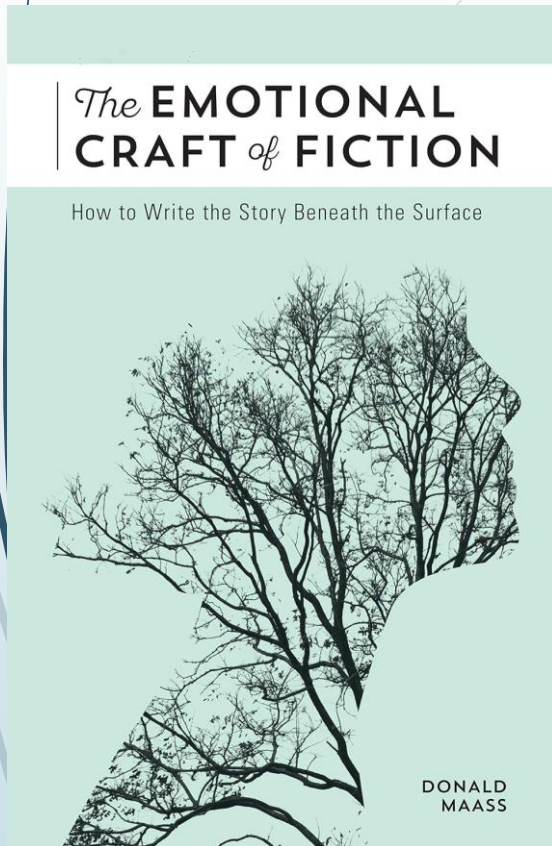
Exercise



3. Look around at the scene, too. What is your protagonist seeing that other's don't? Add one detail that only your protagonist would see, and see it in his unique way.

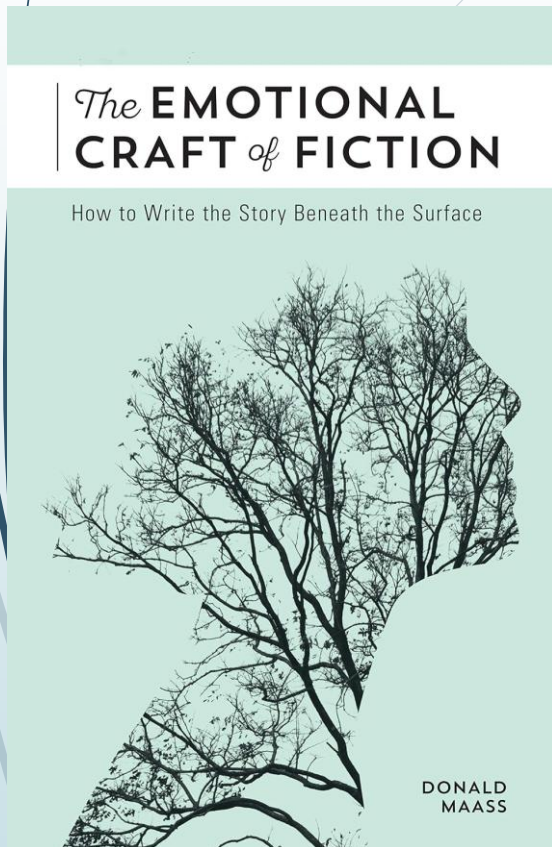
4. Write a new passage for this moment in the story, one in which your character feels deeply (and in detail) this third-level emotion.

Exercise



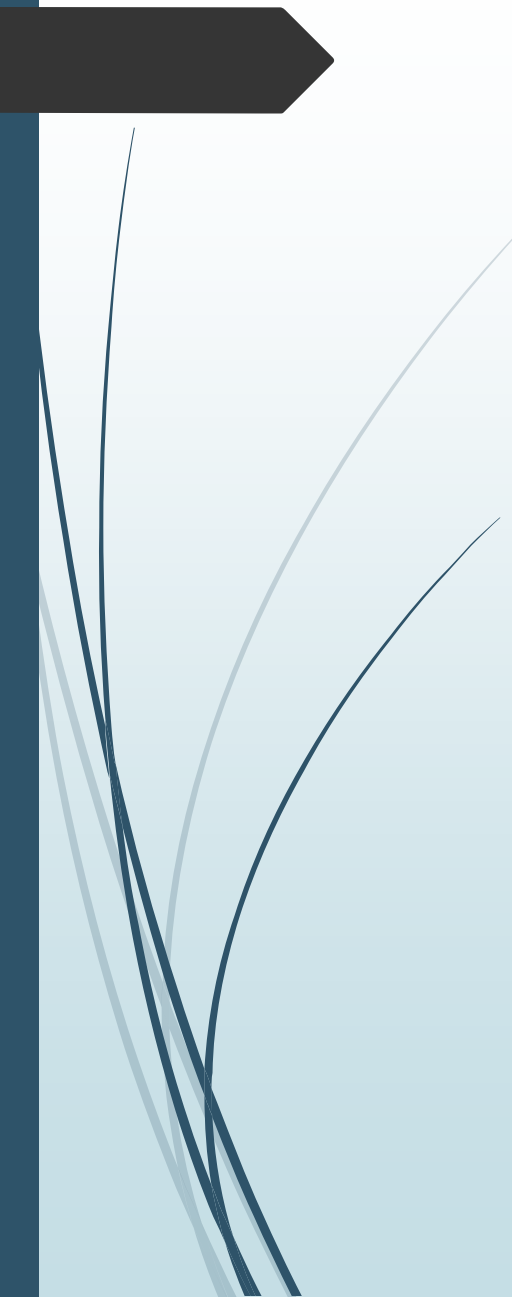
“Why delve so deeply? One reason is to create a longer passage for the reader. That in turn creates a period of time, perhaps fifteen seconds, for the reader’s brain to process. It gives readers the opportunity to arrive at their own emotional response.”

Exercise



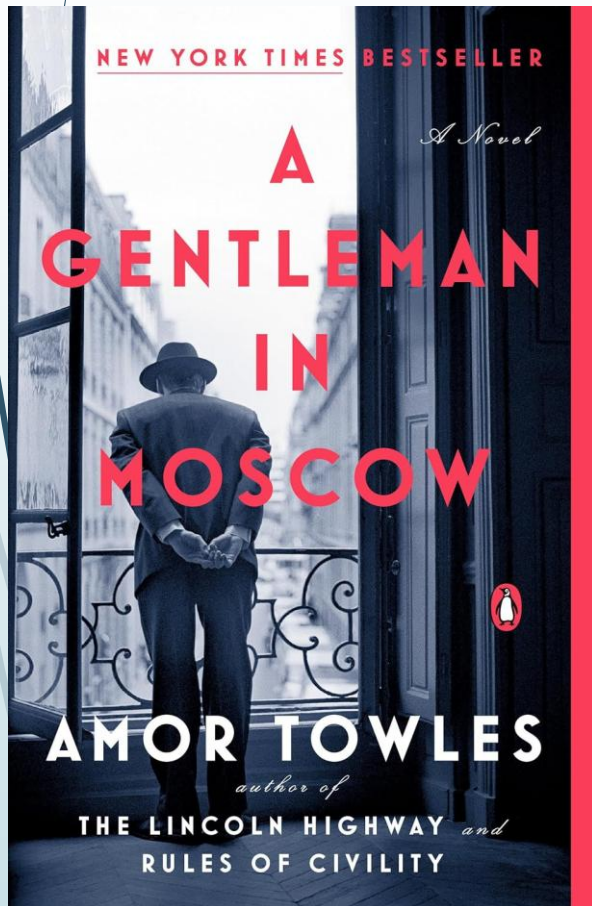
“It’s all but impossible to write about fear and get readers to feel it. In workshops, though, I ask participants to find a moment when a character feels afraid. We then drill down and develop a third-level emotion. . . . When the resulting passages are read, other participants report feeling . . . fear.

“Be obvious and tell readers what to feel, and they won’t feel it. Light an unexpected match, though, and readers will ignite their own feelings.” (pp. 22-23)

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey originate from the left side and sweep across the slide, some passing behind the text.

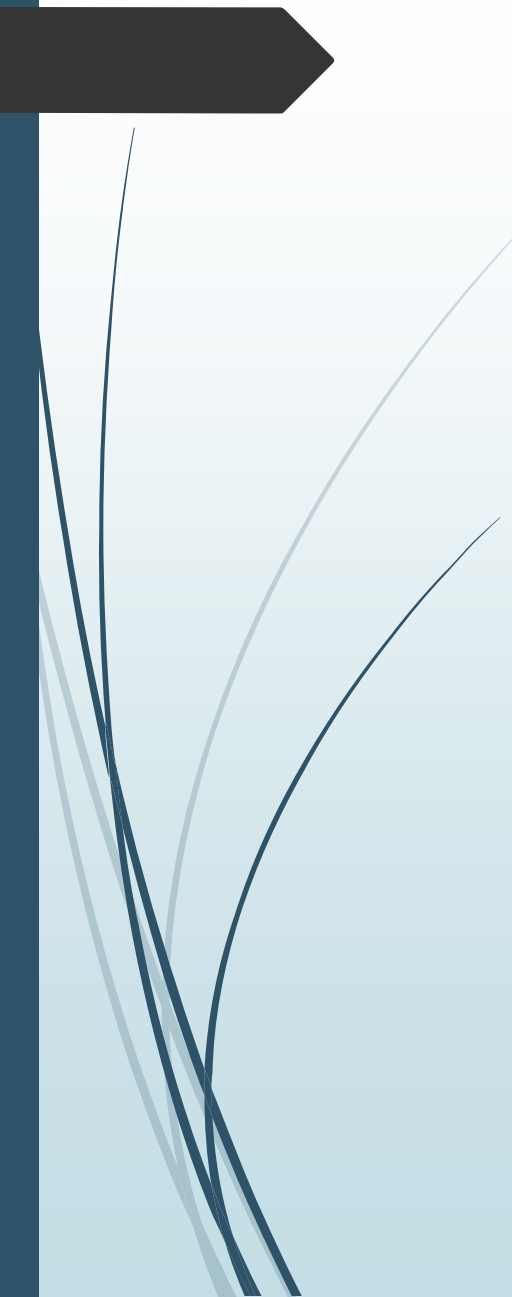
In another tale about Russia (this one's contemporary and written by an American) . . .

(cont.)

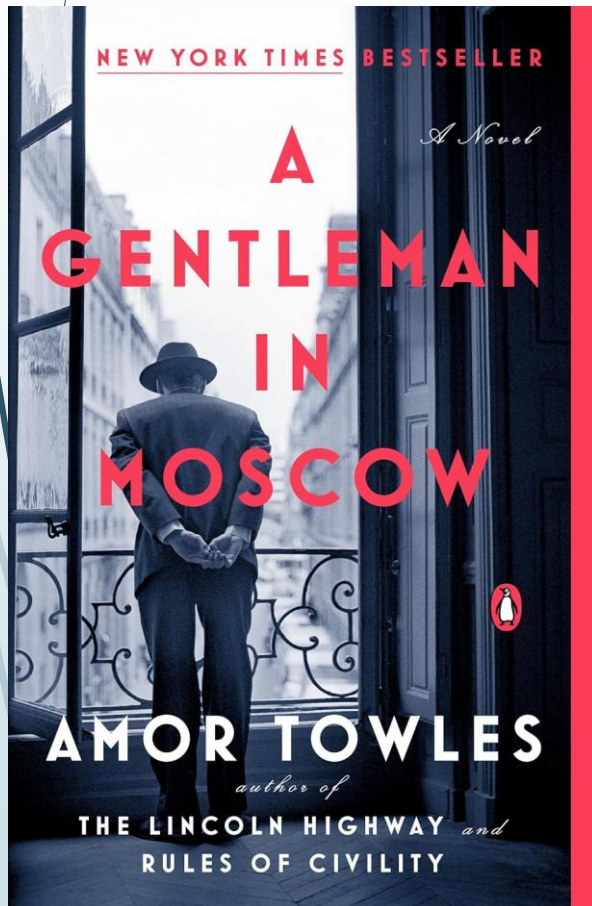


Prologue: a court transcript

“... Our inclination would be to have you taken from this chamber and put against the wall. But there are those within the senior ranks of the Party who count you among the heroes of the prerevolutionary cause. Thus it is the opinion of this committee that you should be returned to that hotel of which you are so fond. But make no mistake: should you ever set foot outside of the Metropol again, you will be shot.”

- 
- A dark grey arrow points right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.
- What is Count Rostov feeling?
 - What else is he feeling?
 - What else?
 - What else?

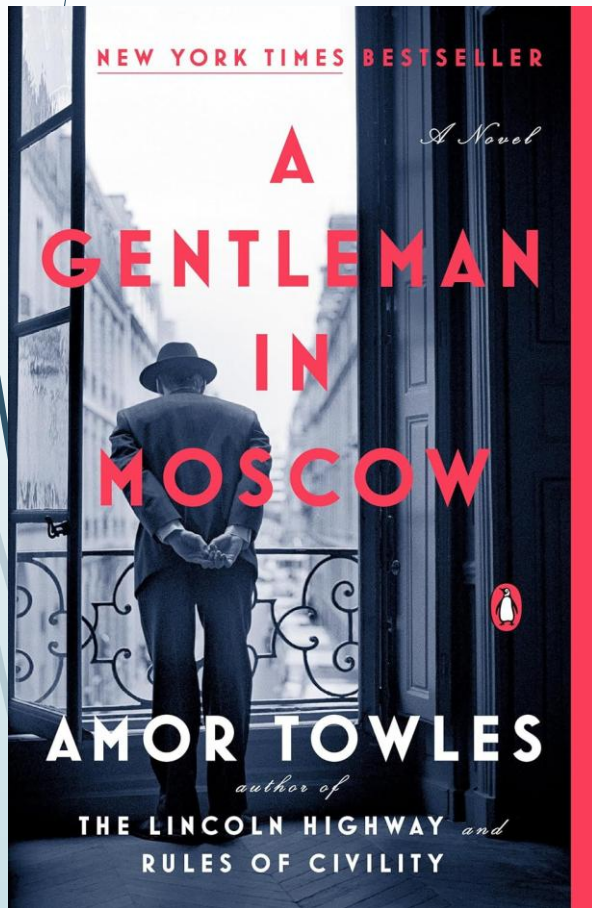
(cont.)



At half past six on the twenty-first of June 1922, when Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov was escorted through the gates of the Kremlin onto Red Square, it was glorious and cool. Drawing his shoulders back without breaking stride, the Count inhaled the air like one fresh from a swim. The sky was the very blue that the cupolas of St. Basil's had been painted for. Their pinks, greens, and golds shimmered as if it were the sole purpose of religion to cheer its Divinity. Even the Bolshevik girls conversing before the windows of the State Department Store seemed dressed to celebrate the last days of spring.

“Hello, my good man,” the Count called to Fyodor, at the edge of the square. “I see the blackberries have come in early this year.”

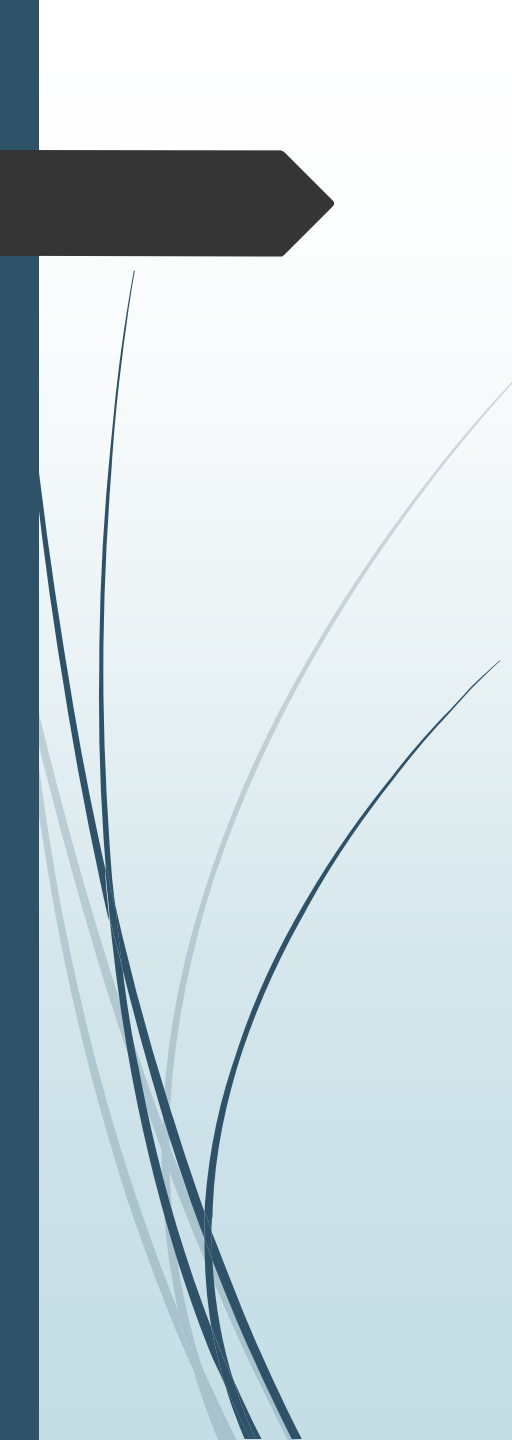
(cont.)



Giving the startled fruit seller no time to reply, the Count walked briskly on, his waxed moustaches spread like the wings of a gull. Passing through Resurrection Gate, he turned his back on the lilacs of the Alexander Gardens and proceeded toward Theater Square, where the Hotel Metropol stood in all its glory. When he reached the threshold, the Count gave a wink to Pavel, the afternoon doorman, and turned with a hand outstretched to the two soldiers trailing behind him.

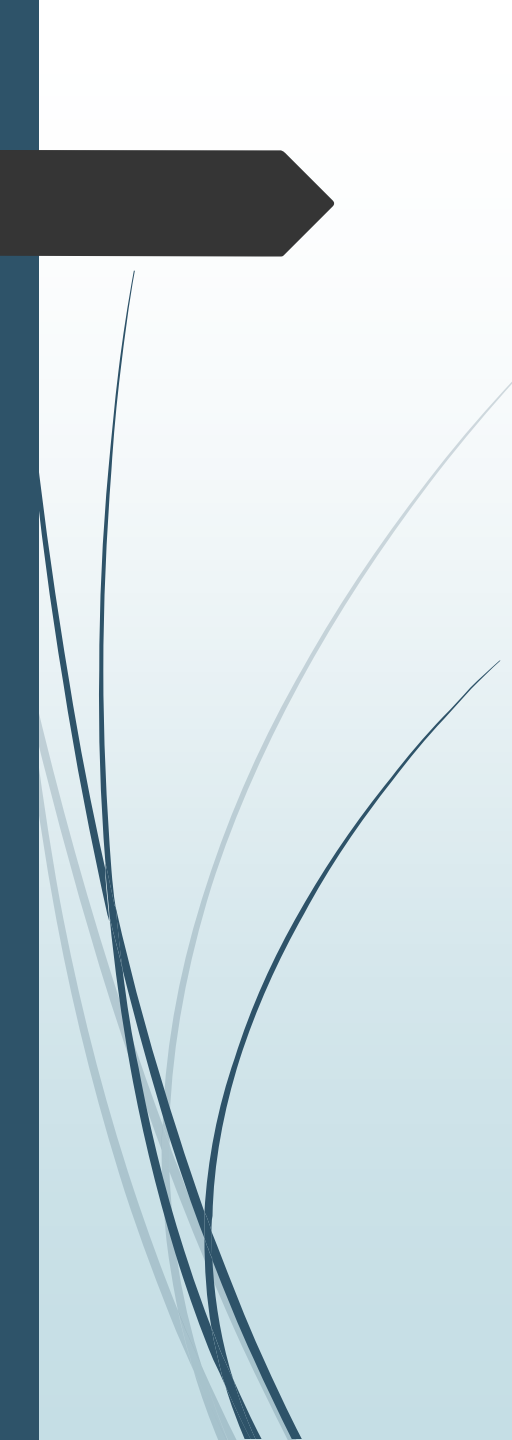
“Thank you, gentlemen, for delivering me safely. I shall no longer be in need of your assistance.” . . .

“On you go,” said the more thuggish of the two, his hand on the butt of his rifle. “We’re to see you to your rooms.”



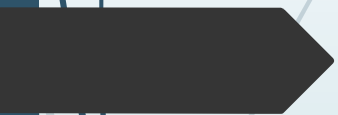
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- Tonal layers
- Emotional layers
- Behavioral layers (e.g. inebriation)
- Characters (layers of characters and characters with layers)
- Stylistic layers (diction, syntax, punctuation, etc.)
- Layers of metaphor
- Allusion



Final thoughts

- Only you as the author can decide how many layers are enough or too many, and which to use.
- When you draft, but especially when you revise, think about layers. What did you create intentionally? What did you weave into the fabric unintentionally?
- You can probably layer more things into your stories, even short stories, than you think at first.
- Even a short story can be about more than one thing, can create more than one emotion in the reader.



~~Q&A~~ ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

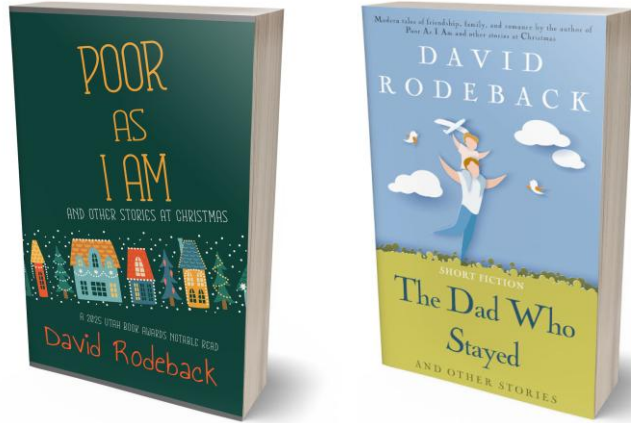
My other sessions at Quills

- Tomorrow at 3:00 p.m.: “Writing Faith in Fiction with Depth and Respect”
- Tomorrow at 5:30 p.m.: “Worldbuilding? You’ll Need Some Government.”



Where to find me and my books*

*besides the conference bookstore

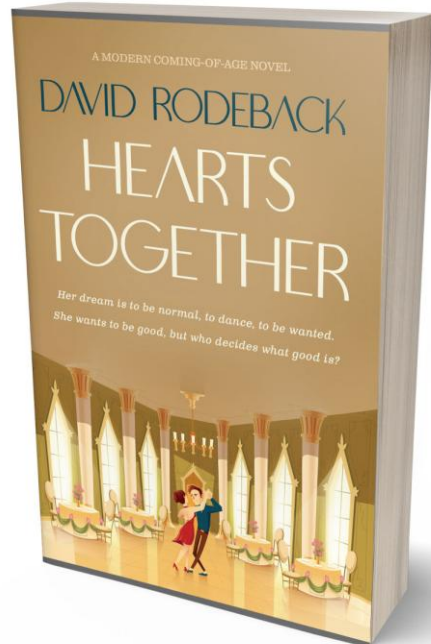


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