

Can You Feel It? Emotions in Storytelling

From the December 2009 Write Brain

Presenter: Michael J. Coumatos

Article by Fleur Bradley

Michael J. Coumatos has held many positions within the military, including naval aviator, test pilot, and ship's captain. He now owns a local business, chairs the Cultural Office of the Pikes Peak Region (COPPeR), and has written two military futuristic thrillers: *Space Wars* and *Counterspace*. Not a guy you'd imagine would spend a lot of time exploring his feelings, but that was exactly what he was teaching us to do at December's Write Brain.

Despite the busy holiday season, the room was packed with writers—newbies and veterans alike. Michael started the Write Brain session by allowing us to introduce ourselves, explaining what we were writing. He then told us this wasn't going to be a simple lecture; we were going to have to participate, sharing our experiences and feelings. "You have to mine your own emotional core to create characters," he explained.

Michael suggested journaling as a way writers can connect to their feelings, to use when writing fiction. He went on to explain the importance of understanding a character's emotional core: the cumulative experiences, or memory episodes, that make a person unique. "You can use the emotional core to set your characters, and it helps you decide how they will react to events in the story," Michael said. He explained that the emotional core will lead to a character's feelings in certain situations, causing specific reactions and behaviors, which creates a naturally progressing scene. "The emotional core is stronger than feelings."

We all did an exercise, where we took a recent emotional experience and looked at our own emotional core to analyze the reactions we had at the time. Michael kept the mood in the room light, by joking and encouraging us to participate.

In another exercise, we wrote a short paragraph about one of our characters, set in a crowded room, using the situation to reveal the character's emotional core. Michael suggested we start by finishing the following sentence for our characters: "I struggle with..." and build on that emotional core revelation. "If you are true to your character, that believability will carry through in your story," Michael said, suggesting the story will move readers more that way. "Don't explain your character's feelings, but let them reveal."

After some audience members read their short character sketches, Michael closed the WriteBrain session by sharing some of his favorite characters, like Macbeth, Scarlett O'Hara and Captain Kirk—all characters with complex emotional cores. "Character yearning guides the story, allowing the character to advance theme and plot," Michael said, giving us the key to creating character-driven fiction. "It's all about how we can create those words that move people."

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