

Christopher Riley | Kathy Riley

Foreword  
by Christopher  
Vogler, author of  
**The Writer's  
Journey**

# The Defining Moment

How Writers and Actors  
Build Characters

## PRAISE FOR *THE DEFINING MOMENT*

As animation directors, our stories are literally nothing without our characters. With *The Defining Moment*, Chris and Kathy have provided tools to help make your characters richer and fuller from the start! We've already begun utilizing some of the techniques that they've outlined. I challenge you to read this book and not do the same!

— **Chris and Justin Copeland (DreamWorks Animation)**

The key to great storytelling is memorable characters. Chris and Kathy Riley have written an essential and invaluable book to guide writers and actors on the crucial journey into the heart of dimensional, dynamic characters and to illuminate the best ways to bring them to life. I recommend this book to anyone involved in the creative process. It gets a place of honor on my bookshelf, next to Chris' *The Hollywood Standard*.

— **Sheryl J. Anderson (creator and showrunner, *Sweet Magnolias*; writer-producer, *Ties That Bind*, *Charmed*)**

In *The Defining Moment*, screenwriters Christopher and Kathy Riley generously reveal their own family's life-changing struggles to illustrate when a character is forced to transform. Covering well known character arcs (both fictional and historical), they delineate how a crucial moment, and choices thereafter, can enrich our storytelling and imbue the players with all-too-human complexity and pathos.

— **Doreen Alexander Child (author of *Charlie Kaufman: Confessions of an Original Mind*)**

If characters aren't emotionally authentic, there's simply no reason to keep watching a movie or reading a script (or to keep writing one, for that matter). Chris and Kathy dive deep into the exploration of what actors and screenwriters share in common — the creation of great characters — to provide insights that are enriching to storytellers of all types.

— **Janet Scott Batchler (screenwriter, *Batman Forever*; screenwriting professor, USC School of Cinematic Arts)**

Chris and Kathy Riley break open screenwriting with the kind of insight that reignites my own love of the craft, both as an actor and a writer. *The Defining Moment* takes the actor's instinct to find watershed moments and translates that approach for writers to find and create these crossroads on the page. It's an overdue look at how both disciplines (and more) come together to create the most compelling characters, which is what we all want to write. An inspiring read.

— **Clare Sera** (actor, *The Princess Diaries*; screenwriter, *Blended*, *Smallfoot*)

*The Defining Moment* is an important tool in the toolbox of any storyteller for bringing clarity, wisdom, and specificity to a process that can often feel amorphous. I cannot wait to see how this book encourages, inspires, and benefits artists.

— **Joseph Barone** (actor, *Homeland*, *American Horror Story*, *Justified*)

Chris and Kathy Riley have had a profound impact on my career as teachers, mentors, and (most importantly) friends. I'm thrilled that they're continuing to share their gifts and insights with the world through this fascinating new book. These are character-defining lessons for storytellers of all stripes.

— **Scott Teems** (screenwriter, *The Exorcist*, *Firestarter*, *Insidious: The Dark Realm*, *Halloween Kills*; writer-director, *Rectify*, *The Quarry*, *That Evening Sun*)

With keen insight and remarkable personal candor, Chris and Kathy Riley have written a book that had me looking back at everything I've ever written to see how it measures up . . . *The Defining Moment* will not only change the way you look at your characters; it may very well change the way you look at your life.

— **Bill Marsilii** (screenwriter, *Deja Vu*)

Novice screenwriters — and experienced ones, too — often struggle with character creation. The Rileys scrutinize pivotal scenes from films, television shows, and plays to show how dynamic events, choices, and actions define characters and increase the potential for audience involvement.

— **Thomas Parham, PhD** (writer, *JAG* and *Big Brother Jake*; Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Palm Beach Atlantic University)

Sometimes someone reminds you that circles are perfect and round, and you catch sight of the beauty and depth of what's always sat there in front of you. *The Defining Moment* is one of those books. It's not just for storytellers, it's for anyone wanting to understand why they are the way they are. As an actor, writer, and director, I only wish I would have had these insights thirty years ago, but I'm so very grateful to have them now.

— **David Noroña** (actor, *FBI: International*, *CSI: Vegas*, *Jack Ryan*, *The Mentalist*, *Weeds*, *One Tree Hill*)

Christopher and Kathy Riley have written the seminal book on character moments that embody memorable, personal moments in movies. From locating moments in characters and stories to recognizing how impactful these moments are, they've written an enriching, galvanizing book on character development that should be read by all storytellers. Wonderfully done.

— **Dave Watson** (editor, *Movies Matter*; author, *Walkabout Undone*)

To write a good script you have to understand what drives your character's behavior. In this book you will learn what questions to ask and how to truly investigate the backstory and motivations of them. "Defining moments" . . . we've all had them in real life, and so should your characters. By learning exactly what these moments are, your script will jump to life, and your audience will become completely invested in your story.

— **Forris Day Jr.** (Co-host, *Get Real: Indie Filmmakers* podcast)

The key to creating believable characters is discovering the moment that motivates every decision they make in a story. Christopher and Kathy Riley take writers and actors through a deep dive into the most defining moments of a character, as well as into exploring the moments that have most shaped you, to create better, more relatable characters.

— **Tom Farr**, writer and educator

I have always been a huge proponent of character being the foundation that all drama stems from. In *The Defining Moment*, Christopher and Kathy pull back the curtain to give us a deep, revealing look into the mythos of crafting characters from a viewpoint and breakdown I have yet to see explored. This is a great book to add to the library of any screenwriter, and one you can come back to again and again for inspiration. A true gem.

— **Scott Parisien** (award-winning screenwriter, *Foxter & Max*)

We've all been told to find the protagonist's flaw, but this is much too simplistic a way to define them. At the other end of the spectrum, we waste a significant amount of time creating character biographies with details that never end up in the story and, if they do, have no real weight. Defining moments are a significantly more efficient way to build characters, and focusing our energies into these key moments in the lives of our characters unlocks much more meaningful storytelling. With clear examples in films such as *Forrest Gump* and *Finding Nemo*, Christopher and Kathy Riley masterfully illustrate the power of using these key moments — not only in crafting characters, but in building the story itself. The Rileys also show how these moments help us to get in touch with the story of our own lives and communicate truthful experience on the page. Defining moments are evidenced by a before and after — for me, reading this book has created just such a before-and-after experience. I will never look at character creation the same way!

— **Gray Jones** (TV editor/writer; host of the *TV Writer Podcast*; partner of *Script Magazine*; author of *How to Break In To TV Writing: Insider Interviews*)

Christopher and Kathleen Riley have brought a fresh perspective to the storyteller's quest to realize tangible, compelling characters. Learning how these key moments build, develop, and ultimately complete or destroy the characters we create will make us more effective writers and actors. Highly recommended.

— **Stuart Hazeldine** (director, *The Shack*; writer-director, *Exam*; writer, *Agincourt*)

*The Defining Moment* is the rare “how to” book that also draws you in emotionally, offering powerful moments from film, TV, novels, plays, and the authors' lives that show how experiences become indelible and characters become memorable. For writers and actors, reading this book just might become the defining moment of your career.

— **Dean Batali** (showrunner, *That '70s Show* and *Good Witch*; writer-producer, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)

# *The* Defining Moment

How Writers and Actors Build Characters

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Christopher Riley and Kathy Riley



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Published by Michael Wiese Productions  
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Studio City, CA 91604  
(818) 379-8799, (818) 986-3408 (Fax)  
mw@mwp.com  
www.mwp.com  
Manufactured in the  
United States of America

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This book was set in Garamond Premier Pro and Din Pro

Cover design by Johnny Ink  
Interior design by Debbie Berne  
Copyediting by Karen Krumpak

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Riley, Christopher, 1961– author. | Riley, Kathy, 1961– author.

Title: The defining moment : how writers and actors build characters /  
Christopher Riley and Kathy Riley.

Description: Studio City : Michael Wiese Productions, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021021204 | ISBN 9781615933372 (trade paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Characters and characteristics in the performing arts. | Characters  
and characteristics in literature. | Acting. | Authorship.

Classification: LCC PN1590.C43 R55 2022 | DDC 792.02/8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021021204>

To our parents, Dale and Carol, Fred and Martha,  
whose lives sparked ours  
whose wounds shaped ours  
whose strengths endure in ours

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## FOREWORD

**THIS BOOK IS ABOUT CHARACTER.** There is a lot to unpack in that statement. Foremost, this book is about how to identify the key, defining moments in the lives of the characters we create for our stories, and how awareness of those critical events can help us write more compelling and realistic characters and more thrilling and emotionally charged scenes and situations.

At the same time, it's about character in a broader and deeper sense: character as the summing-up of a person's basic nature, habitual tendencies, and life choices. The building of character, through the adversities of life and a person's choices in reaction to those challenges, is one of the throughlines in this work. The authors make a valuable observation early on: the defining moments they speak of play the critical role in both the *formation* and the *transformation* of character. And that holds true on the page and in real life. Imagined characters in our stories and our own characters in daily life are formed and shaped by watershed moments deep in the past, but the process of forming and shaping continues throughout life, allowing for those transformative developments of character that are so exciting and satisfying for audiences, and are so impactful and memorable when they happen to us in reality.

Over the years, I have seen many books and concepts dealing with aspects of drama, storytelling, and the creation of characters. What strikes me is how compatible they all are. Rarely do they contradict one another. This book is one that fits into the

matrix of current thinking, complementing and magnifying related systems such as the three-act structure, the hero's journey, and the "save the cat" model. The authors are walking down the same corridor of storytelling theory and practice that others have explored, but they have opened a door to a new room, dedicated to exploring one aspect — defining moments — in all possible depths. After visiting this room, you may find yourself rewalking the old familiar corridor with new eyes, noting how the defining moment idea is active and vital in all the story paradigms and character approaches. I went over all my ideas about structure and character, highlighting the defining moments — such as early loss or separation, meeting with a mentor, crossing a threshold, enduring a supreme ordeal, and resurrection — and I realized how the defining moments shaped characters, left them wounded, and sometimes lifted them to heights of self-realization.

Fittingly, the idea behind *The Defining Moment* came to these authors through a defining moment in their own lives, a fateful meeting with a fierce but benevolent mentor who demonstrated for them a method and a philosophy for creating believable, relatable characters. He taught them that characters are formed and, later, transformed by key moments; he showed them how to dig deep into character biographies to understand and accent those defining events. He gave them a valuable compass for both character and structure, because with knowledge of the defining moments, their stories could be built around revealing such formative events in the past and setting up transformative epiphanies in the character's future. We can be thankful that they took good care of this idea and nurtured it into a full-fledged body of knowledge. They also give us a vivid portrait of their mentor, who sounds like he must have been a real character in his own right.

From their rigorous training and their professional experiences of working with producers, writers, actors, and directors, they

have distilled a systematic approach to this business of defining moments. They considered, categorized, and rationalized just about every imaginable variation of defining life moments: unforgettable episodes of loss; profound emotional changes; life-altering choices; emotional connections forged or broken; dreams shattered or awakened. In other words, the stuff of compelling drama. They present their findings with a clarity and order that I find admirable and that I believe will make the book extremely useful for writers and artists.

The subtitle of this work is "How Writers and Actors Build Characters," and the authors pay special attention to actors and their process of imagining the emotional life history of the people they play. They refer often to actors they have interviewed about how they create backstories for their characters, demonstrating the power of the defining moment idea, which should be part of the toolkit of every performer and artisan. In my brief time as an actor, I was not aware of the need to explore my character's defining moments, had no idea what shaped and motivated him, and therefore produced about as much dramatic intensity as the sofa. (Perhaps that's why a review stated "Mr. Vogler's acting defies publishable description.")

You'll find this book enjoyable to read because the authors are particularly skilled at the use of examples from movie scenes and structure, and they clearly like and appreciate the movies they talk about. A theory must be backed up and illustrated by examples, and having been challenged to come up with representative movie scenes and characters to support my ideas, I am impressed by their dexterity with this part of the assignment. It requires careful watching and rewatching of films so that you fully understand the intentions of each scene, its context within the overall plot, and even its relationship to similar scenes in other movies. You have to be incredibly precise about describing the movie because film fanatics



will pounce on you for the slightest inaccuracy. I get the feeling the authors spent many hours viewing films, extracting essential scenes to support their points, discussing them, and then describing them succinctly without getting bogged in details. Masterfully, they present convincing cinematic evidence for their approach and will lead you either to explore some movies you might have missed or to revisit scenes in beloved classics, appreciating them with fresh eyes through the lens of the defining moment concept.

The authors assert that to understand your characters, you must understand yourself. I think they're right. In dealing with writers as an executive and story consultant, and in writing stories myself, I have learned that we sometimes cannot transcend the boundaries of our own personalities and experiences. It's hard for someone who has not suffered and lost, who has not tried and failed, to write believably about characters who suffer, lose, try, and fail. I think the reason most of us write stories in the first place is to know ourselves better. Each new assignment is a test of character: Will I have the nerve and endurance to finish this work? Do I have deep enough understanding of my characters and their emotional life history? Can I find parallels in my own emotional life that give me insight into what my characters have survived and are about to face?

The Rileys recommend exploring the defining moments in your own life, and they give some useful guidelines for this practice. I found myself examining my own twisting path through life and discovered that, yes, there had been many of these defining "before and after" moments when I made critical choices and experienced changes of fortune, moments of loss and wounding, instants when dreams died or were born. It even made me wonder what epiphanies and transformative moments are waiting for me on life's highway. In these pages, I suspect you will follow a similar

path, expanding your ideas about character and structure and empowering yourself to write more emotionally moving stories and authentic characters, but also glancing in the mirror now and then to reflect on the defining before-and-after moments of your life and the revelations, reconciliations, and breakthroughs yet to come.

**Christopher Vogler**

Author of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*

## INTRODUCTION

# Building Deep Characters

### WHO ARE WE, WE WRITERS AND ACTORS?

Along with directors, editors, and every kind of storyteller, we share one astonishing trait. We bring characters into the world.

We make women. And men. And children. We make robots and monsters and hobbits. Mobsters and clown fish. Singing teapots and chimney sweeps. Presidents and assassins. Living and breathing, our offspring live lives separate from our own, surprising us, defying us, speaking lines we don't premeditate, making choices that dismay, delight, and shock us.

We make them grow and suffer, fight and fall in love. When we're at our best, we deliver into the world full-bodied persons—sometimes clad in fish flesh or exotic alien tissues, other times wrapped in frames as ordinary and human as dust. Once delivered, our offspring cavort, quest, strive, make love, transform, suffer, heal, kill, and die upon the screen, the stage, and the page.

Darth Vader. Scarlett O'Hara. Anton Chigurh. Ophelia. Forrest Gump. Virgil Tibbs. Dr. Welby. Marianne Dashwood. T'Challa. Lady Macbeth. Vito Corleone. Batman. Frodo. Hamlet. Jack Sparrow. Hedda Gabler. Mickey Mouse. Michael Scott. Nemo. Juno. Jojo Rabbit. Indiana Jones. Frasier Crane. Mary

Poppins. Aslan. Hannibal Lecter. Clarice Starling. Walter White. Malcolm X. Alexander Hamilton. Rocky Balboa. Pinocchio.

Each of these indelible characters, more human than humans, more memorable than too many of the actual people we've known, have emerged from the wombs of our imaginations and toil. They have emerged filled with purpose and pain, blood and sinew — or circuit boards and gears. They've emerged after we've worked alone in protracted isolation until they've spilled onto the pages of a novel. Or they've emerged after we've worked in fierce collaboration on a stage, in a writers' room, or on a film set.

Once delivered, these characters do what all living things do: They grow. They change. They transform. Lajos Egri writes in his classic treatise on character, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, "Life is change . . . Every human being is in a state of constant fluctuation and change. Nothing is static in nature, least of all man."

For those of us who write, direct, and play these characters into existence, we need a way to understand two related processes. First, by what means are characters formed before they arrive at what Egri calls the "point of attack" — that is, the moment when the curtain goes up and the telling of the story begins? And second, once the telling has begun, by what means do characters grow bigger or smaller, wiser or more foolish, braver or more cowardly, more or less able, or ruthless, or beautiful, as we watch? How we conceive, gestate, and birth lifelike characters and how we raise them to maturity is the subject of this book.

Consider the opening scene from the 2003 Pixar film *Finding Nemo*.

Two clown fish in love, Marlin and Coral, have just moved into their new ocean home on the seafloor near the drop-off from the shallows into the deep. Coral has laid hundreds of eggs in a cave beneath their home. The happy couple await the hatching of their many offspring, carefree, brimming with dreams of a future

populated by hundreds of little Marlin Juniors and Coral Juniors and perhaps one son named Nemo.

And then the dream turns to nightmare. A barracuda attacks. As Marlin fights to defend his family, he begs Coral to take shelter inside their home. But Marlin is no match for the barracuda, and Coral can't bear to retreat and leave her eggs unprotected. As Coral darts toward the opening to the cave that holds her eggs, the barracuda bludgeons Marlin unconscious. The screen goes dark.

When Marlin awakes, the barracuda is gone. So is Coral. The heartbroken husband can hardly bear to look inside the cave. When he does, he discovers that the eggs, like Coral, are no more. They've been cleaned out, annihilated. All but one solitary orange egg with an eye flickering within, all that remains of Marlin's family, his love, his dreams.

In that moment of unimaginable grief, Marlin names his unhatched baby Nemo. And he makes a pledge. "I'll never let anything happen to you, Nemo."

This is the audacious opening scene of a children's movie. What does it contribute to *Finding Nemo*? For starters, it's riveting storytelling. It's a great scene to watch for the length of time we're watching it. But its value to the movie lasts far longer than the running time of the scene itself. The scene dredges out emotional depths, creating a sense of loss that invests the entire rest of the film with a gravitas it would otherwise lack. Experiencing that moment of tragedy with Marlin informs our understanding of the bereaved father's overprotective parenting and heightens our sense of stakes when Nemo, Marlin's only surviving family, is captured and imperiled. That opening scene makes a profound contribution to the way the audience *feels* the entire rest of the story. And it does more.

It transforms Marlin. The adventure-loving fish who began the story having chosen a home where his growing family would

live literally *on the edge* becomes an anxious father, hovering and hypervigilant, driven no longer by a hunger for adventure but by a compulsion to protect. If we didn't witness his moment of catastrophic damage, Marlin's neurosis would seem to us a character quirk and little more. We wouldn't feel the tragic weight of the defining moment of which his neurosis is an echo.

*Finding Nemo's* opening scene makes a further essential contribution to the story. It creates the need for Marlin's *future transformation*. The bereaved, overprotective father needs to grow. His first defining moment creates the need for a second. The first wounded him. The second, which may or may not come, must heal him — for Marlin's sake, and for the sake of his son.

If we met Marlin at some point after the events depicted in the opening scene of *Finding Nemo*, we wouldn't be able to understand him. We certainly couldn't say in any true sense that we knew him, if we knew nothing of that moment. And, worse, we wouldn't care.

And the storyteller's job is to make the audience care.

Consider next the restaurant scene from the 1972 gangster film *The Godfather*.

It's the winter of 1945 in New York City. Michael Corleone is a war hero, just home from Europe, where he fought as a Marine. Michael leads a life in sharp contrast to that of his father, Vito Corleone, head of a notorious crime family. Michael rejoins his family at a time of dangerous instability. A new boss, Sollozzo, is muscling in on Corleone turf. When Vito, the Godfather, refuses to yield to Sollozzo's advances, Sollozzo has Vito gunned down. Five bullets go into the Godfather's back. And though Don Corleone survives the immediate attack, his life remains under threat from his enemies. Michael, whom the screenplay by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola calls a "high-class college kid" who "never wanted to get mixed up in the family business," now feels

the urgent need to step forward and defend his father. He becomes convinced that both the interloper Sollozzo and McCluskey, the corrupt police captain who serves as Sollozzo's bodyguard, must be killed.

Tom Hagen, the family's consiglieri, warns, "What you have to understand is that while Sollozzo is guarded like this, he's invulnerable. Nobody has ever gunned down a New York police captain. Never. It would be disastrous."

Michael insists, "We can't wait. No matter what Sollozzo says about a deal, he's figuring out how to kill Pop. You have to get Sollozzo now."

And then Michael suggests a plan that astonishes Hagen and the rest of the family. Michael will meet with Sollozzo and McCluskey and kill them both. The high-class college kid, the war hero who never wanted to get mixed up in the family business, will commit the murders himself.

In the screenplay, Michael contrives to have a gun planted at the Luna Azure, the restaurant where the meeting will take place. He sits across the table from his enemies and breaks bread with them. Then he excuses himself to the bathroom and retrieves the hidden gun.

"He takes a deep breath," the script reads, "and shoves it under his waistband." And then the script adds a curious notation. "For some unexplainable reason he hesitates once again, deliberately washes his hands and dries them. Then he goes out."

The story seems to pause at this moment, to take a breath, anticipating the plunge. A moment of action approaches, the storytellers understand, that will transform Michael in a way that will shape the rest of the movie and, it turns out, its sequels.

After this pause, Michael returns to take his seat at the table.

The screenplay tells us, "Sollozzo begins to speak in Sicilian once again but Michael's heart is pounding so hard he can barely hear him." More anticipation of what's to come, more underscoring

of the importance of what's about to transpire. And then it happens. Without warning, the script tells us, Michael shoves the table away from him and shoots Sollozzo and then McCluskey.

Michael is wildly at a peak. He starts to move out. His hand: is frozen by his side, still gripping the gun.

He moves, not letting the gun go.

Michael's face; frozen in its expression.

His hand: still holding the gun.

His face: finally he closes his eyes.

His hand relaxes, the gun falls to the floor with a dull thud.

He walks quickly out of the restaurant, looks back.

He sees a frozen tableau of the murder; as though it had been recreated in wax.

Then he leaves.

The moment is elongated, emphasized, spotlit. Why? Because this is the moment that makes Michael Corleone what he will become, the successor to his father, the next Godfather. In this moment, Michael is redefined, remade, reborn. He embraces a ruthlessness that will define him and dictate his future.

If we met Michael Corleone at some point after this event, we wouldn't be able to understand him, and we certainly couldn't say in any true sense that we knew him if we knew nothing of this moment.

What does this moment contribute to *The Godfather*? As with the opening scene of *Finding Nemo*, it's riveting storytelling. Every second we're with Michael at the Luna Azure, our eyes remain glued to the screen. But its value to the movie lasts far longer than the scene itself. The scene crowns Michael as the protagonist of the film, the prime mover, his father's successor. It informs our understanding of every action Michael takes thereafter. Because

we understand the love of family that moved Michael to kill, because we were with him when he conceived, planned, and carried out the twin murders, we understand and relate to and continue to root for Michael in ways we otherwise never could. And the moment does more.

It transforms Michael. The clean-cut, law-abiding Marine who wanted to have nothing to do with his family's criminal enterprise — whose own crime boss father wanted him to have nothing to do with that business — becomes a bold and ruthless cop killer, a man who has now done what had never been done before, a man who might now do anything. If we didn't witness his moment of dramatic moral change, Michael's ruthlessness would seem a convenient character trait for a gangster movie but little more. We wouldn't comprehend its profoundly human roots or remain emotionally invested in his character as the fullness of his resulting family tragedy unfolds.

The restaurant scene in *The Godfather* makes a further essential contribution to the story. It creates the need for Michael to be saved and sets up much of what follows. It creates the necessity for Michael to flee to Italy so that his life can be saved. And it sets up our desire for Michael to return to Kay so that his soul can be saved. This ruthless, morally damaged man needs to grow. That he doesn't grow in the ways for which we intuitively yearn — that no second defining moment of redemption ever takes place — fuels the manifold tragedy of the story for Fredo, for Kay, for their unborn son, and for Michael himself.

These two scenes, these two moments — one from an animated family film and one from a gangster drama for adults — have an outsized emotional impact on the audience, along with an enduring power to shape and define the characters at their core. They reveal that our best stories explore more than characters. They explore character *formation* and *transformation*. Sometimes the

shaping of characters takes place in slow, smooth, steadily bending arcs, but other times in sudden, jagged, cataclysmic moments.

The coming chapters will explore the remarkable power of a small number of discrete moments to effect dramatic and lasting character change. These moments rip characters open, exposing them naked to the gaze of the audience, infusing them with depth, psychological authenticity, and emotional resonance, shaping characters who linger in our memories and demand we care.

Spoiler alert: Throughout this book, we will describe pivotal moments from film, television, books, and the stage. We must describe these moments to illustrate the contribution such moments make to the art of character creation, development, and revelation. When we reference the title of a work you haven't watched or read, you have three options. First, you can plunge ahead reading our description, and what's spoiled is spoiled. Second, you can skip that part of the book and keep yourself unspoiled. Third, you can put down this book and immediately race off to watch or read the wonderful work we're about to describe, then return with fresh knowledge and appreciation of that work.

\* \* \*

One further introduction:

As stories have storytellers, books have authors. This one has Christopher and Kathy Riley, two lifelong storytellers and, increasingly, these days, story listeners. We moved to Hollywood decades ago, freshly married, freshly college-minted, towing a U-Haul trailer packed with our wedding presents still in their boxes, and with no earthly idea how to tell stories that deserved the attention of millions of people. In the years since, we've become screenwriters and authors and teachers of the best of what we've learned along the way. This book delves into what we've come to

understand about creating emotionally authentic characters who grow as they struggle. It does so from the point of view of a pair of screenwriters. We don't act. We're not authorities on acting. But we believe that writers and actors have much to teach one another about how we understand the work all of us do with characters. As our friend Joseph Barone, a Los Angeles-based actor, told us, "In the entertainment profession, we are all storytellers. We're coming at it from different angles, but ultimately we're all trying to tell the story."

Tony Hale, the celebrated comic actor who earned a raft of Emmy and Screen Actors Guild awards and nominations playing Buster Bluth in the television series *Arrested Development* and Gary Walsh in the HBO series *Veep*, described to us an experience he had on a recent project. "It was a really interesting script," remembered Hale. But during production, Hale encountered something in the script that gave him pause. "There was a jarring moment that needed to be massaged." He told the writer/director, "I just don't think I would do this." His colleague's response, recalled Hale, demonstrated that he cared more about the story itself than he did about asserting his ownership of the words on the page. "He cared about the piece, he cared about the message," said Hale. The filmmaker welcomed the veteran actor's insights and incorporated them into the film. Hale explained, "If you can place your ego to the side and allow others to speak into the process, and if you can trust the actor you've hired, really trusting his or her gut, really separate your ego, it can make it make sense." Of course, important insights flow in the other direction, too, from writers and directors to actors. "Actors are desperate for help arranging what's in the writer or director's mind. To get that feedback is gold," said Hale. We hope this book furthers a conversation between our disciplines that will enrich all of us with the many lessons we can teach one another.

As we explore the ways writers, directors, and actors create characters of depth and complexity, we will make the claim that to understand the characters to whom you give birth, you must understand yourself. This suggests that we the authors have needed to come to some understanding of ourselves. In the pages that follow, when we urge you to search for the moments that define you, we will offer, by way of example, such moments of our own. These moments are personal. Some are painful. They include moments of injury and moments of healing. Telling them makes us vulnerable. They will reveal us. But we trust they will help you recognize the pivotal moments in your own history. And we hope they will encourage and equip you to reveal yourself, both in the characters you create and in the life you lead. We begin as strangers to one another. Through the stories all of us will tell in the years to come and the many characters we each have yet to create, we hope that, somehow, we'll come to know one another.

# 1. The Essential Insight of Defining Moments

"I don't need to know if there's gum on your shoe,  
I just need to know how you got that scar."

**AS STORYTELLERS, WE LONG TO DO JUSTICE TO OUR CHARACTERS. WE** yearn to present more than two-dimensional caricatures. We hope to offer the audience deep, complicated, recognizable, flawed people like us. But whenever we approach this work, we stand humbled before its demands.

Persons — and, by extension, characters — are *infinitely* complex. They defy any effort to make a full inventory of their minds, their personalities, their purses, their pasts or their souls. They exceed our capacity to comprehend. Even when we live inside our own bodies and enjoy direct access to our own thoughts, to our singular, invisible inner life, the possibility continues that decade after decade we make new discoveries about and gain deeper insights into ourselves. How then can we hope to gain omniscience about another person or character? We can't.

What can we do then, we who labor to give birth to lifelike characters who bear the wounds of fulsome pasts and who struggle

and transform before the captivated eyes of an audience that laughs and sighs and thinks, “Yes, that’s how it is for me, too”? What can we know about our characters? Or, more to the point, what *must* we know?

### **The Moment We Discovered Defining Moments**

During the early years of our development as screenwriters, we wrote a screenplay for a courtroom thriller we titled *In Defense of Josef Mengele*. It was a what-if. “What if the notorious Angel of Death of Auschwitz returned to modern day Germany to stand trial? And what if he was represented at trial by an idealistic attorney committed to telling the truth about Mengele’s monstrous actions during the war? What could we learn about a doctor who became a monster? And what could we learn about ourselves?”

We managed to get the script into the hands of a gruff, gifted television writer-producer named Coleman Luck. At the time we met him, he was writing and producing on the hour-long television series *The Equalizer*. He phoned us and complimented our script and told us he didn’t think we were looking at an immediate sale, but offered to mentor us as we rewrote. Luck saw life as alive with meaning and was committed to telling stories that added up to something. He had been a combat infantry officer in Vietnam and become a man who didn’t mince words. We sat with him in his office at Universal, where he displayed a broadsword on top of his coffee table, and he predicted that if we chose to work with him, he would push us so hard toward excellence that we would come to hate him. We thought he was joking. He wasn’t. And though we never did grow to hate him, he did push us to work harder than we had imagined any writer worked, digging into our characters, asking ever more penetrating questions about them,

excavating the truth about who they were, what had made them thus, and by what means they might change under the pressures the story could bring to bear.

One day, as we wrestled with our understanding of our characters, Luck explained his theory of what he called *defining moments*. Each of us, he believed, is the product of a handful of pivotal experiences or decisions, perhaps as few as five or six in a lifetime, that have shaped our course and made us who we’ve become. These experiences and decisions create moments of *before* and *after*. We can speak of the time before the divorce and the time after. The time before and after the fire or the diagnosis, or the time before and after two lovers met. If you are our friend, you may come to know some of our defining moments, the moments that have scarred us, given birth to our dreams, even healed us. The more of these moments you know, the better you may be said to know us. And so it was, Luck proposed, with our characters. Discovering that handful of moments that have defined a character could become the key to understanding the deepest and most important truths of that character.

He gave us the homework of searching for the five or six moments that had defined each of the main characters in our screenplay. Once we’d found those moments, Luck told us, we should describe each one in a paragraph, like a short dramatic scene. We spent the next week or so interrogating our characters — Mengele, his attorney Peter Rohm, Peter’s grandmother Hilde — exploring their childhoods, their youths, the years leading up to the opening of our movie, the key experiences and decisions that had formed the people we met at fade in. But we didn’t stop with an examination of our characters’ pasts. We searched the pages of our own script for clues about how the events and choices that took place after the movie began reshaped and redefined our characters. We



sought to understand or sharpen the pivotal moments that made up, like links in a chain, the arcs of our characters as they grew and changed. We even allowed ourselves to imagine moments that might take place after the final fade-out, moments that the trajectory of our story's character transformations suggested might lie ahead.

We returned to Luck's office with our handful of stories for each of our main characters and with a degree of insight into those characters that had dramatically deepened. We had a clearer sense of what they might say and do under pressure. Our connection to them felt more intimate. We derived new scenes for our script that provided the actors who would eventually play the roles deeper insight into their characters. Those scenes created the opportunity for the actors and director to reveal those characters onscreen to an audience that could form intimate connections with those characters. They made it possible for the audience to care.

The script got better.

Eventually retitled *After the Truth*, this script launched our careers as writers, earned us representation at one of Hollywood's top talent agencies, and sold to German producer Werner Koenig. The film was directed by the talented Roland Suso Richter and starred the extraordinary Götz George as Mengele and Kai Wiesinger as Rohm. While the film won multiple international awards, it seems significant in this context that the most prestigious award for which the film was nominated, the European Film Award, was an *acting* award for George's masterfully human and disturbing portrayal of Mengele. And this seems to us evidence that Luck's insight into character had paid off in a successful collaboration between writers, director, actors, and, our most important collaborators, the members of the audience.

## Defining Moments Make Deep Character Development Possible

If Luck was right, and we're convinced he was, we don't need to know every one of the infinite number of details about a character. For writers, directors, and actors, this is good news. Knowing our characters becomes possible.

Imagine, for example, that we're telling the story of an overprotective clown fish named Marlin, a father who perseverates over the safety of his son, Nemo. Over the course of the story, we plan for Marlin's hypervigilant parenting to drive a wedge between him and his son. And then that son, despite Marlin's restrictive supervision, strays into dangerous waters, is captured and carried into captivity far from home. We envision a journey of growth during which Marlin will need to confront and overcome his limitations in order to rescue and reconcile with Nemo. Following Luck's thinking, we might look at this character dynamic and subsequent arc and ask, "How did Marlin become so overprotective? What fear drives him? What loss has he suffered that has given birth to such a fear?" And this line of inquiry might lead us to discover the moment of tragic loss\* that opens *Finding Nemo*, shapes Marlin, invests us deeply in Marlin's cause, provides the starting point for his inner journey, and deepens our emotional connection to the entire film. And all of this becomes possible not because we know what Marlin ate for breakfast but because we located the moment that defined him.

This insight, once gained, may seem obvious. We do believe it is simple and quickly grasped. But like many powerful truths, the idea gains utility and provides benefit to writers, directors, and

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\* For a more complete description of this moment, see the Introduction.

actors only when we apply it in our actual lives and work. Luck spoke to us about defining moments for only a few minutes. We've spent the decades since that conversation plumbing the depths of this idea and endeavoring to harness its power in the stories we tell.

### Why We Resist This Insight

This imperative to plumb our characters' depths runs hard against our culture and instincts. People we meet ask us what we do, what we're working on, who we know, what we drive, where we live. Few ask, "What is the moment that dealt you your most crippling blow?" or "At what instant was your dream for your work or your family life born?" or "How have you experienced healing from your most grievous wound?" Questions like that can clear a room. For many of us, our instinct is to hide. The pressure of our culture, of our upbringing in polite society, of the norms of interaction meant to insulate us from awkward social interactions, demands that we lie to one another. The truth is, in our real lives we too rarely invite or offer honesty and intimacy. When we're face to face, we prefer to talk about our successes, not our defeats; our credits, not our crises; our Teslas, not our tragedies. But in our giving and receiving of stories on the screen, on the stage and on the page, the longing to know and be known finds an arena in which it can thrive. Storytelling allows us to gaze on the inner life, struggles, and wounds of another. Films, television, books, and plays invite us to see one another as we are. We can look without looking away. We can bear to see. And when we act in the role of the storyteller, our souls can dare to disrobe and bear to be seen. We believe this seeing and being seen represents one of the most primal and powerful attractions of storytelling for audience and storyteller alike.

And what exactly do we long to see and know? When we think about the intimate encounters we've experienced with characters in our favorite films, television, plays, and books, we don't

think primarily about what Robert McKee in his landmark book *Story*\* calls *characterization*: "the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny... all aspects of humanity we could know by taking notes on someone day in and day out." Those things are interesting and often amusing. But when we think about the characters with whom we've experienced our strongest and most intimate encounters, we think about what McKee calls *true character*, which he says "is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure — the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature." It isn't Forrest Gump's leg braces that attach us to him throughout his many improbable adventures, from the jungles of Vietnam to the waters of the Gulf to the White House; it's his pure and relentless love of Jenny, a love born in a defining moment when Forrest meets his golden-haired girl on the school bus and is forever changed.

There's another reason we resist the work required to plumb our characters' depths. We get ahead of ourselves. We get excited about what our characters are about to say and do. Often a story's surface action, to borrow a term from author Claudia Hunter Johnson, sparkles so brightly that we're tempted to race ahead, following our characters as they pursue some high-stakes goal through impossible obstacles. With our hearts pounding and legs churning, we race from one character action to the next, from one struggle to another, focused solely on *what* our characters do because it's so blasted interesting or amusing or audacious, but neglecting to ask *why* they do what they do.

Many times in the course of developing stories, we've been tempted to shortcut the process. We know enough, we think. Our heroine needs to get her dying child to a doctor on the other side

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\* Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, HarperEntertainment, 1977.

of the front lines, deep in enemy territory. Her motivation is primal, and the clock is ticking. We can imagine the risks she'll take, how she'll negotiate the betrayal of allies and the unexpected assistance of enemies. We envision the moment she reaches the hospital where the doctor works and how it will feel when he recognizes her as an enemy and nonetheless saves her child — or refuses in that final desperate moment to provide treatment. What more do we need to know? And so we rush ahead, writing or directing or acting those intensely dramatic scenes, but operating at a superficial level that prevents us from knowing or making known a character at the greatest possible depth.

The creation of character-defining moments requires discipline and a kind of love for our characters. It demands that we resist the temptation to race ahead. It requires us to slow down and think about our characters, listen to them, study them. “What happened to you,” we must ask with patience and compassion, “to make you this way?” We understand this mother has a dying child, but only she can tell us what being a mother means to *her* and how she, unique among all women, came to motherhood. How did that moment when her newborn was first placed in her arms change her? From what to what was she changed? Only when we take the time and invest the effort, only when we give them our precious attention, will our characters share these intimate secrets with us.

### **What Does All This Hard Work Get Us?**

Let's say we take the time to unearth our characters' defining moments. What benefits accrue from knowledge of these events?

We propose that defining moments can provide the key to:

- understanding the invisible forces that drive and impede our characters

- commanding the attention of our audience
- deepening the audience's emotional investment in our characters
- tracking and dramatizing character growth and transformation
- energizing the performance of actors who've come into contact with the deepest forces driving their characters
- equipping writers, directors, actors, and all of our creative collaborators as we work together telling deep, honest, and moving stories

We'll examine those benefits one at a time.

### ***Understanding the Invisible Forces That Drive and Impede Our Characters***

Forrest Gump inspires a young Elvis Presley's distinctive dance style. He plays college football. He rescues wounded soldiers in Vietnam. He plays ping-pong in China. He visits the White House. He speaks at a war protest on the National Mall. He founds a shrimping business. He invests in Apple. He donates to the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. He mows lawns. He runs countless miles. He does a head-spinning variety of things, and yet his story holds together as if all of these disconnected actions are one. What holds this nutty tale together?

We can talk about Forrest Gump's low IQ. His distinctive manner of speaking. His odd posture. His innocence. All those details matter. None explains why he does what he does. None reveals the glue that holds his story together. It isn't his IQ or his posture or his innocence. What is it?

It's his love for Jenny.

That love drives him to write her letters every day he's in Vietnam and to follow her advice when danger comes. His love

for Jenny drives him to name a fleet of shrimping boats after her and to crash a Black Panther party and to wade into the Reflecting Pool and to welcome her into his home and care for her through her final illness and cherish her memory and raise her son. Forrest Gump's love for Jenny drives his actions and unifies the movie. That love defines him.

Is there a single, critical moment when this relationship is born? In fact, there is. In the screenplay by Eric Roth, based on the novel by Winston Groom, Forrest himself describes that moment, beginning as his younger self boards the school bus on his first day of school. None of the kids will let him sit beside them. And as young Forrest stands in the aisle looking for a seat, adult Forrest narrates, "You know, it's funny what a young man recollects. 'Cause I don't remember being born." And, as if to drive home the point that this moment stands unique in his memory, he continues, "I don't recall what I got for my first Christmas and I don't know when I went on my first outdoor picnic. But I do remember the first time I heard the sweetest voice in the wide world."

"You can sit here if you want," says Jenny Curran, a golden-haired girl about Forrest's age.

Adult Forrest says, "I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life. She was like an angel."

Forrest takes the seat next to Jenny, they introduce themselves to one another, and their friendship is born.

"From that day on," recalls Forrest, "we was always together. Jenny and me was like peas and carrots. She was my most special friend. My only friend."

Notice the before-and-after language Forrest uses: "From that day on." Before that moment, he had no friend. After that moment, he had Jenny. And his love for Jenny defines him and drives his actions to the day of her death and beyond. If we're ignorant of the difference meeting Jenny makes in Forrest's life, we

don't know Forrest Gump. Knowing about their meeting and its significance provides the key to comprehending the powerful and invisible forces that drive this iconic movie character.

We've already discussed the tragic opening scene of *Finding Nemo* and its enduring impact on Marlin. The damage inflicted on his psyche by that moment of loss affects him in many ways. It puts an end to his spirit of adventure. It transforms him into a fearful, overly restrictive parent. It creates a barrier between him and his only surviving child. If we're ignorant of Marlin's defining moment, we don't know Marlin. Knowing about that moment provides the key to comprehending the powerful and invisible forces that impede this beloved movie character.

#### ***Commanding the Attention of Our Audience***

Alfred Hitchcock famously said, "Drama is life with the dull bits cut out." He's right, of course. We don't want to watch the bits where nothing happens. Nor do we want to watch the long, slow bits where something might be happening but happens so slowly that it's imperceptible. That's why in the history of cinema, we don't have any great paint-drying scenes. It's why Shakespeare and Ibsen failed to provide any memorable grass-growing or glacier-creeping scenes. We have no interest in watching the earth's tectonic plates creep, century by century, millimeter by millimeter, or the ultra slow-motion ooze of magma miles beneath our wheat fields. As a great white shark hunts for prey, our eye scans for change. When nothing changes, our attention wanders. But when a volcano rumbles and the magma explodes into the sky, leveling forests and gushing rivers of molten rock, we take notice. The slow creep of the glacier bores us; the calving of massive icebergs that plunge into the sea and create tsunamis as tall as skyscrapers fascinates. Nine months of gestation doesn't make for spellbinding observation; the moment of birth does.

We were living in Los Angeles on the morning of January 17, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 1994. At the time, we lived only a few miles from Northridge, the spot in the San Fernando Valley where, at 4:30 a.m., a blind thrust fault ruptured. Megatons of energy were released. Violent shock waves radiated through the city. Freeway overpasses collapsed. Apartment buildings crumbled. Shopping malls caved in. Parking structures pancaked. We awoke to our world writhing in darkness, our bed bucking as if an enraged giant lay beneath, intent on shaking the life out of us. Our young children were screaming in their beds, but we couldn't hear them over the screaming of the house itself. For the first time since moving to California and experiencing several less intense seismic events, we understood how people die in earthquakes.

The initial shock lasted between ten and twenty seconds. The speed at which the ground moved was the highest ever recorded. Our home and our family survived. Many others didn't. Fifty-seven of our fellow Angelenos died that morning. Almost nine thousand were hurt. Property damage was counted in the tens of billions of dollars. The mountain outside the window of the house where we live today grew three feet taller. All in between ten and twenty seconds. It was a moment that captured our attention. While it lasted, we couldn't think of anything else. It was as intensely dramatic as any moment we've experienced in our lives.

This is the power of defining moments to command our attention and our care.

We pay attention to the moments of change. And defining moments are the moments of eruption, of seismic shaking, of birth and death. They are the moments of greatest change. Discovering them and employing them in our storytelling provides a key to capturing the attention and care of an audience.

### ***Deepening the Audience's Emotional Investment in Our Characters***

When we moved to Los Angeles, we brought a script Chris had written in college. During our first months in town, we happened to meet a producer who became a friend, and he offered to read that script. It was the first time an industry professional was laying eyes on work either of us had done, and we looked forward to enthusiastic feedback and some sort of open door to move forward in our careers as baby screenwriters.

Instead, what we heard the next time we saw the producer was this: "I read your script. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have read past the first ten pages."

Chris stammered something like, "Oh." And then, "Why?"

The producer responded with blunt words. "I didn't care about your characters."

Those words did more than sting. They made Chris question whether he even belonged in Hollywood. He suddenly doubted whether he had what it took to become a professional screenwriter if he couldn't accomplish that most fundamental storytelling task: making a reader give a rip about his characters.

After spending twenty-four miserable hours contemplating a retreat home to Kansas, Chris picked himself off the floor, and together we asked ourselves a question we would need to answer if we were going to progress as storytellers: "How do we make people care about our characters?"

Defining moments—while not the complete answer—provide an important key to unlocking the answer to that question.

When we see Marlin suffer the loss of his family, we gain more than an understanding of the forces that drive and impede him. Our hearts are moved. We gain a deep sense of investment in his

well-being. We feel an emotional stake in his story. We attach to him. We begin to care what happens to Marlin. And when Nemo is taken captive, we root intensely for Marlin to rescue his only surviving child. If we're an actor, director, or producer reading the script, we keep turning the pages.

### ***Tracking and Dramatizing Character Growth and Transformation***

In the exquisite 2015 film *Room*, written by Emma Donoghue and directed by Lenny Abrahamson, actress Brie Larson plays Joy Newsome, a young woman who was abducted as a teenager and has been held captive ever since in her abductor's backyard shed. When the film begins, Joy has spent seven years imprisoned this way, has given birth to a son she calls Jack (played by Jason Tremblay), has raised him in this confined world she and her son call "Room," and is preparing to celebrate Jack's fifth birthday. Jack is Joy's entire world, and Joy has employed her immense love and creativity to transform their prison cell into an entire world for Jack. Against all odds, she has protected him from the psychological damage that should have been unavoidable, growing up where he has. But when Joy's captor, a barely seen figure she calls Old Nick, takes ominous notice of Jack, Joy hatches an ingenious plan to help Jack escape. At incalculable emotional cost to herself, Joy launches Jack out of Room and into the wide world he's never known. The escape attempt itself unfolds in a sequence so harrowing, so uncertain, so freighted with physical and emotional stakes it's almost unwatchable. The escape attempt succeeds. Jack makes it to safety. He assists the police in finding and freeing his mother. And that's just the story up to the movie's midpoint. Because while mother and son have completed their physical escape, they have yet to make their emotional escape. Joy's mother, played by Joan Allen, embraces her daughter and grandson with a full heart.

Joy's father, played by William H. Macy, can't. When he looks at Joy, all he can see is the pain of having lost her for all those years. And when he looks at Jack, all he can see is the kidnapper who raped his daughter and fathered this child. Unable to bear Jack's presence, Macy's character departs, leaving his daughter to negotiate the rest of her perilous journey without his support.

Without describing the remainder of the story, which depicts additional character growth, we can point to multiple defining moments implicit in the lives of these characters that allow us to track their transformation.

To begin, we can point to the moment of Joy's abduction. For Joy, her mother, and her father, this event creates a moment of before and after. It's a moment that redirects each of their lives in dramatic ways. For Joy, the changes are obvious. Instead of leading the life of a typical high school student, she becomes a prisoner and sex slave. For her parents, their lives become consumed with the search for their daughter and the ongoing grief of her loss.

For Joy, the birth of Jack represents a further defining moment. Before his birth, she dwelt alone in Room. After his birth, she had her child, the love of her life. Her priorities, her emotions, her minute-to-minute activities, center on him. Room itself is transformed. Instead of representing only her prison, she begins, for the sake of her son, to turn Room into a universe of possibilities.

Jack's fifth birthday acts as another defining moment. The predator Old Nick takes notice of Jack. For Joy, the status quo can no longer hold. Before Jack's birthday, Joy could protect Jack. After his birthday, Joy can no longer feel confident about keeping her child safe. Before this moment, Joy could keep her son at her side. After this moment, she knows she needs to send him away. As a consequence, this moment pushes Joy to take the most dangerous and extreme action of her years in captivity.

Jack and Joy's escape and reunion with Joy's parents represents

another defining moment. Before the escape, they were prisoners under the power and control of Old Nick. After the escape, they are free. Before the escape, Joy's parents could only grieve the loss of their daughter and fear what had happened to her without any actual knowledge of her fate. After the escape, they can celebrate her return and fill the black hole in their knowledge of Joy's life all those years she was missing.

Each of these moments becomes a pivot point in the growth and transformation of the characters it touches. From point to point, we can track the way they change. These dramatic moments and the characters' responses to them make clear, visible, and comprehensible to the audience the characters' invisible inner journeys.

Where their journeys diverge, the defining moments help us understand why. Joy experiences not only the moment of her abduction and rape but also the moment of Jack's birth, along with all the changes his birth brings to her life. Joy's dad experiences the impact of his daughter's abduction but — and this is critical to understanding him — doesn't experience Jack's birth. Joy is redefined by Jack's presence. Her dad is not. As a consequence, Joy has an entirely different orientation toward Jack than does her dad. For Joy, Jack represents love and hope, informed by his presence in her life following his birth. For her dad, Jack represents only the horror and violence of the sole defining moment he experienced.

The inability of Joy's dad to keep up with his daughter's emotional growth because he missed pivotal moments of change — defining moments — mirrors the experience of the audience. We first watched *Room* as a screener, one of those DVDs the studios distribute during awards season to members of the various Hollywood guilds in hopes of encouraging nominations and awards. As we watched the unbearably intense sequence of Jack's escape and Joy's rescue, the DVD glitched and the movie froze. We

stopped breathing. We stabbed buttons on the remote. We went apoplectic. You'd do the same.

When any one of us is caught up in a story, we can't bear to miss the defining moments. Not only do they make for riveting viewing, they make sense of the story. If the DVD skips, or if we race to the kitchen for a Hot Pocket, or if we need to slip out of our seat in the theater to visit the bathroom, and a defining moment takes place when we're not watching, we return to a character and a story we no longer understand. We weren't in the *Winnebago* when it made a sharp turn and drove off without us. When this happens, we will ask, often out loud, "What happened?!" Deprived of knowledge of their defining moments, we lose connection with our characters and their journeys.

#### ***Energizing the Performance of Actors Who've Come into Contact with the Deepest Forces Driving Their Characters***

Do actors really think about where their characters come from and what has shaped them? Absolutely, says our friend Angie Bitsko, a veteran stage actor, director, and acting teacher in San Diego. "We're backstory-ing all the time."

But isn't "backstory-ing" the province of writers? Not at all, insists Bitsko. "I find that if actors just throw themselves into the script and into the story, it becomes very superficial. So you've got to step back, and you've got to figure out who you are, how you fit into the story, how you relate to the other characters. You're going to have to do a lot of work on your own."

Beyond figuring out relationships and a character's place in the story, Bitsko points to the specific value of an actor populating a character's backstory with pivotal moments not present in the script.

“We call it the actor’s secret,” says Bitsko. “There are going to be secrets that you have that aren’t necessarily going to be shared with your audience, maybe even with other characters. It’s those secrets, or defining moments, that shape and drive that character.”

And the way Bitsko figures it, this work of creating robust backstories for characters doesn’t belong only to leads and those playing featured characters. It may be even more important, she says, for ensemble characters. “As an actor, you don’t want to be just a piece of furniture onstage. With enough audience members, someone is looking at you at every given moment.” Her advice to every actor, no matter how many or few lines they have, even if the script refers to them as Soldier #2: “Give your character a name. That name may not appear on the marquee or in the program, but you know your name. You have a full life, and your life has significance.”

When Bitsko directed a university production of the musical comedy *The Addams Family*, she tried an experiment. She challenged the actors to create full backstories for their characters, an assortment of dead relatives who come back in the present but who also share connections, along with pivotal moments — defining moments — from their pasts. Bitsko collected these stories of full, fleshed-out lives and created a family tree. “It’s something the audience never saw,” she recalls. “But onstage, that created a brand new dynamic. It fueled their energy as characters. It fueled the story with energy.” How could it not? Every actor had discovered the engine that drove their character.

***Equipping Writers, Directors, Actors, and All of Our Creative Collaborators as We Work Together Telling Deep, Honest, and Moving Stories***

Look again at the restaurant scene from *The Godfather*.<sup>\*</sup> When he kills rival Sollozzo and police captain McCluskey, Michael

<sup>\*</sup> For a more complete description of this moment, see the Introduction.

Corleone is going to cross a threshold from his old life into his new one. He will transform from upstanding citizen to crime boss, from innocent to killer. It’s a passage that can’t be reversed, a journey that can’t be untraveled. Michael has passed a point of no return. This moment begins on the page, the work of an author and a screenwriter. In the screenplay, the heart of this decisive sequence, the actual moment when Michael flips the invisible internal switch that changes his inner moral landscape forever, takes place in the restaurant’s bathroom. Michael has just found the gun that was planted for him in advance.

CLOSE ON MICHAEL; the feel of it reassures him. Then he breaks it loose from the tape holding it; he takes a deep breath and shoves it under his waistband. For some unexplainable reason he hesitates once again, deliberately washes his hands and dries them. Then he goes out.\*

Notice those words: “For some unexplainable reason he hesitates once again.” They draw attention to this moment. They elongate it. They point to something “unexplainable,” some important, unseen action. Then they give the actor something to do in this pause. He “washes his hands and dries them.” Taken together, these words alert the actor, in this case Al Pacino, that important internal gears are turning. Then they give Pacino the time — “he hesitates once again” — and the action — “[he] deliberately washes his hands and dries them” — to play the life-altering internal turn. Here we have writers and actor working together to create a defining moment on the screen.

But those who remember this scene in detail know this isn’t quite how the moment plays in the film. Here’s what happens

<sup>\*</sup> *The Godfather*, screenplay by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, third draft, March 29, 1971, Paramount Pictures.



in the finished film after Michael finds the gun hidden behind the toilet tank. We cut back to the table where Sollozzo and McCluskey wait. McCluskey glances toward the bathroom, as if wondering what's taking Michael so long, heightening our sense of the passing time. Then we cut back to the bathroom, where Michael has already tucked the gun away, and we see him pass through one doorway, out of the toilet stall. The door swings closed behind him, but it's a door that only comes up to shoulder height so that we can see over the top of it. The camera holds, watching as Michael pauses between this door and the next — another shoulder-high door like the one on the toilet stall. He stands here and smooths his hair using both hands, holding his hands first over his face, then on the back of his neck, as if stuck in a moment of decision or commitment, just as he's stuck between the two doors. Then, the decision apparently made, Michael pushes through that next door, which swings closed behind him, and only then does he pass through a third door, this one the actual bathroom door that leads back into the restaurant, and finally pass from our view.

Here we see the work of Coppola wearing his director's hat. He recognized the importance of this moment to Michael's transformation. He recognized his need as a director to dramatize this invisible, internal movement in cinematic language so that he could photograph it and put it on the screen, unveiling it to the audience. He chose not to rely completely on that "unexplainable" hesitation and the extra handwashing to do the job. He staged and shot the moment using a sequence of three doors through which Michael must pass, and he had Pacino pause between those doors. It's in that freighted visual space that Pacino's performance externalizes his inner moment of commitment to the action he's about to take.

Who created this defining moment onscreen? A novelist. A screenwriting team. A director. Three actors. A production designer. A cinematographer. And an editor. Not to mention a sound designer, a composer, a dozen or so extras, and an army of others who recognized the towering importance of this moment not only to the plot but to the character of Michael Corleone. They each brought their specialized storytelling powers to bear to create this scene, which runs over eight minutes in total, lingers in the minds of the audience, and undergirds everything that follows in this film and its sequels.

Actor Joseph Barone observes that different members of the creative team sometimes use different terms to describe the storytelling dynamics with which they engage. "To me, it's always valuable when you're able to match those terms to anyone you're working with, be that an actor or, even better, a director, or even a writer, if you have that opportunity to know where they were coming from when creating the character. And also learning [from the way they speak about their work], going, 'Ooh, I like that better. I actually like how you as a writer would say this, and I'm going to steal that now.' It's more active for me. It's more interesting. It makes me more interesting on camera."

Creating defining moments, it turns out, is a team sport. Writers, directors, and actors lead the way. Our collaborators eagerly join us, storytellers all. For each of us, our storytelling instincts recognize and home in on these moments like heatseeking missiles.

\* \* \*

Storytellers who understand and employ the dynamic power of

defining moments will charge their stories with emotion, deepen the investment of the audience in their characters, reveal their characters' growth, and focus the extraordinary abilities of their collaborators to create moments that will keep all of our eyes glued to the screen.

How do writers, directors, and actors recognize defining moments and harness their extraordinary power to its fullest? They can begin by grasping the range of the various sorts of moments that can define characters. In Chapter 2, we'll examine the characteristics of a wide spectrum of defining moments.

## 2. Characteristics of Defining Moments

**THE DAY OUR MENTOR COLEMAN LUCK INTRODUCED US TO THE CONCEPT** of defining moments, we hadn't yet experienced the wrenching event that created our family's starkest boundary of before and after. We hadn't yet crossed the threshold from which there could be no return to the life we'd been living.

Our son Peter was five years old. He was a red-haired imp, a jokester, confident and sociable. Rachel, our daughter, was eight. She relished her role as big sister and choreographed elaborate dance routines that she and Peter performed to Céline Dion tunes.

One day, Chris accompanied Peter to preschool for a take-your-parent-to-school day. Chris, an introvert unsure about what sorts of interactions this event would entail, told Peter he was a little nervous about the whole thing. Peter rolled his eyes. His voice dripping with condescension, he said, "Dad, it's only preschool." Apart from his son's rebuke, what Chris later most vividly recalled from that day was the sidebar conversation he had with one of