

## ▼ JUGGLING

○ When you have your character do one thing and think about something else not only do you create tension, you create character. *Juggling* means the way you go back and forth between action and thought to create immediacy, tension, and character.

For example, your character is Loretta, the performer. It's a dangerous act—Loretta juggles hatchets. They're shiny and sharp, with hard hickory handles; if she doesn't concentrate, she can be badly hurt. But, though she's tossing them in the air, she's worrying about how to afford the nursing bills for her father. And that reminds her of when she was a little girl, and had collected four cans of bacon grease for the war effort, and her father had told her, "You're a little soldier." Meanwhile we're nervous about those tumbling hatchets.

Make readers feel the physical immediacy of the action itself. Use an action you can describe authoritatively. Let's turn to another example. A man named Streater, for instance, is visiting a childhood skating pond. If Streater is fulfilling an old wish by ice-skating across a lake, you need to know enough about ice-skating and what natural lake ice looks and feels and sounds like to make readers feel the sensations.

That physical world has to be rendered in detail and interwoven throughout the story. If you push Streater onto the ice in the first paragraph, then drop into his thoughts for several pages, and don't return to the ice until the last paragraph, the forward motion and the immediacy of the action evaporate, and the momentum is lost. Interweaving thoughts and action keeps the story going, makes the reader feel physically there. If the character is cold and wet, keep the reader cold and wet.

Going into a character's mind gives you enormous freedom. The human mind can think of an amazing amount in seconds—memories with the sharpest of details, images and sensations separated by years, voices from the past and fantasies for the future. A paragraph of thoughts ranging over decades can occur while a shoelace is being tied. Streater, out on the ice, might be recalling an argument with his brother many years ago or a recent puzzling conversation with a good friend. Streater might not even know why he is having these thoughts and be puzzled by them. But we now feel we know Streater as well as he knows himself.

There are some techniques that you must be aware of in writing a story with this structure. One is how to go back and forth between the actions and thoughts of your

character. It's relatively easy to slide from an external action to an internal one, like this:

Streater looked down at the old skates. The blue leather cracked and lined. The laces frayed. Damn. Nothing stayed the way it should. Not Elayne, not the house, nothing. He leaned down and pulled the laces to see if they had rotted. One snapped off right at the top eyelet.

In the first sentence the narrative voice puts us behind the character's eyes. The next phrases are what the character sees. The next ones are what the character thought, and the last two slide out of the character's thoughts to describe action, what the character does. In a couple of phrases we've learned of a complicated life involving specific and general disappointments, and now we want to know more. You do not have to say "he thought" every time your character thinks, though you'll often do that as another way of moving between thought and action. People don't usually think within quotation marks, so they're best avoided.

Give your character something interesting and active to do, something that requires mental concentration and physical effort. If you have elderly, frail Maria trying to dig a yellowjacket nest out of her tomato patch, readers will be highly attentive. But tension is not generated merely by danger. If Maria's pride and dignity are dependent on her ability to take care of herself despite her age, her efforts to thread her embroidery needle could create great tension. If the action is important to the character, then it will feel important to readers. Or, conversely, as

in the story of our juggler, you create tension if the character should be concentrating, but distracting thoughts and memories intrude.

This technique does not limit itself to any particular type of story or way of seeing the world. It can have serious or humorous intentions. If a surgeon is thinking about his argument with the Mercedes mechanic while he is performing a triple bypass, readers feel both a queasy sensation and some satirical purpose.

Tension can be generated by the trials of ordinary life—a character looking for a gift in a snobbish store, or trying to unravel a borrowed fishing reel. You'll see how positively readers react when they recognize their own feelings. Actions that are fundamentally passive, like sunbathing, don't work very well. It's true that sunbathing has a goal. There are even dangers and pitfalls (will he burn? will the clouds cover the sun?), but those fears don't exactly energize the story.

When you move between action and thought, your readers are simultaneously outside and inside. That interplay is at the heart of fiction.

See *Flashback*, *Immediacy*, *Interior Monologue*, *Point of View*, *Stream of Consciousness*.