

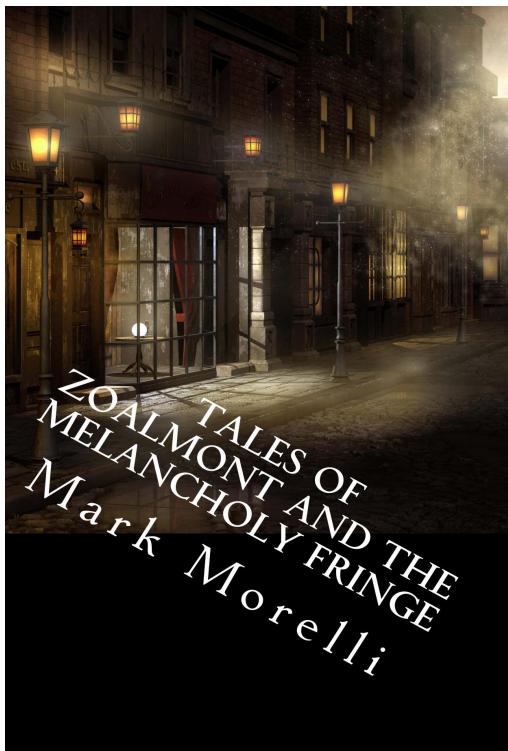
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Tales of Zoalmont and the Melancholy Fringe

by Mark Morelli

www.markmorelli.net



“A young girl with her BB gun; a goopy-eyed boy in a dank basement; a muddy, drunk man hiding behind his father’s freshly dug grave: these are just a few of the characters you’ll meet—and become haunted by—in Mark Morelli’s *Tales of Zoalmont and the Melanchology Fringe*. Arranged in the order in which they were written, between 1982 and 1993, these stories reveal much more than a young man earning chops as a fiction writer. The settings are vivid, conflicts concisely defined, and the themes are eternal: love, death, and the binding power of Italian cooking. Morelli also exhibits a finely tuned ear for dialogue—the stilted stammer of a father delivering “The Talk” to his son; the loaded Morse code of long-married couples; and the plaintive patter of whiskey drinkers. You will come to know, intimately, the keenly drawn denizens of Zoalmont, and you will carry them with you for a long, long time.”

**Kimberly Willardson Editor,
The Vincent Brothers Review
www.vincentbrothersreview.org**

Tales of Zoalmont and the Melancholy Fringe

Stories: 1982-1993

Mark Morelli



CUYAHOGA FALLS, OHIO

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“Rewind and Reflect” in *Changing Men*, Summer/Fall 1992

“Who Are We! (To Say What Stigmata With You)” in *FM Magazine*, April 1994

“Hunting Down the Burglar” in *Pig Iron Press*, 1991

“Afternoon Surprise” in *The Realist*, 1991

“Vikings,” and “Armand Hates Tea” in *S.L.U.G.fest Ltd.*, 1991 and 1993. Judith Lindstedt later produced Mark Morelli’s screen adaptation of “Armand Hates Tea” for television.

Dedication

For my mother, Nora, who bought me my first books and when she saw that I couldn't get enough, kept buying more.

For my father, Raymond, who helped me to see the stories that surrounded me every day.

For my wife, Lisa, who gave me the time to write.

For my children, Olivia and Julia, with whom I share this glimpse of my younger self. I hope you will be enriched by the stories that surround you, too.

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Introduction

These are stories outside of the box.

I wrote most of them in the eighties, in my twenties. Back then, I indulged my curiosity for the world by writing stories. I was in college or just out. I was not yet married or just. The kids hadn't arrived yet. A computer was at first the size of a refrigerator, then it was just a typewriter that saved you time. The internet was around the corner. Ronald Reagan or George H.W. Bush was president. During this time, you didn't have to add "H.W." The vibrant generation that fought World War II was just retiring, still prominent lions in government, community and their families.

I wrote many stories, published a few, started a lot more than I finished. Our first child was born in 1993. The second in 1997. Finally, I threw all of the manuscripts into a box. In 2011, I opened it.

That's when these became stories outside the box. Or a magic lamp. Rub it, and out comes the past.

It was odd to read stories that I wrote but could not remember how they ended. The sentences were mine, but I didn't recognize them. That's when it occurred to me that

someone else was the writer.

Isn't that what reading is all about,
experiencing life through someone else's
eyes? Even if that someone else is me?

Additional notes for the 2nd edition

My friend and tireless supporter, Ken Weiss, was among the first to read these stories. He pointed out that while these stories took place in very specific places and times, there is something about the world in these pages that is *otherly*. Ken called this mood and place "the melancholy fringe."

I immediately agreed that this describes what I felt and tried to describe in these stories, all of which began with a speck of autobiography and grew into fictional worlds of their own.

So I welcome you to the melancholy fringe, where the darkness isn't pitch, the sadness isn't depressing, and your front row seat out on the fringe gives you the perfect view to a time in small town America on the cusp of the digital era that happened not so long ago...but is gone forever.

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Jimmy Hands

He got the name Jimmy Hands as a child in the Great Depression. The strong, wild boy attached himself with all his might and desperation to trees, to poles, to people and never let go. To poles and trees, no one seemed to mind. But when he clung to people, especially children, adults in the town of Zoalmont threatened Ophelia, his odd teenaged mother.

"We'll have the county take that child away," they said to her.

This frightened her. Jimmy was the only thing she had. There was no husband. She did not know even which boy was Jimmy's father.

Ophelia's own parents, who themselves were surprised by the arrival of Ophelia nearly twenty years after they were married, wanted nothing to do with their shameful wayward daughter. This didn't bother Ophelia for it differed little from how they had always treated her.

He got the name Jimmy Hands because of what the specialist taught him. The specialist was traveling by car across the country. He decided to stop in Zoalmont for the night. He stayed in the town's one hotel and ate his breakfast at the town's one restaurant. During the breakfast gossip he overhead talk of Ophelia and the bastard idiot child who clung to the very people who threatened to send him away.

"Don't want that child yanking at me," the specialist overheard one diner say.

"He clings to the flesh because he's a sin of the flesh," said another.

"He's bound to strangle an innocent child someday," said a third.

The specialist was a city man, political, fervent about helping the poor, especially during those hard times. He was intrigued by the stories he overheard and a few weeks later came back to town and taught the wretched unruly boy the most important thing Jimmy would ever learn.

Ophelia's parents never smiled or showed any love to one another, speaking their own old world language. Their almost beautiful, if she just combed this way or wore that dress, but confused daughter always tried too hard to find love and friendship. If she liked a boy, she did not bother with fine-laced language, the small talk that bought time. She just thrust herself forward, like a hostess offering free pie. She made love hard as any boy. Unlike a boy, she returned home with a face stung by tears.

When the specialist came and did his good work with Jimmy, Ophelia tried to thank him by wrapping her body around his. But the specialist waved Ophelia away. Your gratitude is enough, he said, furious with the town that enfeebled and punished her. You must never give your love away like that again, he said.

The specialist was the kindest person she would ever meet, a sad thing because she was only twenty-one and would live to be seventy. The specialist taught Jimmy one thing, to drop whatever he was doing, to unclench whoever or whatever he might be squeezing, and clasp his hands together obediently at the sound of the word "hands."

Ophelia grew bent and white-haired in Zoalmont with no husband. Her child became a man who continued to hang onto poles and trees and people, who did nothing but paw at things until someone said "hands." Then he would let go. Jimmy's grandparents thought him Ophelia's punishment from God and did not love or comfort either of them, but they did give them a room upstairs. When they died they left Jimmy and Ophelia even more alone but at least sheltered in the old house.

Weeds grew high in the yard. Neighbors complained. Ophelia tried to teach Jimmy Hands how to take care of the yard, but the brawny man with no sense would just push the shovel over and over in the same spot or roll in the weeds staring at the clouds. In the rare moments when she felt brave enough to think of the big picture of her life, she sunk into a deep, dark sadness. Ophelia trembled when she remembered the threat. "Be good, Jimmy, or the county will take you away," she said, more for her own sake than his.

On summer nights, the old woman and her no-longer-young son sat on their front porch in the cool shadows of a droopy willow tree. Jimmy Hands could not speak. But on these cool evenings, a more peaceful language hung in the air. The chirps and whistles of birds, the rusty squeak of the porch swing, the sound of children playing...as long as the children kept playing and left them alone.

During these moments the rare thoughts came. Ophelia would stare at Jimmy while he played with his finger or with the chain of the swing, with anything until he was told not to, and wonder if she was ever meant for greater things. Was Jimmy a blessing or a curse? If he was a curse, then was her wanton childhood worth the punishment? Would she avoid hell because of her earthly penance? And if he was a blessing...well, she couldn't see it. Though these thoughts were sad, thinking them comforted her, for otherwise her mind was filled with an even sadder thought, that Jimmy was just a useless animal. How bleak, to think that her life was spent caring for a beast.

Mercifully these thoughts never lasted long. Summertime in Zoalmont, like any little town, was alive with loud children and peeling bicycle tires and spraying gravel and it never took long for a few marauding children to shout "hands-Jimmy-hands!" as they rode by, aggravating Jimmy till he flapped his arms and honked like a goose.

Ophelia died on a summer day, in the bathroom, the door locked behind her. She would lay dead for two days before someone would hear yowling that came from Jimmy inside the house. He had pawed the door till his nails bled. The police burst into the bathroom to find an old woman whose gray, sullen skin was remarkably free of the wrinkles of laughter.

The paramedics wheeled out Ophelia and the police, who were not sure what to do, put a blanket around Jimmy. It took awhile, but somebody eventually suggested they find something for him to eat.

"There there, Jimmy Hands," said one policeman with a mustache who had known of Jimmy all of his life. There-there was all he could think to say.

Jimmy Hands watched with fear and excitement as paramedics hoisted his mother into the ambulance. Neighbors in robes shuffled curiously to the sidewalk. Jimmy wept loudly then screamed in anger at the men taking his mother away. He slapped his own head and clawed at the two cops who tried to restrain him.

Hands-Jimmy-hands they said, out of breath.

Children gathered on their bikes in the front yard. A cop told them to get back. The young boys laughed.

"Hands, Jimmy!" said one kid. And Jimmy clasped his hands for just a second before raising them to his face.

"Hands," said another boy.

"Hands, Jimmy!" cried a third.

Jimmy covered his face, joined his fingers together, covered his ears, wiped his eyes, pushed away from the cops, over and over.

"Hands-Jimmy-hands!" said a tall boy with long bangs as he laughed and pointed.

Jimmy broke free and ran out into the street as the ambulance pulled out of the driveway. The police chased him. The children rode their bikes in a circle around Jimmy and the cops.

"Hands-Jimmy-hands!" they chanted.

Jimmy joined his hands then covered his ears. He called for his mother with a sound only she recognized.

One child rode too close and Jimmy grabbed him and held him tight. The boy shrieked and tried to break free. One cop panicked and drew his gun. The other cop said put the gun down and told everybody to step back and be calm.

"Shut up," this cop said. "Everybody shut up!"

"Hands," he said softly as he stepped toward Jimmy. His voice grew even quieter, more desperate. "Hands...hands...hands."

Things got quiet except for the sound of the cop repeating the word and the voice on the police radio telling them that county health officials were on their way.

Exercise

Discuss the four ways the author develops characters – direct description, character's actions, characters' words and thoughts, other characters' words and thoughts. Begin by creating a chart like the one below. (Examples included.)

Characters	Direct description	Actions	Thoughts or words	Others thoughts or words
Unnamed person in town			"He cling to the flesh because he's a sin of the flesh..."	
Policeman	There-there was all he could think to say.			

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The Power to Move Mountains

Arnold Smith sat his desk and stared out the window as old Boog Hemmetter hobbled down the sidewalk past the short rows of shops and businesses. The old man's gait was made crooked by age and his hardening superstition to not step on cracks.

The real estate office was quiet. The old oak filing cabinets had been in that same spot for nearly a century, outlasting four businesses. Julia Schultz, the secretary, sipped coffee and penciled in answers to a magazine quiz. Business was slow on a hot summer day. There was work to do but no hurry to get it done.

"Hard to believe you grew up in this town without knowing Boog's power," said Arnold Smith, a balding, middle-aged man with a red, boyish face, belly bursting at the buttons. Arnold Smith the real estate man was known in town for his fairness. Everyone told him he ought to be mayor, a testament to his reputable character.

"And if you don't mind me saying," Arnold said to Julia, "I've noticed you have quite a troublesome carbuncle there on your left thumb."

"Isn't it ugly?" Julia said, self-consciously covering it with the magazine.

"No wart is ever beautiful," said Arnold Smith.

"I got some wart medicine, but it just burns my skin. Maybe I'm putting it on wrong. Maybe I'm too sloppy."

"Yes," her boss said. "Or maybe it just doesn't work."

"Well, if that doesn't work, then I don't know what would. I hope it does, though. I don't want to go through life with this ugly thing on my thumb."

"Warts aren't permanent," Arnold said. "Besides, like I told you, there's Boog Hemmetter."

"You and your Boog Hemmetter stories."

"They're not just stories."

"They're not?"

"Nope."

"They're the truth?"

"All I'm saying is that they are more than just stories. Stories you read to children. Stories happen in faraway places. Stories have princes and dragons. There are not princes or dragons inside the old man limping down the sidewalk. Look at him."

"What's he doing?"

"Hopping over cracks."

Julia Schultz laughed.

"Arnold, are you telling me that Boog Hemmetter can touch this wart and it will magically disappear, just like that? Poof!" She waved her arms grandly.

"Why not?"

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"He'll touch the wart and it will go away?"

"Yes."

"He just touches it and it vanishes?"

"Say it a thousand times, Julia, and I will answer a thousand times yes."

Julia was at least twenty years younger than her boss, but Arnold Smith felt more like the child when he was around her. His awe and wonder brimmed in her presence, not because she inspired it, but perhaps because she was just all business, too serious for someone just twenty-two. It made Arnold Smith's day if he could make his secretary laugh.

"Well, I don't believe in such things."

"In what things?" Arnold asked.

"That he's some kind of Indian medicine man."

"Boog? He's not Indian at all. I think his parents were German. And he's not a medicine man. He just has the power to do that one thing. I'll call him in and show you."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Don't you dare, Arnold. You'll embarrass me and that old man."

Arnold rapped on the window.

"Me?" Boog asked through the glass. Arnold waved him in. Boog Hemmetter nodded, wet his finger, slicked back the few remaining tufts of silver hair and entered the office.

"I can't believe you," Julia said. "Don't make fun of him."

"I'm not."

She quickly grabbed some folders and rushed to the typewriter.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm typing up some deeds."

"You can do that later."

"Don't embarrass me," she said, rolling letterhead into the typewriter. "Don't be mean."

The bell tinkled above the door and Boog entered.

Arnold smiled. "Boog, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine."

"Everybody doing well by you, Boog?"

"Oh, sure. Can't complain."

"They're not giving you a hard time at the bank are they?"

"Oh no. We just like to rib each other, that's all."

"What brings you to town, Boog?"

"Post office," the old man said.

"Can I get you some coffee?"

"Sure!"

"Well sit down while I pour," Arnold said.
"You don't take anything in it, right?"

"Not since the war," Boog laughed.

Forty years later, Boog still talked about sugar rationing.

"Boog, I was just telling Julia about how sad I am now that I got rid of my father's cabin out there in the Allegheny mountains. You remember that cabin?"

Julia smiled and rolled her eyes.

"I think I went hunting with him once or twice," said Boog.

"Yessir...the mountains," said Arnold. "Boog, speaking of mountains...remember telling us when we were boys about the power to move mountains? I can sell them, Boog, but I can't move them. I can have them dug up or even talk to the state about having a highway cut through the middle of one. But I can't move them."

"Anyhow, Julia's heard stories about you and all, but she says she's not so sure about your power. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"I've lost touch with the young folks," Boog said. "They're all moving out of town anyway. My kids are gone. Neighbor's kids, they're all gone. Are you gonna move away, too?"

Julia said yes. She would finish her secretarial studies at the community college within months and she had a cousin in Pittsburgh she could stay with till she got on her feet.

"I've been to some ball games there," Boog said. "It's a big city. Used to be smokey, just like around here, back when we had plants. No more jobs like that. No more jobs for brutes."

"But you still have the power, don't you?" Arnold Smith asked.

"You sure you wanna hear my story?" Boog raised his frosty eyebrows.

"Sure, she does," Arnold answer. "How else is she going to understand?"

"You sure?" Boog asked Julia.

Julia shrugged, still concealing her hand.
"Why not."

So Boog told his story.

"When I was a boy in the twenties, there was revival tents that brought this town to life. No TVs and the big picture shows was in Youngstown and getting there before the freeways took some time. Anyhow, these caravans came rollin' into town just after the harvest, when all the work was done, sometimes just hours after the celebratin' calmed down. Lotsa fellas worked hard and drank just as hard, and a week later, they was saved by the preachers for the winter. Come spring they started to workin' hard again, then to drinkin' hard, and then get saved again, every harvest. I know some fellows got saved a dozen times. But oh them preachers, with their wild hair and bug eyes, how they'd scream. *Shame upon thee who has bowed to the god of John Barleycorn! Cleanse thy body, purify thy mind, for you have the power*

to move mountains! That's the kind of preaching I heard all my life, but once when I was thirteen years old, them words just seared into me, and I heard them preachers like I never heard them before. Maybe I wasn't listenin' before that day, or maybe up to that time I was just plain too young, I don't know. But I do know that I was given the power on that day."

"Now I didn't do much with it for a few years. Just sorta let it soak inside me. Never even told anyone about it. Not even my ma and pa. Well, sure enough, two years go by and I'm finally old enough to leave school. Lots of us quit school to work in them days. So I was workin' on the Harn Brothers farm, luggin' milk cans, pourin' grain into feed troughs, loadin' trucks, when I start to think about them words. *You have the power to move mountains.*"

"I was workin' with Quincy Powell. He's dead now. And we're loadin' crates of eggs, me down on the ground handing up and Quincy stackin' the crates up on the flatbed. So for some reason, I don't know why, I start tellin' Quincy about what the preachers said about the power to move mountains."

"Quincy said, Why you tellin' me, I was there, too! And I said to Quincy, yeah, but you didn't get the power of the Lord. And he says, neither did you, Boog, so don't give me that look, coz I know you ain't got no powers from God. Well, I just smiled and he says, don't smile Boog, coz you ain't a preacher and you can't speak in tongues and you ain't got the power to lift them eggs, let alone the power of the Lord."

Well, I had never felt more calm in my life when I handed him up some eggs and said, *I may not be a preacher, but I got other powers.* Well, he just took the eggs from me and was thinkin' a minute, not sure what to say, till he says, *all right, friend, why don't you tell me 'bout these...powers.* Then it was my turn to load eggs for awhile and figure out what to say. Finally, I said, *I'm not sure yet. And I ain't in a hurry to find out. All in the Lord's time.* Quincy just bust out laughin', tips a little, and a big crate of eggs slips from his hands and tears into a wart on his knuckle. Blood squirted from his hand. To this day I don't remember thinking much except that I reached up, touched the wound and said, *little mountain go away, tumble down into the valley of death.* Quincy, he showed me his wart the next day, pointing to his hand, and I says *ain't nothing there* and he says, *exactly.* To his dying day he says I cured him and from that day which is over sixty years ago I been helping folks out just like you, little girl."

"Very interesting story," said Julia.

"Excuse me for just a moment, Boog. Arnold, may I speak with you for a moment about this lease agreement?" She waved a folder. Arnold followed her to the back room.

"What's wrong?" Arnold asked.

"That was, well, interesting, but I don't feel right about playing with some old guy's mind. He seems like a nice old man."

"So?"

"So I don't want to play games with him."

"It's not a game, Julia. He'll rub it and in a few days the wart will be gone."

"I don't know," she said, covering her hand. Arnold paced and looked in on Boog. "Coffee okay, Boog?"

"Yup." Boog saw Irv Holloway outside and waved.

"It just makes me feel kind of weird and nervous," Julia said.

Arnold Smith grew impatient. "Come on, this isn't Moses parting the Red Sea. What's the big deal? There won't be any talking clouds." Arnold marched back to his desk. Boog sipped coffee. Julia walked slowly from the back room to the front desk.

"Okay," she said, extending her hand to Boog, looking out the window. The old man examined the wart on her thumb like a jeweler inspecting a ring. He said words under his breath. Boog held the young woman's hand as if it were a sick bird and continued speaking to himself quietly.

"Mmm...the power...mmm...tumble tiny mountain....collapse into dust....the valley of death...mmm....mmm...mmm..."

He then lowered his head, opened his eyes and patted Julia on the wrist.

"There, young girl, it'll be gone in a day or two."

"It will?" Julia was surprised to feel a flicker of hope, even if only for a moment.

"Yes, it will." Boog smiled and finished his coffee in two big gulps. "And now, I have to go. I sweep out the American Legion every other day, clean their toilets. Keeps me busy. Bye now."

Outside, he waved to Arnold and Julia through the window. They watched him walk down the street, stepping over cracks, greeting familiar faces at the bank and hardware store.

"Has Boog ever cured you?" Julia asked Arnold.

"Probably."

"You're not sure?"

"I'm sure he probably did. He was the school janitor. We saw him everyday. I'm sure he cured me. He has the power to move mountains."

"This is just so fishy," she said.

"Think so?"

"It's just hard to swallow."

"I agree."

"Well, I don't get it then. In this dinky little town, why would Boog Hemmetter have the power to make this thing go away?"

Arnold shrugged.

"I'll tell you what," said Julia, "if my wart goes away, I'll give Boog Hemmetter ten bucks."

Arnold shook his head and smiled. He looked out the window. Boog Hemmetter was across the street sweeping the sidewalk in front of the American Legion building, looking up at the darkening sky.

"Looks like rain," said Julia. "We could use the rain."

Boog shook the dust from the broom. Old whiskey drinkers will be tramping that dust back in later that afternoon. Then Boog will sweep it back outside.

Arnold was just old enough to remember this town at war, when all those old afternoon whiskey drinkers were the sturdy young men, the brothers and uncles who fought the Germans and Japanese. Those were sad days, when some brothers and uncles never came home. But Arnold also remembered them as comforting days because everyone had some sort of faith. Telegrams told about sons who died on battlefields and news headlines announce the deaths of thousands. Enough blood spilled to fill a sea and yet there was faith. Though life hung in the lurch, suspended by a twine that continually unraveled, people silently agreed to believe in the same things. If the twine snapped, someone cushioned the fall.

Arnold Smith watched Boog Hemmetter reach out his hand to feel the first drops of rain. Arnold remembered the rain of his boyhood, when folks turned up their collars and ducked under awnings, the very same awning secured by rusty bolts to his own building. Rain became a spare moment to say hello, to catch up, to bless someone.

Arnold Smith knew that Boog and all the old-timers believed in the power to move mountains. And Arnold could see that Julia Schultz and her friends clenched their jaws defiantly in the face of such things that relied on faith, and instead, forged on with their lives with faith only in themselves and their own abilities, and God help you if that ran out, if only there was a God.

Exercise

Discuss the four ways the author develops characters – direct description, character's actions, characters' words and thoughts, other characters' words and thoughts. Begin by creating a chart like the one below. (Examples included.)

Characters	Direct description	Actions	Thoughts or words	Others thoughts or words
Boog Hemmetter	"The old man's gait was made crooked by age and his hardening superstition to not step on cracks.".			
Arnold Smith			"I can have them dug up or even talk to the state about having the highway cut through the middle of one. But I can't move them."	

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Afternoon Surprise

The theme music faded, and the first words spoken by Leeza Jessie Jones were uncharacteristically somber. She looked into the camera , which had been equipped with a special lens in order to not reflect too much the glistening in her eyes.

“Our hearts go out to our guests, Lillian and Michael Meeker. They are the parents of a missing child. We thank them for coming and today we hope to understand more about their tragic story.”

The Meekers bowed their heads humbly. The audience clapped respectfully. Lillian Meeker explained how Krista, their six-year-old daughter, had wandered away from her at the mall. Michael Meeker said the police investigations met dead ends. Next, a psychologist appeared to discuss the horrible strains on the marriage that Lillian and Michael Meeker had to withstand and offered some statistics about missing children.

Leeza Jessie Jones bit her lips in a way that would make Bill Clinton videotape and study it. In a heartbreakin moment, Lillian Meeker bravely told the audience, “It feels like

someone just reached into my chest and tore out my heart. Somehow, and I don't know how, I will have to move on and face life. Please, please...all of you..don't ever let your children out of your sight. If I only knew where she was..."

"Let's hope we can do something about that," said Leeza Jessie Jones. She then introduced a psychic named Quentin Leep, a specialist in finding missing people. He had a proven record tracking down runaway teens, deadbeat dads, and people living incognito in trailers avoiding big captain gains taxes. Quentin Leep spoke with closed eyes while he fiddled with a deck of playing cards.

"Your daughter is very close to you," Quentin Leep told the Meeker.

"She'll always be close to us," said the father. "I don't go a minute without thinking about her."

"She remains close to you," said Quentin Leep, eyes still closed.

Lillian buried her face in her palms and her shoulders shook. Michael comforted her.

Leeza Jessie Jones smiled wryly. "We'll find out how much closer...when we come back from this break."

The Meekers raised their heads, befuddled.

After the commercial, Leeza Jessie Jones probed Quentin Leep.

"You say that you feel the missing girl is close?"

“Yes, Leeza, I’m getting a very strong feeling about that. I’m feeling red, which is a very strong, close color.”

“I know when I wear a red dress my boyfriend likes to get strong and close,” said Leeza.

The audience laughed. A few hooted. Lillian and Michael clutched each other’s hands.

“What would you say to your daughter if she was right here with you?” said Leeza Jessie Jones softly, her eyes darting from the Meekers to her floor director and back.

Michael Meeker’s chin quivered as he spoke. “I would tell her...that we love her...and that...that...” but he could not continue. Audience members wiped their eyes with tissues provided by the show’s sponsors. Leeza Jessie Jones leaned over and patted the Meekers’ shoulders.

“We have a little surprise for the Meekers,” she said.

A recording of the missing girl’s favorite ditty, Merv Griffin singing “I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts” played as Leeza Jesse Jones pointed to the curtain and said, “Please welcome to our show, the missing little girl, Krista Meeker!”

A little girl, now seven, wearing a brand new red outfit provided by another sponsor, appeared hesitantly from behind the curtain.

Michael Meeker's eyes widened. Lillian Meeker took quick shallow breaths and her hands shook. They were numb, frozen to their chairs.

Leeza Jessie Jones' smile was big as a quarter moon in a cloudless sky. She poked the parents playfully on the shoulders. "Go ahead, go see Krista," she said. "It's really, really her."

The audience caught on and erupted in wild cheers, chanting "Kris-ta, Kris-ta, Kris-ta!" The host gently led Krista Meeker to her parents and the family finally embraced.

"When we called you three weeks ago to appear on this show, did you have any idea this would happen?" Leeza Jessie Jones asked.

Michael and Lillian stammered incoherently. Leeza saved the day by holding out her hand and saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Meekers have been reunited. They not only have each other, they have some brand new prizes we'll give them right after this break!"

After the commercial break, Leeza took questions and comments from the audience.

"I'm really happy for the parents that they got their little girl back," said one tall woman with her hand on her hip. "But at first they didn't even hug her. There's something weird about that."

"I just want to know why, you know, this lady is not watching her daughter at the mall?" said a young man with a backwards baseball cap.

“I have a question for the little girl. Did you run away from home because of abuse?” asked a woman in a blazer who added an extra syllable to every word she spoke.

A middle-aged man asked Quentin Leep to predict stock futures. Quentin Leep then spent the rest of the program describing the laws of insider trading and why, because of his clairvoyant gift, he was not allowed to discuss the stock market with anyone.

Meanwhile Michael and Lillian Meeker were getting on-air makeovers.

* * *

Exercise

Discuss the four ways the author develops characters – direct description, character's actions, characters' words and thoughts, other characters' words and thoughts. Begin by creating a chart like the one below. (Examples included.)

Characters	Direct description	Actions	Thoughts or words	Others thoughts or words
The Meekers	They were numb, frozen to their chairs.			
Quentin Leep			"She remains close to you," said Quentin Leep, eyes still closed.	

Mark Morelli is also the author of *Effwords: Faith, Family, Fatherhood & That Other One*, wrote and published the humor 'zine *PAH!* from 1988-2008, and contributed the column "Rearview" to the web magazine *Halfsquare* from 2005-2008. He has been a college teacher, copywriter, reporter, deejay and quiz game writer. He is still a daily visitor to the melancholy fringe.

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