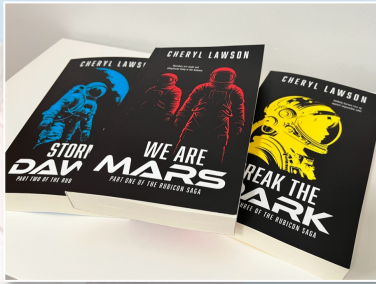


Women with Agency in Fiction

An introduction to writing female
characters who control their own narrative.



Introduction



Cheryl Lawson Science fiction author

My stories are predominantly **character-driven sci-fi thrillers** and sometimes incorporate elements of horror.



Character **agency is important** to me because it is a keystone to engaging, realistic fiction.

Workshop overview

This workshop's main goal is to build awareness for character agency through:

- Introducing agency **definitions & key concepts**
- Providing insights on **developing male/female agency partnerships**
- Discussing agency and **vulnerability, permission/consent, and violence**
- Using popular fiction examples to illustrate the **presence or lack of agency**.

If time allows, attendees will create their own micro-fiction snippets that demonstrate their understanding of agency, and we'll discuss.



Topic motivation

As a child and teen

Unsafe & dysfunctional home/school life



Small, invisible, vulnerable

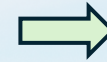
Apartheid South Africa (censorship,
segregation, propaganda, violence)



State-controlled/generated fear &
uncertainty over future/safety

As an adult

Art education & career, lived alone for a
time



Growing independence,
greater agency

Married, became a mom, moved to
Canada



Learned agency in
partnership

Own business, became a writer



Fully-realized agency as I reached
long-term goal of being a writer

Definition of Agency in Psychology

*Definition by Thomas S. Bateman:

The ability to exercise agency is to acquire significant control over your outcomes in life's various arenas, including school, work, sports, physical health, and psychological well-being.

Full-fledged agency requires believing you can achieve your goal and engaging in the following activities:

* Psychology Today, 2022 (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/getting-proactive/202203/agency-is-the-highest-level-personal-competence>)



- 
- A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up at the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.
1. **Forethought:** deciding to take on a challenge, thinking ahead, setting goals, and making plans.
 2. **Implementation:** taking first steps, enacting plans, and persisting toward success.
 3. **Self-management:** taking care of yourself, dealing with emotions and stress, and maintaining good health to sustain your efforts.
 4. **Learning and adapting:** monitoring progress, rethinking strategies and tactics, and making effective adjustments.

A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up at the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white lace scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

Thoughtfully executing all four pillars of agency:

1. contributes to personal and professional growth
2. improves professional performance over time.

Agency is thus a **vital source of power**, a capability, a competence that can contribute to your overall well-being.

Definition of Agency in Literature

Connie J. Jasperson (author/blogger) wrote in her fascinating article, Agency and Character Development * that:

In literary terms, “agency” is the ability of a character to surprise the author, and therefore, the reader.

* 2022 article entitled, Agency and Character Development (<https://conniejjasperson.com/tag/what-is-agency-in-literary-terms>)



I interpret literary character agency as follows:

- **Character-driven** plot
- Characters are **integral to the overall plan** of the story
- Characters each **bring individual identity and image** to a story
- Their **uniqueness and evolution may surprise** the writer.

Understand and create agency for *your* fiction's female characters

1. Developing agency partnership between male and female characters
2. Addressing vulnerability, permission/consent, and violence
3. Illustrative examples from fiction



A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up at the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

DEVELOPING AGENCY PARTNERSHIP

1. Section refers to **female/male agency partnership** but can also apply to non-binary, trans, and other gender-marginalized characters
2. **Key points** of section:
 - (a) **character** development,
 - (b) **relationship** development,
 - (c) **removal of choice** (and thereby agency).

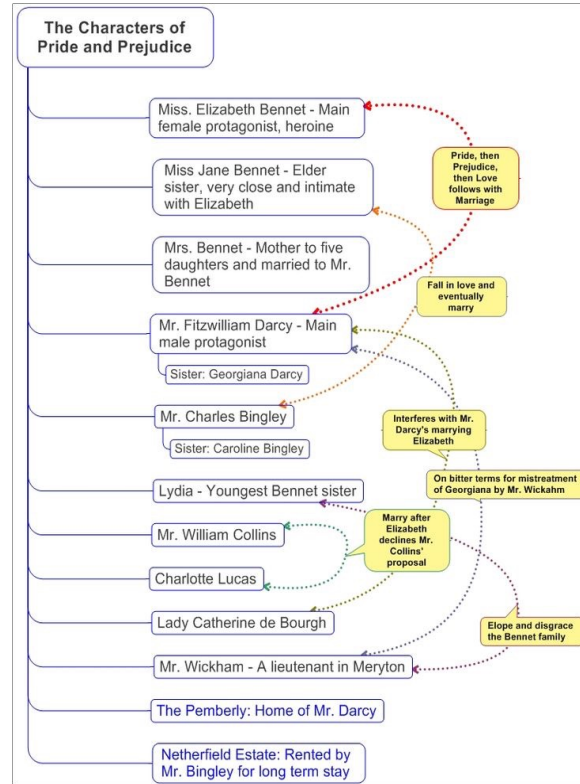
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

STORY: _____		VERSION: _____		CHARACTER SHEET A Writer's Desk Essential		PLOT BOX
DATE: _____						
NAME: _____		FAMILY				ADDITIONAL NOTES
GOES BY: _____		MOTHER: _____		ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
MEANING: _____		FATHER: _____		ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
SYMBOLISM: _____		SIBLINGS: _____		ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
CONNECTION TO M/C: _____						
ROLE IN STORY: _____		CHILDREN: _____		ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES				ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
HAIR COLOR: _____	STYLE: _____			ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
EYE COLOR: _____	SHAPE: _____	EXTENDED FAMILY: _____				
SKIN COLOR: _____	CONDITION: _____			ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
AGE: _____				ALIVE/DEAD: _____		
HEIGHT: _____		RELATIONSHIP HEALTH: _____				
BUILD: _____						
SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES		CHARACTER/PERSONALITY				
SPECIES: _____		PRIORITIES: _____				
CLASS/SECT: _____		SELF-SENSE: _____				
POSITION IN SOCIETY: _____		GREATEST STRENGTH: _____				
EDUCATION: _____		GREATEST WEAKNESS: _____				
RELIGION: _____		SUBTLE FLAW: _____				
FINANCIAL STATUS: _____		OBVIOUS FLAW: _____				
BACKGROUND		POWERS: _____				
ORIGIN SPECIFIC: _____		VULNERABILITIES: _____				
ORIGIN GENERAL: _____		OPTIMIST/PESSIMIST/REALIST: _____				
CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE: POS. NEG. _____		INTROVERT/EXTROVERT: _____				
CHILDHOOD TRAUMAS: _____		DRIVE/MOTIVATIONS: _____				
IMPORTANT EVENTS: _____		GOOD AT: _____				
OTHER NOTES:		BAD AT: _____				
		MANNERISMS/PECULIARITIES: _____				
		DARKEST SECRET: _____				

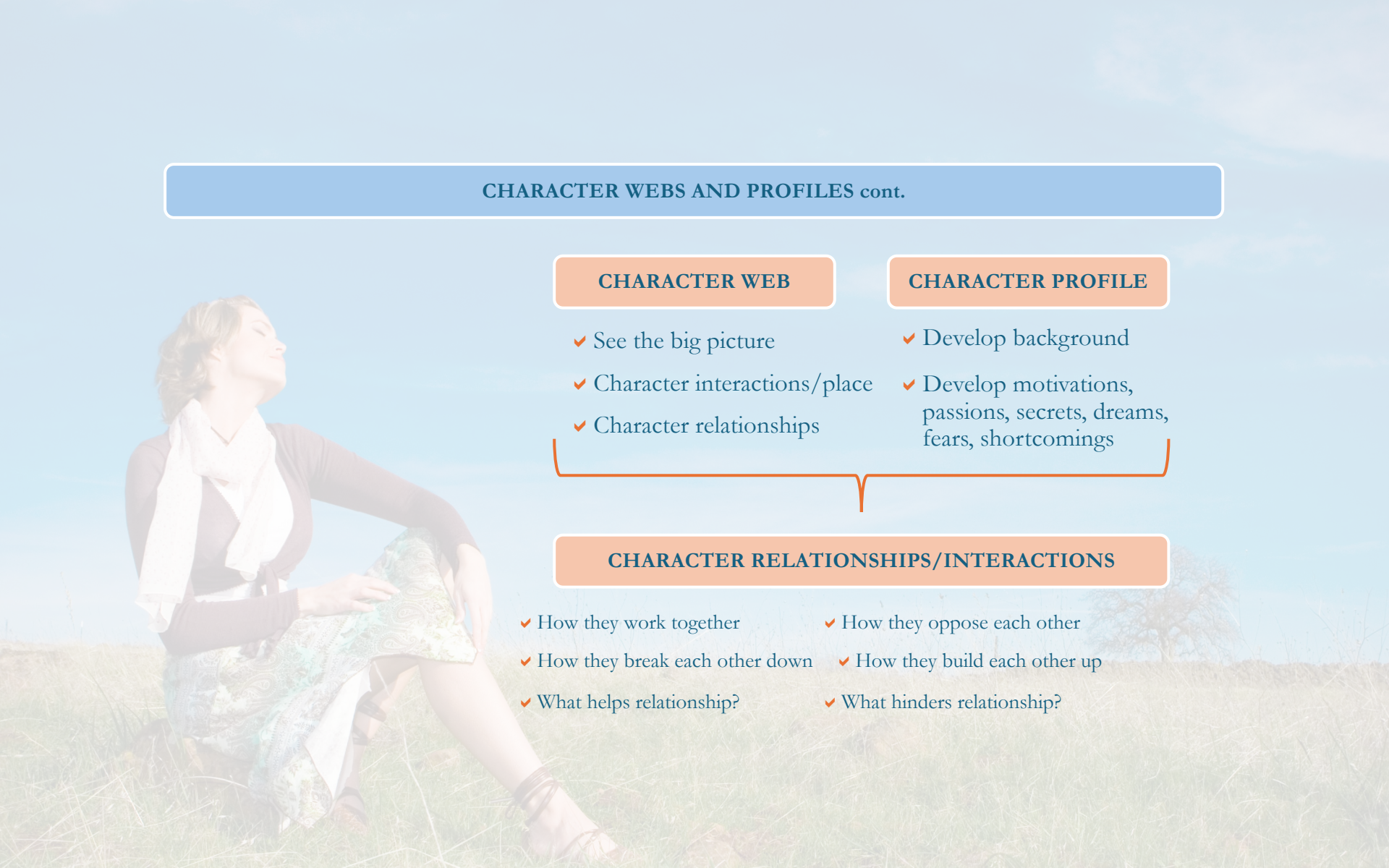
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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Character Web



Sourced from Pinterest user: Prolific Living



CHARACTER WEBS AND PROFILES cont.

CHARACTER WEB

- ✓ See the big picture
- ✓ Character interactions/place
- ✓ Character relationships

CHARACTER PROFILE

- ✓ Develop background
- ✓ Develop motivations, passions, secrets, dreams, fears, shortcomings

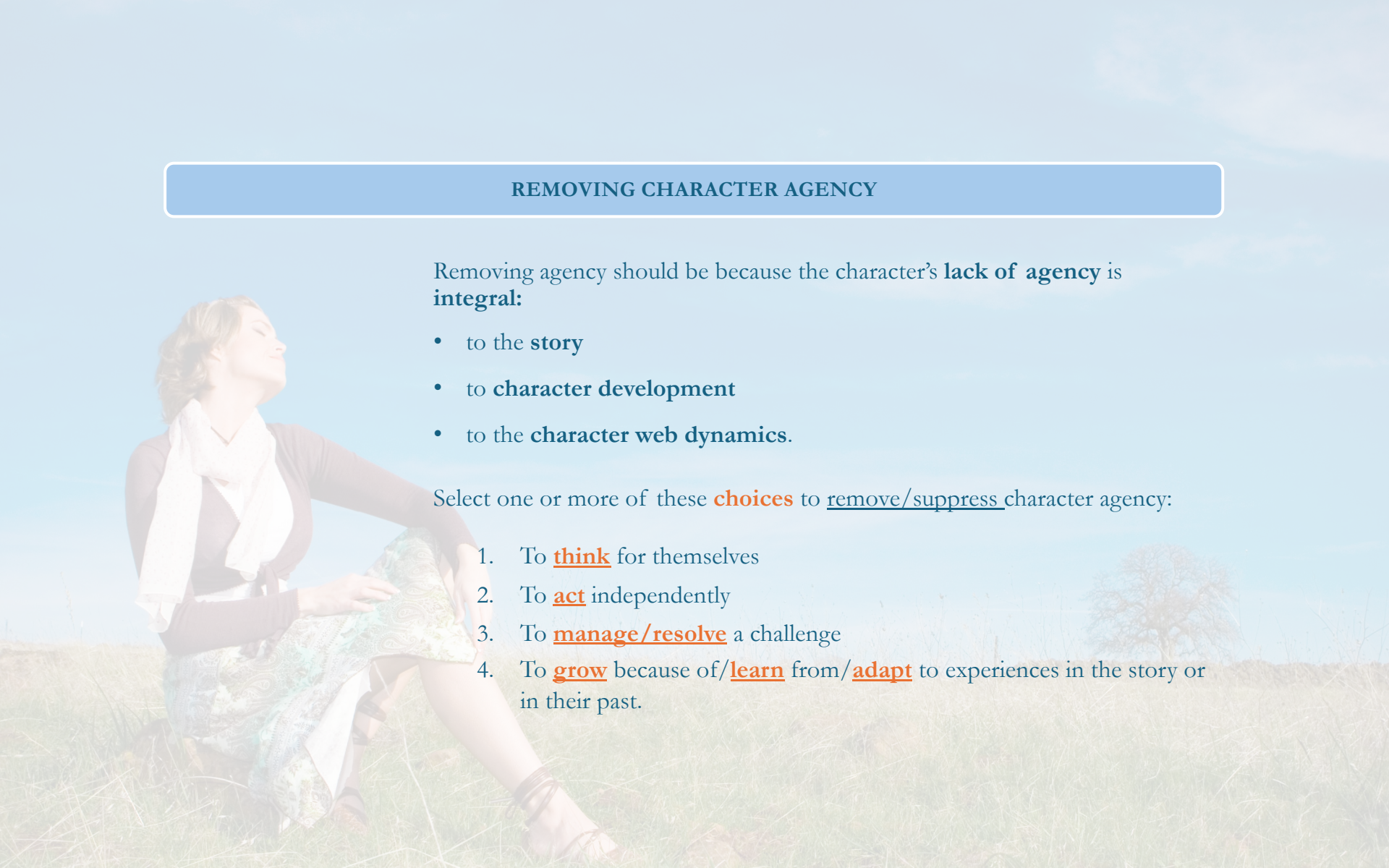
CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS/INTERACTIONS

- ✓ How they work together
- ✓ How they break each other down
- ✓ What helps relationship?
- ✓ How they oppose each other
- ✓ How they build each other up
- ✓ What hinders relationship?

A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up at the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERSECTIONS

- ✓ Opportunity for narrative tension
- ✓ Opportunity to create characters who are equal on page and in plot
- ✓ Opportunity to assign agency through writing characters based on four **agency pillars** mentioned earlier:
 1. Thinking
 2. Acting
 3. Managing
 4. Learning/adapting

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white lace scarf, a dark brown cardigan, and a patterned skirt, is sitting in a field of tall grass. She is looking up at the sky with a serene expression. The background shows a clear blue sky with some light clouds and a few trees in the distance.

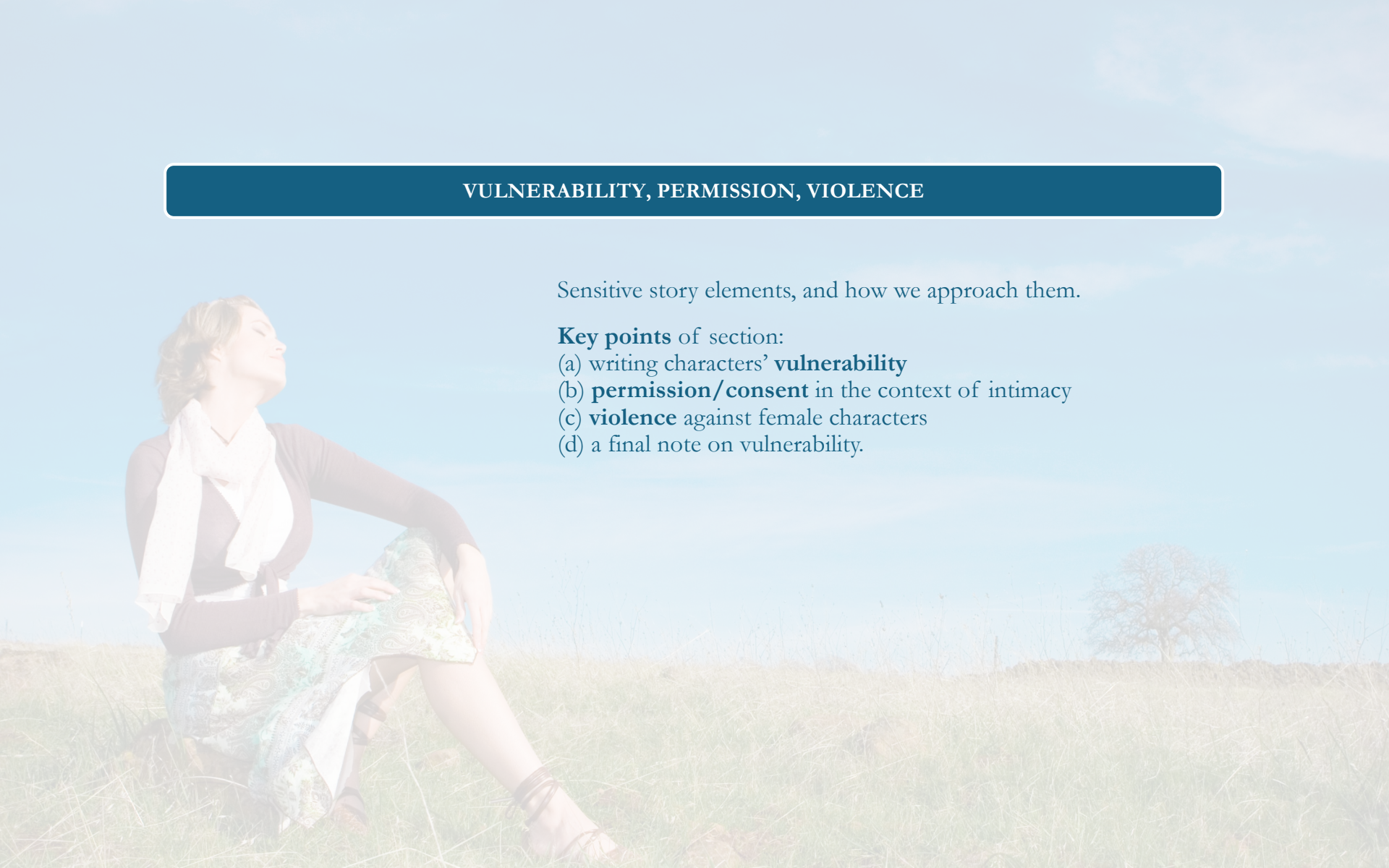
REMOVING CHARACTER AGENCY

Removing agency should be because the character's **lack of agency** is **integral**:

- to the **story**
- to **character development**
- to the **character web dynamics**.

Select one or more of these **choices** to remove/suppress character agency:

1. To think for themselves
2. To act independently
3. To manage/resolve a challenge
4. To grow because of/learn from/adapt to experiences in the story or in their past.

A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up towards the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white lace scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

VULNERABILITY, PERMISSION, VIOLENCE

Sensitive story elements, and how we approach them.

Key points of section:

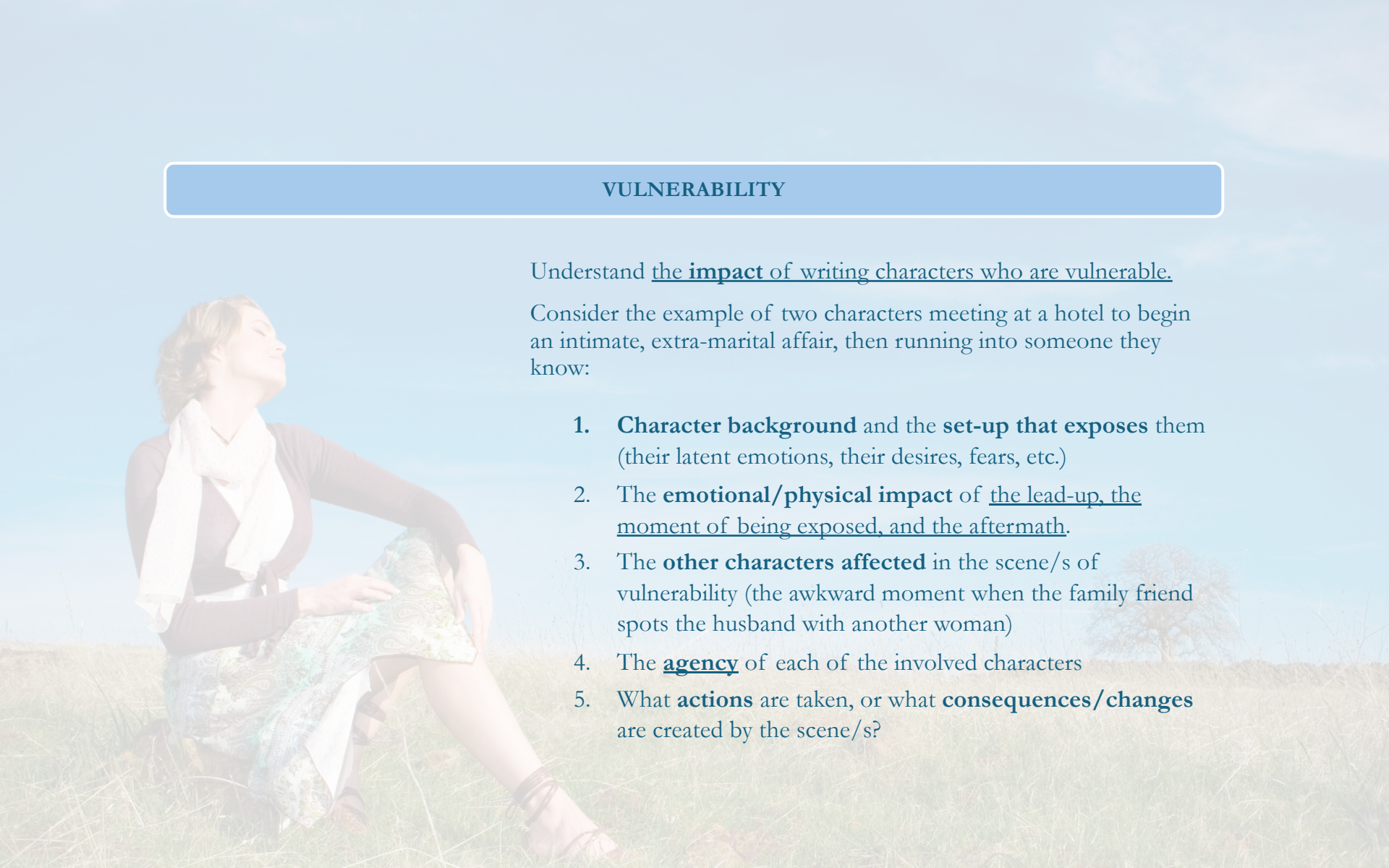
- (a) writing characters' **vulnerability**
- (b) **permission/consent** in the context of intimacy
- (c) **violence** against female characters
- (d) a final note on vulnerability.

A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up towards the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

VULNERABILITY

Writing characters in vulnerable states may involve:

- **Lived** experience to draw on AND/OR
- Significant **research** to support your understanding of the character and plot points surrounding vulnerability AND/OR
- **Sensitivity** readers/developmental editors who can advise you on how best to approach your subject.

A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall grass, looking up at the sky. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a blue sky.

VULNERABILITY

Understand the **impact** of writing characters who are vulnerable.

Consider the example of two characters meeting at a hotel to begin an intimate, extra-marital affair, then running into someone they know:

1. **Character background** and the **set-up that exposes** them (their latent emotions, their desires, fears, etc.)
2. The **emotional/physical impact** of the lead-up, the moment of being exposed, and the aftermath.
3. The **other characters affected** in the scene/s of vulnerability (the awkward moment when the family friend spots the husband with another woman)
4. The **agency** of each of the involved characters
5. What **actions** are taken, or what **consequences/changes** are created by the scene/s?

VULNERABILITY

Something to remember in terms of agency as defined in literary terms:

Elements of vulnerability do not occur in isolation. They ripple through the whole story, through the lives of the characters involved. Authentic storytelling makes this VISIBLE in the moments that follow.



A woman with short blonde hair is sitting in a field of tall, dry grass. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved top, a white scarf, and a patterned skirt. She is looking up towards the sky with a slight smile. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

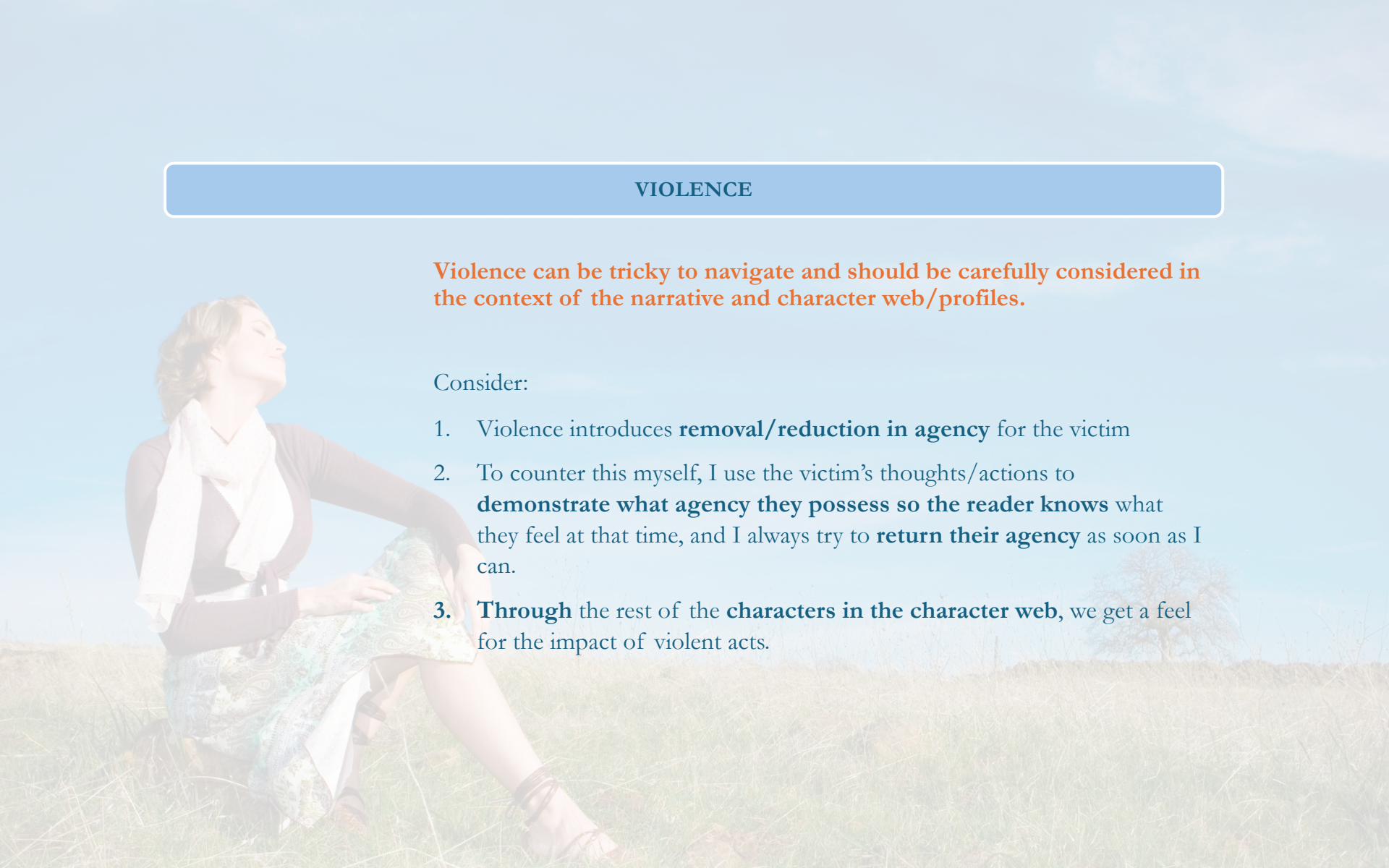
PERMISSION/CONSENT

Permission/consent in the context of intimate encounters:

- Reminder that this can apply to other relationships besides male/female partners

Consider:

1. **Story developmental stage** and **reader perception**
2. **Character relationship** at the moments intimacy is introduced
3. **Character background**, and how this informs decisions/actions
4. **Genre** expectations.

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white scarf, a dark long-sleeved top, and a patterned skirt, is sitting in a field of tall grass. She is looking up towards the sky. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

VIOLENCE

Violence can be tricky to navigate and should be carefully considered in the context of the narrative and character web/profiles.

Consider:

1. Violence introduces **removal/reduction in agency** for the victim
2. To counter this myself, I use the victim's thoughts/actions to **demonstrate what agency they possess so the reader knows** what they feel at that time, and I always try to **return their agency** as soon as I can.
3. **Through** the rest of the **characters in the character web**, we get a feel for the impact of violent acts.

VULNERABILITY

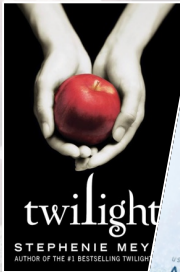
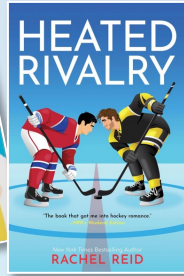
FINAL NOTE:

Imagine **yourself** in the vulnerable position you are writing . . .

- What would **YOU do/feel/say/experience** in that situation?
- Use **sensitivity beta readers** to help navigate difficult subjects.



POPULAR FICTION EXAMPLES



1. Showcasing character agency:
The Hunger Games (Katniss Everdeen)
The Hating Game (Lucy Hutton)
Heated Rivalry (Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov)
Pride and Prejudice (not quite pop-fic, but a good example of female agency in Elizabeth Bennet who chooses love over duty to family)
2. Demonstrate lack of female agency:
Twilight Saga (Bella Swan)
It Ends With Us (in examples to follow)
Fifty Shades of Grey (Anastasia Steele)
Twisted Love (Ava Chen)

EXAMPLES

My areas of greatest concern with popular fiction that demonstrate a lack of female character agency:



1. **Morally-grey behavior/toxic masculinity** is portrayed as **exciting and dangerous**, and often ignored to the female character's peril
2. A precedent exists in these books **to ignore/forgive/justify** the male characters' **questionable actions and words**
3. **Pretty, illustrated pastel covers** hide a multitude of **female agency red flags**
4. Perpetuate the **misguided trope** that **women can change/heal toxic men.**

EXAMPLES



What I found exploring these authors:

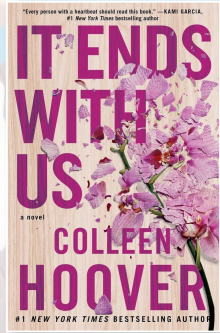
1. Ana Huang's Twisted Love:

- Female main character, Ava, ignores/overlooks/forgives the main male character's behaviors (including stalking her, controlling, obsessiveness)
- **Her mother is NEVER named** (the woman has zero agency)
- Memory-loss-through-trauma trope removes Ava's agency.

2. Sally Thorne's The Hating Game:

- Female main character, Lucy, is self-determining, ambitious, self-aware, and in charge of her own story.
- The male MC, Josh, has green-flag energy: he doesn't take advantage, he comes across as grumpy, but he's really just insecure, he likes Lucy but doesn't know how to tell her, so they end up playing games that wind them both up.

EXAMPLES cont.



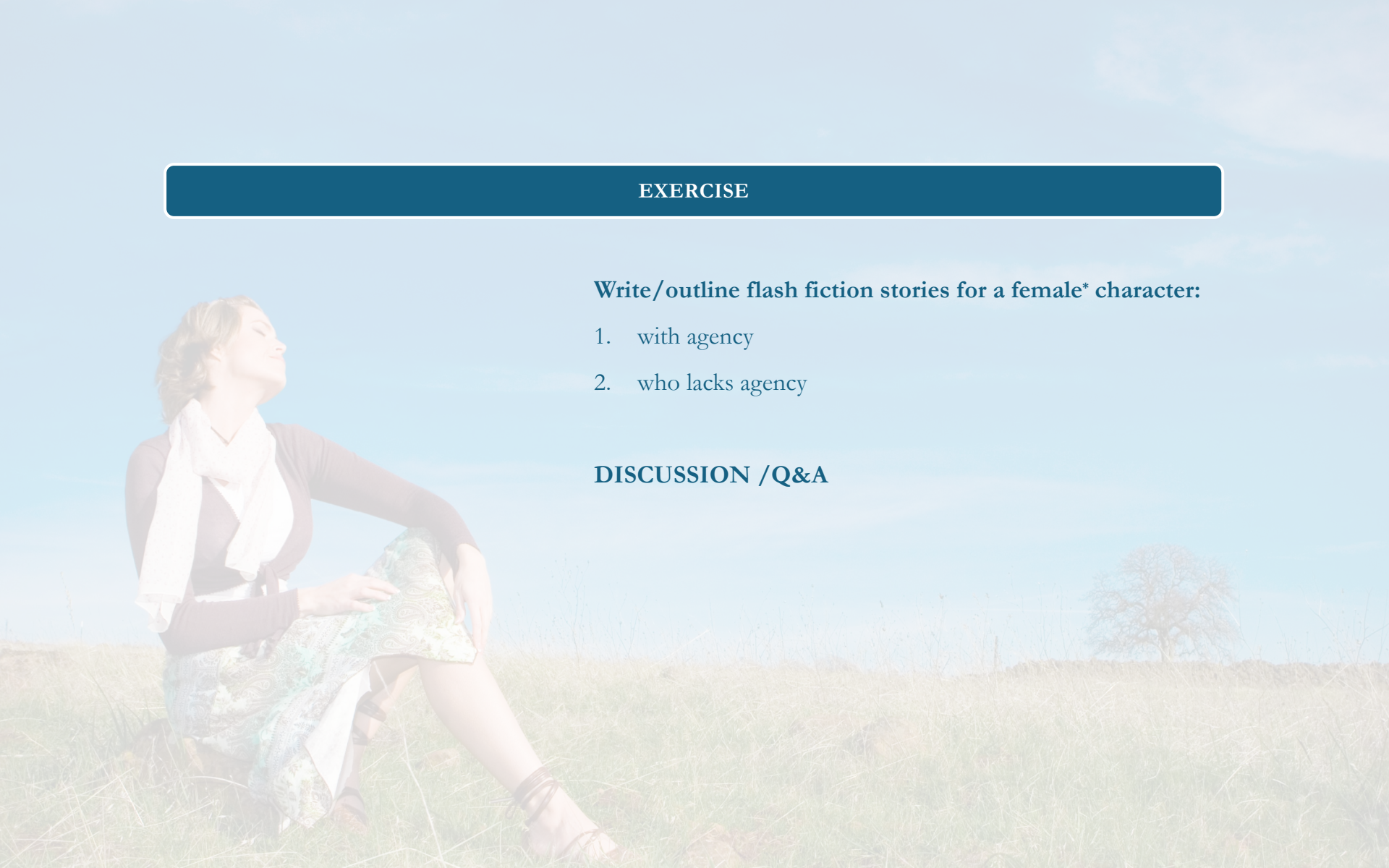
3. Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*:

- Criticism focused on **wrong market positioning** (as a romance), and **lack of trigger warnings** for the domestic violence.



IN CONCLUSION

- Yes, I write science fiction, but my stories are **character-driven, heavy emphasis on agency**.
- I'm no expert on romance writing but I am aware of, and concerned with, how women are depicted in popular fiction, including romance.
- If this workshop is your first exposure to character agency, I encourage you to learn more, ask questions, look at both positive and negative examples to develop your own understanding of agency.
- Look at what readers are saying. Reviews give important feedback on what works for them.

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EXERCISE

Write/outline flash fiction stories for a female* character:

1. with agency
2. who lacks agency

DISCUSSION /Q&A

Women with Agency in Fiction

THANK YOU for attending!

Find me at: cheryllawson.net

