

## Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

### Episode 71: Orson Scott Card

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption.

Thank you to Erik\_LO for leaving our podcast review of the week on iTunes. He said -

*Great interview with Chester Elton. Whitney, you really do ask great questions, and Chester has great answers. Thanks for sharing.*

Thank you Erik! For those of you have been listening for a while and haven't yet written a rating and review on the podcast, we would be very grateful if you would take a moment and do so now.

Now, onto today's conversation, with a quick reminder that this is an edit of a live radio interview with Orson Scott Card, prolific novelist, best known as author of [Ender's Game](#), and a professor at Southern Virginia University.

Whitney: In today's episode, we will be discussing just one of the seven points of personal disruption, which is embracing constraints. All too often we find ourselves saying, "If only I had more time, more money, more health, expertise. If only Oprah were my fairy godmother, I could get something done." And yet, when we take a moment to examine the role constraints play in the creative process and in our lives, we frequently find that they aren't a check on absolute freedom, but a tool of creation.

With me to discuss this topic today is Orson Scott Card, an American novelist who has authored 70, that's 7-0, books and counting, best known for his work in science fiction. His novel [Ender's Game](#) and its sequel [Speaker for the Dead](#) both won the Hugo and Nebula awards, making him the only author to win science fiction's top US prizes in consecutive years. He's also a professor at Southern Virginia University, and co-producer of the television series *Extinct*.

Welcome, Scott.

Scott: Hi. Glad to be here.

Whitney: Well, I'd like to start off our conversation by reading something that Colonel Graff says about Ender in [Ender's Game](#). And, setting the stage on the off chance that someone listening is not familiar with this book, it is military science fiction. It was written over 30 years ago. Children are sent to a battle school to save the human race, and Ender's thrown into this situation where he gets unwanted soldiers, the rejects, not enough soldiers, not enough time, not an adult- enough adult supervision. And so then Colonel Graff says, about Ender: "Ender must believe that no adult will ever, ever step in to help in any way. If he does not believe that to the core of his soul, he will never reach the peak of his abilities."

Now, before I ask you to comment, I'd like to pair that quote with something that was in [your Twitter feed](#) recently. You said, "When I'm actually creating a story that works, it comes out of my unconscious. Things happen in the book because they come to mind, and because they feel important and true to me."

So, will you talk about what was happening in your life in around 1985, what was true about your life that would have caused this quote from Colonel Graff to come out of your mind, and onto the page?

Scott: Well now, see, you're assuming that my fiction reflects, uh, my life, and that is extremely rarely true, because it reflects the lives of the characters. I've never been in a situation anything like Ender's or Graff's, and therefore I would never have, uh, even thought of this idea. I thought of it only because that's the situation they were in, those were the decisions they had to make. And then I made the sit- the decision that seemed most plausible to me at the time. Now, I don't know, I still have- really don't- haven't decided whether Graff's training methods of Ender were good, or wise.

Whitney: Interesting.

Scott: I know that in my own life, uh, where- while I have tried very hard to always rely on my own, uh, resources to solve problems, an- and ... When I'm writing fiction, that is absolutely the only source that I have, uh, in terms of telling me this is what you should do. There are always people willing to tell you, but they're always wrong. Uh, and so-

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Uh, you know ... But- but there are other times, financially, uh ... you know, just needing help, that I call on other people constantly.

So, I think that- that, you know, Graff's training philosophy is a defensible one, but I am not the one to defend it, because ... uh, you know, when you talk about career, looking out for your own career, I always ... There's a little laughter in the back of my mind whenever the word career is said, because I don't know that many people who have actually embarked on a career and followed the plan and had it work. A few, a few. My, uh, my wife's father set out to be a historian, and by golly, he retired as a historian, a few years ago, and he's still doing history. So, that's a career. That was a plan.

But I majored in theater, which means I had no plan at all. Uh, anybody who majors in theater and thinks they're going to have a career is just- you know, that's just a joke. But I knew better. And, uh, I just followed, uh, I just did whatever opportunities presented themselves that seemed to be something that I could handle, that was worth, worth trying. Which meant that I've fluctuated back and forth between self-employment and employment, uh, working as an editor, as a ghostwriter, as a rewrite guy, uh, and then of course as an original writer. And, uh, just wrote whatever, uh, whatever projects presented themselves that- that seemed writable. And every now and then, there's one that I had- even had under contract, but I have to buy the contract back, because I can no longer write what I had meant to write.

So, you know, career to me is- is a series of, uh, accidents, and you discover what your career was, looking back. But, uh, most of the people I know, of course of them were theater or English majors, and, uh, there's not- not much career path involved in those, because you end up not doing what you, uh, supposedly trained for. I mean, and English major, what have you trained for? To teach English. And, uh, if that's not your goal, then, uh, wow, it's a good pre-law. Though, everything is a good pre-law, uh, education.

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: So, uh, you know ... At the same time, let me just say that I have had an experience, have had several experiences with constraint, not necessarily imposed from outside, with, you know, believing that no one would help me, but rather, um ...

I just remember, uh, high school English class, writing poetry. From a good friend, uh, older of course, he's my parent's generation, uh, Clint Larson, and this was in the late '60s, it was the time when Rod McKuen's feel good poetry, you know, every poem had the word "lonely" in it somewhere. Uh ... so I guess it was feel bad poetry. But anyway, it was-

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Feel sad and, uh, aren't I a wonderful sensitive person poetry. Uh, and Rod McKuen I think is the last American poet to be a massive bestseller for his poetry, uh, and I was in the thrall of his kind of poetry. So, I was writing these sort of gushing, try to find a nice phrase, uh, poems for poetry class. And Clint Larson took me aside and said, "Scott, these are fine for what they are, but they're not much. Uh, because, you know, any comedian can come up with nice phrasing, and that's all you're really aiming for. And so, uh ... unless you don't care about the difference between comedy and poetry, um, what I recommend for you is to learn structure, to learn, literally, constraints." He said, "I don't want to see another poem from you until you've written a hundred sonnets."

Now, we didn't stick to that, because I'm still not up to a hundred yet. Sonnets are hard. And, uh, you know, that's not what I sit down and relax into doing. But for a while, I was writing so many sonnets that that is what naturally flowed from my pen. Uh, and in the process of learning the constraints of the rhyme patterns, and the iambic pentameter, and, um, you know, just making the rhythm work, making the thing sing, um, I learned a completely different kind of writing, a different approach to writing, and it has colored everything I've written since.

So, it's the single most important assignment I have ever been given in my life. I think my career in a way is based on being a guy who internalized the forms of the English language sonnet. And even though, when I write my fiction, I'm definitely not writing sonnets, nothing is meant to rhyme, nevertheless, that iambic pentameter, that blank verse, flows from me without my even noticing it. I- ... my words have to have certain music, or it's not even- not- it won't work for me.

Uh, obviously I don't have that music when I'm talking, uh, but when I'm writing, that is the way that it works for me. So, I don't think about my manner of writing anymore, because I went through those exercises, learned those constraints, and instead of depriving me of the chance to write the gushy self-indulgent poetry I was writing before, it liberated me by giving me amazing tools that- that were simply not available to me until I learned how to write within those constraints.

Whitney: And this was your high school English teacher, you said?

Scott: No, no, this- this was, uh-

Whitney: In college?

Scott: Early in college, I think sophomore year.

Whitney: Early college.

So, that's fascinating. So, it was early college, because you had a professor who was willing, probably there were- I suspect your gushing Rod McKuen type poetry was actually pretty good by many people's standards, it sounds like, but your teacher-

Scott: Oh, well ... yeah, that's something for, uh, some poor sucker of a graduate student to decide later.

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: But, uh, you know-

Whitney: But your professor was willing to push you and say-

Scott: If anybody ever studies what I wrote, I certainly have copies of all those old poems. But, I look back at them and I- I feel a sort of wistfulness for the ignorant foolish child that I was, but, uh-

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Other than that, there's- there's not much merit in them.

Whitney: For- though- It's poetry month, it's April, um, when we're having this conversation. Is there a poem, for those who don't particularly love poetry, um, but you would love to be introduced to this genre that you would recommend? One or two that are good introductory poems?

Scott: Oh, well, see, I came in so many backward ways. Uh, and when you talk about formal poetry, it almost always is in kind of archaic language, because since the modernists popped up and wrecked everything, uh, nobody writes, uh, formal poetry now. Or very few people do. Uh, so ... um, I- I'd have to- I'd have to think a little and look a little,

because I think of my favorite poets, and my favorite poems of theirs, and they're tough sledding, uh, for a lot of people. You know, Gerard Manley Hopkins is not for the faint of heart. And, uh, Shakespeare's sonnets were perfectly clear when he wrote them, but they're not clear now, because the language has changed so much. So, that can feel pretty rough, and- and I wouldn't inflict Milton on anybody, uh, who is not fore- armored-

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Uh, to- to be prepared to deal with him and his endless commas. But, you know, the periodic sentence was the destruction of language in its own day. Uh, but ...

Let me- let me just introduce a poem of my own. I did not write this-

Whitney: Oh, please.

Scott: I did not write this after the sonnets. I was writing formal poetry as a kid, because that's what they taught us to write in school back in the '60s. But, uh, I was taking a science class, I dissected my first earthworm, uh, we studied about earthworms, and the thing that stuck out to me at the, uh, lofty pinnacle of- of seventh grade, was the, uh, fact that all earthworms are both male and female. And, uh, and so this is the poem I wrote then:

"The earthworm is a little odd, it hath hermaphroditic bod. And in its millimetric girth it crawleth far beneath the earth, engageth in its menial toil amid the grimy muddy soil. The earthworm doesn't know it's wed to MaryBell instead of Fred. But to earthworms things like- but all of this is idle chatter, to earthworms things like this don't matter. For the earthworm doing what it oughter is half a son and half a daughter."

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Now, the obviously influence on that is [Ogden Nash](#), my father's favorite poet.

Whitney: Huh.

Scott: Uh, and anybody who can grab a- a book of Ogden Nash's verse, um, will be well rewarded just for the sheer play of language, and the wonderful ideas.

For example, here's an Ogden Nash poem, which if it had a title, would be perhaps "Ketchup." Here's the whole poem:

"Nothing. Nothing. Then a lottle."

Whitney: What- say that again? (laughs)

Scott: So it rhymes with ketchup bottle

Whitney: Say that one more time?

Scott: Okay. Picture this title, though it didn't actually have this title, it was implied.

Whitney: Okay. Okay.

Scott: The ketchup bottle.

"Nothing. Nothing. Then a lottle"

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: It's just- this is Ogden Nash's wordplay, and, uh-

Whitney: Yeah. Yeah.

Scott: He took the English language and, and found rhymes that don't exist.

Uh, the next best introduction to poetry is the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim.

Whitney: Oh, I love Stephen Sondheim.

Scott: Oh, I- Hi- his lyrics flow like scannable poetry.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Scott: I- I just remember that my first real introduction to him, knowing that it was him I was hearing, obviously I- I heard [West Side Story](#) but I had no idea who the lyricist was, um, but it's in [A Little Night Music](#), and it's, uh, from the song "Liaisons." And, uh, the older woman who is singing to the younger woman, uh, reminiscing about old liaisons, says, "Indiscriminate women, it pains me more than I can say." And, to rhyme "indiscriminate" with "women, it" is just amazing. Uh, and you know, it's also showy.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Scott: Sondheim was definitely calling attention to the lyric, and yet he wasn't. It was absolutely true to the character, it's- it's I think verse at its finest, uh, though it was meant to be sung, um, it scans beautifully just as written language.

So, the- you know, the only place where rigid, uh, uh, lyrical patterns are required now is in songs, and uh, there's a lot of fluidity even there. Rap music pays no attention to the original accentuation of- of, uh, um, English phrasing, because it sort of forces an accent onto syllables that are not meant to be stressed in order to- to meet the beat of the, of the underlying music. But, uh, in musical comedy as a general rule, they still try to follow the rules.

Uh, country music is notorious for rhymes of things that don't rhyme, uh, like ... rhyming "time" with "fine." Those don't rhyme.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Scott: But, uh, you know, in country music they rhyme. That's a country music rhyme.

Whitney: Wow.

Scott: Perfectly good. Uh, and-

Whitney: Well speaking- speaking of-

Scott: So you just get used to the standards of the-

Whitney: speaking of constraints, or-

Scott: Of your genre. But, but I still find that the most difficult, demanding writing that I do is poetry and, uh, song lyrics.

Whitney: Yeah. Well, so, speaking of constraints, it's time for us to go on a break.

Scott: Okay.

Whitney: We'll be right back after this commercial spot. We're talking more with Orson Scott Card, best known as the science fiction author of *Ender's Game*, and a professor at Southern Virginia University.

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So, Scott, today you're now a professor at Southern Virginia University, which is this rapidly growing liberal arts college in the middle of Virginia, in the Shenandoah valley. Why did you decide, after all these years and all these books you've written to, to become a professor?

Scott: Well, I've been teaching all along. Uh, occasional stints at one school or another, taught a semester at Pepperdine, uh, I've done writing workshops in many different places. Uh, taught many, uh, writing workshops for Appalachian State University, so it's not as if my

academic links, uh, have ever been allowed to lapse for very long. Plus, I teach my own independent workshops, uh, [Uncle Orson's Writing Class](#), and, uh, the ... uh, my literary bootcamp.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Which, you know, very intense experience. But, uh, when I'm teaching I'm not writing. That's just the way it is. Even when I intend to, I find that I can't. Uh, there's just- I can't shift my concentration from my students to writing, so I don't try. Uh, I just teach and concentrate on teaching. Therefore, it has to be a hobby, because no- never have I been paid anywhere near enough to cover the costs of meeting my payroll, or anything else.

Whitney: You have been called, or identified as a great mentor. Um, could you talk for a minute about some of the people in your career who you've had an opportunity to mentor? Um, up and coming authors that you have been able to i- identify, bring along, um ... just any thoughts that come to mind for you in terms of the- the opportunity for you to give back to up and coming, um, writers?

Scott: Well, in a way, mentoring doesn't really work, in my experience, for young writers.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Because I'm just one guy, one mind. And, even if they please me, that doesn't mean they're going to please a large audience. Doesn't mean they're going to please editors. And so, I can be useful to them, uh, by providing ... I mean, I provide a lot of things. What I teach is not a quote, creative writing class, unquote. Those are usually run more like therapy, uh, you know, like- like American acting classes. They're therapy sessions-

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: They're not, uh, uh, actual training in the way that-

Whitney: So what do you teach, then?

Scott: You say what?

Whitney: So what do you teach? You're saying you don't teach creative writing.

Scott: Well, I don't know. What I teach is specific skills and techniques to help them master the third person limited past tense viewpoint, that is the, uh, dominant, uh, voice in contemporary American fiction. It is the best of the tool sets, and uh, Jane Austen began it for us, um, and it has been honed and refined until now, if you can't master the third person limited with deep penetration, uh, in past tense, uh, then either you're going to do it in present tense, which means it's going to sound literary, uh, which means there are only a few genres that will accept it, uh, and very- and even fewer readers. Or you, uh, are going to be regarded as kind of an amateur.



Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: So, once my students master this, uh, skill, then even when they're writing something that the publisher may not end up publishing, uh, when they submit a query or an outline or a- or a, a manuscript, the editor will look upon it with recognition and happiness, because here is somebody who knows how to write like a pro.

Whitney: Interesting.

Scott: And that's my goal, is that at the end of my class, they know how to sound like a professional as they write. It means that they have mastered the tools.

You- you have to write stories for your imaginary perfect audience, and that audience is people who believe in and care about the same kinds of stories as you. And, there may be only nine of them, in which case you won't have so much a career as simply a hobby. But if there are nine million of them, and the publisher gets the book out there where those people have a good chance of finding it, then you will do quite well and make a very good living.

So, it's really, uh, a matter of chance, and I can't do anything about that. I can't make a writer love a kind of story, just because it's going to sell well. For one thing, I don't know what's going to sell well. Uh, most agents are in this category-

Whitney: But you can teach them the craft.

Scott: They know what sold last year.

Whitney: Yeah.

Scott: They know how to sell last year's hit, but they have no idea how to sell next year's hit, because nobody knows what it will look like.

Whitney: So, i- in the spirit of that, of being one of your readers, I think I've ... I counted, I've read over 30 of your books. Um, I thought it would be-

Scott: You are an amazing human being.

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: I- I hope your life was better for that.

Whitney: My life is better. And so, I thought what would be- what would be fun, for, for me, certainly, but I think for a lot of our listeners, is to tell you about some of the books that I've ... cause because I'm not going to ask you about what your favorite book is, because that's like asking you your favorite child. But-

Scott: Exactly. And by the way-

Whitney: I can-

Scott: About favorite children, on any given day, I know which one is my favorite. It just keeps changing, that's all.

Whitney: Exactly.

Scott: (laughs)

Whitney: Exactly. So, but I'm still not going to ask you that question, but I'm going to tell you about some books and series that I've loved. And then, um, I would love to hear why those are meaningful to you, or how they're meaningful to you.

So, for example- and- and maybe, if you want to throw in constraints here and there, let's- to stay on the theme.

Scott: Absolutely.

Whitney: So the first one is actually the [Homecoming series](#). I was introduced to you through this series, not [Ender's Game](#), and I- for me, this was in many ways a feminist series very much ahead of its time, and the- the character that I loved, and I'm going to mispronounce her name, is Hushidh, and she- she's a traveler, and you wrote this about her: um, "She lives in the constant awareness of all the connections and relationships among the people around her. Having a web-sense is naturally the most important thing in her life as she watches people connect and detach from one another, forming communities and dissolving them."

So, that series was important to me for those reasons. I'd love to hear why it's meaningful to you.

Scott: Well, see here's the amazing thing, is that that is not what I had in mind when I began it. Uh, it is actually ... uh, when- when I was in grad school, I studied Middle English romance, and I realized that the best of them were great science fiction novels if you just changed the ocean to space.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Uh, and, you know, whenever you cross an ocean, and I regard it as a space voyage and going to another planet instead of another continental mass or island.

Uh, I drew a map of the city of Basilica, and I absolutely fell in love with the city, and it dawned on me, this is a city of women. And so I invented the idea that only women are allowed to be citizens, and a man can enter and dwell in the city only if he is under a marriage contract. But it's illegal to- to have a marriage contract that lasts more than a year or so, it has to continually be renewed. And if the woman chooses not to renew, out goes the man. Uh, and- and he has- you know, there's a settlement of, uh, rejected or hopeful men just outside the city walls, but to dwell in the city, you have to have

been accepted and, and have a place in the life of a woman. Now, if you're a boy and you grow up in, you know, you're born to a woman in the city, then obviously there are boys all over the city. But when you reach adulthood, uh, you leave.

Now, I actually got much of this idea from Shirley Strum, uh, her book *Almost Human* about baboons. Wonderful scientist who was really turning the whole concept of what a troop of baboon- baboons was about. All of the previous anthropologists, or primatologists, were men who had stood off at a distance, watching through binoculars. She was the first who, following the admonition of- of Professor Leakey, just went among the baboons, and just sat there. Long enough that they got used to her, and she could observe the life close up.

And what she discovered was that all of the male display, the assertion of male dominance, the most displaying and violent and intrusive male was not the top male. He was the bottom male, because this was a troop of females. And the females remained. Males would enter the troop, gradually win a place there where they were accepted by the females, where they befriended a female, where the female's children would, um, accept that male. And so, they lived very peacefully when they were fully accepted. They were only obnoxious displayers when they first arrived. But they would stay for about five years, that is until the earliest of their offspring who were female were coming of age. And when they started going into estrus, we don't know what signals the baboons use, but the male just ups and leaves. And, uh-

Whitney: Wow.

Scott: There's, you know, nobody boots him out, but he just goes, so that he doesn't accidentally mate with one of his own daughters. Which is great for the bloodline, and amazing as a social institution.

So, that was my city of Basilica, uh, was echoing what I had learned from baboons. I- from that book, I actually came to the conclusion that civilization is an invention of women.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Um, because women are the ones who benefit most from it. Uh, with males, the old alpha male system, which is the polygamist- polygamist nomad tribal leader, uh, that works great for the males who happen to be the top males. But if you want to have a peaceful society where everybody who wants to mate has a reasonable opportunity to do so, then you need to have- you need to get rid of the alpha male. And that's the whole-

Whitney: Fascinating.

Scott: Business of civilization, is to try to contain the alpha male, and, uh, allow the, uh, secondary males, like me who are intellectual or artistic or whatever, uh, the guys who could make the best arrowheads but were not particularly wonderful on the hunt. It was

okay for them to stay home, make arrowheads, and they could still mate and pass their intelligence and skill, the- the innate skills and the learned skills, either through, uh, heredity or through, uh, culture, on to the next generation.

Whitney: Wow. Fascinating.

Scott: And so, civilization to me, then, is best served by following the instincts of females, who form rigid hierarchies in the baboons. They form rigid hierarchies that never change until the death of a female. Uh, the top female is the top female until she's gone.

Whitney: So-

Scott: And, unlike, uh, male gorillas, there's no challenging her. She's- she's in, she's boss.

Whitney: Okay, so we've got- Okay, so I- I could listen to you talk about this all day, but I want to get to a couple more books

Scott: But you asked me what excited me about it, and that was it, so.

Whitney: Yeah. Yeah. I- it- it- it is fascinating, and it's- especially something I've been thinking about some more, thinking about recently, is that, the male/female aspect of it.

So another one, um, obviously [Ender's Game](#). Um, I read that in the early morning hours with our, when- right after our first child was born, and ... And also, it's been especially meaningful for me, because Ender is a textbook disrupter, playing war games that no one wants to play. I'm not going to ask you to so much comment on that, but in retrospect, the relationship with Ender and Jane, I think so much of your work prefigured cloud computing and artificial intelligence.

Scott: The funny thing is, I still regard Jane as a complete fantasy character.

Whitney: Huh.

Scott: In the sense that I don't think computers will ever be able to mimic, uh, real intelligence, human intelligence.

Whitney: Yeah.

Scott: They can't handle language yet, they never will, I don't think. Um, the best grammar check- checkers are awful. Um, on- on Quora I recently responded to somebody's query that said "What grammar checker should I use as I'm learning English, to help me write better?" And I said "None of them. Stay away from them. Just learn the language."

Whitney: Yeah.

Scott: Because, uh, I once took an article by John Dvorak, wonderful writer, I took an essay of his in a computer magazine and ran it through the- the best grammar checker at the

time. The one that everybody said, "This is wonderful, you can rely on it." And I made every change that that grammar checker suggested, and I kept running the revised versions through until it no longer suggested any changes. So, according to that grammar checker, it was perfect. It sounded like it was written by a first-year Korean student of English as a second language.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: It was horrible. And that's where grammar checkers always lead you. If you're already a native speaker, you'll know to reject the things that sound stupid.

Whitney: Interesting.

Scott: But if you're learning English as a second language, and you rely on a grammar checker, you're going to be led astray.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Well, that's the problem that we have with- with, uh, thinking of, um, intelligent computers. It's so fun to write fiction with a sidekick like Jane, who travels with, uh, Ender wherever he goes, and no one knows she's there because she's just a jewel in his ear, uh, talking to him, uh, sub-vocally. He sub-vocalizes her so nobody even knows he's talking to her, there's not even any whispering.

Whitney: Okay. So, now, Scott, the jewel, the-

Scott: But that's- that's fantasy, I don't believe it.

Whitney: The jewel in my ear is saying we need to go to break.

Scott: Okay.

Whitney: So, we will be right back after this commercial spot, talking more with Orson Scott Card, best known as the science fiction author of [Ender's Game](#), and currently a professor at Southern Virginia University.

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Before we went to break, we were talking about some books that I've loved, and then asking Scott Card to respond to those, and I want to just share a couple more, and then ask you the question, um, characters that you've learned the most from. What they've taught you about yourself, maybe the self you didn't want to see, your shadow self, as well as your best self. So, I'll give you a chance to kind of think about that for a second while I tell you a couple more books that I've loved.

One was [Stone Tables](#), which is a retelling of the Moses story, Rachel, and Rebekah. I think for me, these- these stories and books really helped these biblical figures that

we've all read about, they can sometimes feel so flat, and in the words of my friend Julie Berry, they helped- you helped me have them feel round.

Um, I also loved [Enchantment](#) and [Magic Street](#). Both just made me really happy to read, and then the very-

Scott: Well, I'm glad you like those, I think they're my best novels.

Whitney: Really?

Scott: Yeah.

Whitney: Interesting. [Enchantment](#) and [Magic Street](#) you think are your best? Okay, why? Okay, do tell. Why, why, why, why? So fascinating.

Scott: Well, for me, I didn't plan it that way, but [Enchantment](#) turned out to be my book on marriage. What- what I think my marriage means, and what marriage in general means. How you become, uh, helpmates to each other. Uh, people who can count on each other, and rely on each other and trust, uh, through ... through the long haul. Uh, real marriage, not- not nonce marriage. Not marriage for the moment.

Whitney: Right.

Scott: Uh, and then with [Magic Street](#), the project was to write, uh, a black superhero, really.

Whitney: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Scott: Uh, my- a good friend of mine, who is a black comics fan and was frustrated by the ... nearly utter dearth of black, uh, superheroes, except as sidekicks. Um, you know, I said "Well, I- I do have my character Arthur Stuart in the Alvin Maker series," and he said "Yeah, but he's a sidekick." And, so I- I said, "I can't write, I can't write a, uh, a black hero, because I don't know black culture. I've never been black and I never will be. So, you know, I - I would be faking it." And he says, "I'll help."

And he did. He helped tremendously, and, uh, and so ... basically I wrote this novel, uh, that was both a take on some aspects of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and yet it's set in an upper-middle class black neighborhood in LA, and uh, it is ... every major character in it is black. And, uh, I feel like I kind of pulled it off. Kind of. But I avoided all the clichés of the black criminal elements that we're constantly seeing on television and in movies, uh, this is upper middle class blacks, uh, educated, uh, re- as refined as upper middle class whites, or perhaps more so. Uh, and I'm really proud of the result. I think it's- it's my most magical story.

Whitney: That's wonderful. Now I want to go back and reread them, because it's been a while.

So, with that then, let me ask you the question. Which are- who are some characters that you have learned the most from?

Scott: Well, you know, when- when I think about that, it's ... course all the characters come out of my head, so, you know, what am I going to learn from them? They're not going to teach me anything that I didn't already know. But, I may not have known that I knew it, because there's several kinds of knowledge, and I'm going to sound a little Dick Cheney-ish here, but there's ... there's the stuff that you know that you know.

Whitney: (laughs)

Scott: Just like there's the stuff that you know that you don't know. But often, there are things that you don't know that you don't know that you don't know them, because you don't know that they could be known. And there are the things that you do know, but you don't realize you know them because you've never vocalized them. You've never used it. You- you don't-

And- and as a writer, I don't know, uh, many of the things that I actually know intuitively and instinctively, until a character says them or does them. And so I have had some characters who have, usually by being smart-alecky, uh, given me maxims and ideas that- that, uh, became useful to me.

But it's usually through the long haul, when I am writing about a character in more than one book, and I really explore who that character is, that I come to understand them. And when you come to understand another person, something that is much easier for a fiction writer to do with a fictional character than with any real people, because real people remain perversely independent, and keep doing things that surprise you no matter how well you think you know them. Um, but with- with a fictional character, I come to actually understand them.

Here's the thing that I find.

Whitney: And give us an example.

Scott: Even the ones that are rotten and crummy-

Whitney: Give us an example.

Scott: They, I still love.

Whitney: Okay.

Scott: I- the more I know them, the more I come to love them and care about them.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Scott: And wish that they would make better choices. And, when that happens, your bad guys don't remain Darth Vader. They become something quite more ... quite a bit more nuanced, more real and understandable.

And so, by the end of a book, I rarely have a villain. If I had a villain, then he's probably either crazy or just loves evil, and it's hard to write those guys. I just can't stay very long in their heads, because they don't think like me.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: I don't actually love evil. And so, uh, it's ... it's reassuring to know that I am uncomfortable writing those characters. Uh, it's kind of thrilling to find that I become quite comfortable with characters who mean well, whose self-story is one of trying to do the right thing, and then recognizing when they fail, and trying to make up for it. Trying to, you know, take responsibility for what they do.

To name a particular character would be hard, because ultimately they all act that way-

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Because they all do what I do, which is do your best to take responsibility for what is your responsibility. For what you caused, for what you did, and then try to make amends. Try to make things better, try to improve yourself and improve the lives of the people around you. I think that's what being a good person is, and when I write about good people, I find that readers who also think that those things are good respond well to those characters.

Whitney: Interesting.

Okay, you're being incredible evasive and not giving me an actual answer to that question, but I'm going to let it go.

Scott: Well, there were no easy answers. I did give you a true answer.

Whitney: You did (laughs).

So, um, when people come into class the very first day, what's one of the first things you have them do?

Scott: The first thing that I-

Whitney: Whether it-

Scott: I usually do.

Whitney: Yeah.

Scott: Besides exercises in using viewpoint, that's just, you know, that's just got to be done.

Whitney: That's the craft.



Scott: But, uh, we have what I call a thousand ideas session, and I just ask them a bunch of questions, and they come up with a story together. Though, I am the arbiter, I decide which ones we pursue and follow. But my point of that exercise is to show them that ideas are cheap. That coming up with ideas for stories is about as- it's pathetically easy.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: But, knowing how to structure them into a story is hard. And I go through a session in, in which we take one of those ideas that we came up with, one of those story ideas, and then I show how you develop a structure for it. And it's not the three-act structure in all of the writing classes, that's ...I got ... The screenwriting classes that talk about a three-act structure, uh, I just have to say that I have little respect for that, because there is no such structure in stories that work.

Um, but- but ... you know, there's ... I- I talk about that at length, I have a book, [Characters and Viewpoint](#), and another one, [How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy](#), both of which, uh, teach my principles of- of, uh, construction and structure. Uh, and they're- they're just guidelines for how to know where to start your story, and how to wrap it up.

Whitney: Okay.

Scott: And basically it's- it's your ending that determines what your beginning needs to be. You need to promise the story you intend to deliver.

Whitney: Interesting. Hmm.

Scott: But then, you know, you have to outline. You have to plan. You have to have an idea in mind of what your structure is going to be, in order to be able to move forward with confidence. But then I warn my students, if you follow your outline literally, you will end up with a crappy story.

Whitney: Hmm.

Scott: Because along the way, your unconscious mind is going to plunk characters down that you like, that aren't in your outline. And they're going to have their own lives, they're going to have their own needs and desires. And if you don't respect those, if you make everybody fit your outline, none of your characters will be real, and you will be ... you won't even believe in your own story, because you're ignoring your own unconscious impulses. The best stuff in the story is not in your outline, ever.

And ... I ... you know, at the risk of boring people, I could- could, uh, go through many of my stories and talk about huge characters, really major characters, that were just nonce characters. People that were placeholders, uh ... They began that way, but I was more intrigued by them than by the hero, and they ended up becoming really important. And so, uh, you know, in [Ender's Game](#), Petra, Bean, uh, Dink. Uh, these were nonce

characters. I had no- there was no plan for them. I had no plan for any of those characters, and they ended up being extremely important to me and to the story.

And, uh ... and that happens in every novel. If it isn't happening, there's something seriously wrong.

Whitney: Fascinating.

Scott: So, you have to be interruptible. You have to be, you have to allow your unconscious mind to disrupt your plan. And yet, you still have to keep aiming toward that goal, that ending that you planned from the start.

Whitney: So, speaking of being interruptible, I have a question for you.

Scott: Sure.

Whitney: You are- Let's go back to this constraints, as we start to wrap up. We've got just a few minutes left.

You are obviously in this enviable position for an author, and yet if we believe that constraints are a tool of creation, how do you continue to impose constraints on your writing so that you continue to do your best work?

Scott: Um, that's ... part of it is just the form imposes that restraint.

Whitney: Hmm. Okay.

Scott: Uh, there're things that you do much more easily in fiction, uh, and other things that are easier in movies, and you do the fiction things in fiction, and you do the movie things in a screenplay.

Uh, but there are other constraints. Uh, for one thing, I could spend time writing novels, and I ... and sometimes I would really rather, writing novels that have no science fiction of fantasy element in them. My favorite genre is, uh, romantic comedy or satiric comedy. But I never get to write that because, uh, I have to make a certain income level, and the market for my work is, uh, generally within the science fiction and fantasy genre. When I step out of that genre, the sales are much lower. So, publishers are eager for books from me in-genre, and not so eager for books out of genre.

So, I just live with that. And I occasionally write something, I have a, a book called, um, the - [A Town Divided by Christmas](#). Very slim book, that will be coming out this next fall from, uh, Blackstone, which is moving from being just an- an audio publisher to being an audio and print publisher. And they're bringing out that book, which has no science fiction or fantasy element in it, though it does have scientists as major characters, uh, coming to a small town in North Carolina where the town is riven in half. They're doing genetic research, and the town is strictly divided in half according to a quarrel from decades before about which newborn baby got to be Jesus in the Christmas pageant.

Whitney: Wow.

Scott: And, yeah. It's a Christmas romance. That's what it is, and I love it. But it has its own restraints. There's certain things that must happen and can't happen, and ... And I'm happy to know those restraints. If I don't know them, then I'm just flailing around.

Uh, it's the limitations, it's the rules. When I write magic in fantasy, uh, you have to have rules for the magic. If anything can happen, Judson Jerome once said this to me, he said, "Scott, if- if anything can happen, who cares what does happen?" And so you have to be able to lay out what the rules of magic are, so that you know what can't happen. But every time you create a magical rule, it carries with it the implications of dozens, maybe hundreds, of stories. Good stories. Because now you know who's going to be having problems, where the problems will arise, where the unusual person will be. And, uh, it helps you to, uh, to find your way through what could be just the chaos of anything-can-happen style fantasy.

Whitney: Wow. That's so wonderful.

Okay, we're about to wrap up. My very last question for you is, anything that you would like to share that's kind of come up in, you know, 30, 45 seconds, that you think is important, that kind of occurred to you, that you'd like to share with our listeners before we wrap?

Scott: Oh, then I have- I have nothing I can say in 30 to 40 seconds. Let me just mention some, uh, some books that I'm reading right now.

I just finished a book called [Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes](#), which I think if- for anybody who cares about understanding the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, this book is absolutely marvelous.

Then there's a book called [Jane and Dorothy, a True Tale of Sense and Sensibility](#), and it follows Dorothy Wordsworth, the sister of the poet William Wordsworth, and Jane Austen. They are near contemporaries, well they overlap, certainly, in their lives, and it's a marvelous book about growing up female in pre-Victorian England.

Um, I also, uh, recently read a great science fiction novel. I don't read much science fiction now, but it's called [Hell Divers](#), and I would tell you the author's name, but I can never hold it in my head, except his last name is Smith. Uh, and of course that's a rare, rare one. Easy to find out on Google.

Whitney: Yeah.

Scott: But it's [Hell Divers](#), two separate words.

Whitney: Thank y-

Scott: There are two books already written, the third book is coming out in the middle of next month, and I really found it gripping, thrilling. Uh, good characterization. Amazing action adventure, better than Tom Clancy. Uh, really, I- I can't recommend it highly enough.

I'm reading [Thomas Sowell's book on discrimination](#), his, you know, uh, good economics stuff. And, um, he's one of the most brilliant minds, uh, I- I think-

Whitney: Fantastic.

Scott: Writing on- on, uh, economics today.

And, uh, I've got about six other books going on various machines that I have, uh, you know, that I have, uh, my Kindle books on. Plus my stack of real books, print books to read. So, you know-

Whitney: That's a great list. Thank you.

Scott: If I had any advice for anybody, just read stuff you don't think you'll like.

Whitney: Love it. That is wonderful parting advice.

Uh, Scott, thank you so much for being with us, and thank you all of you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, let us know. We look forward to hearing from you at [wj@whitneyjohnson.com](mailto:wj@whitneyjohnson.com). Scott, where can people find you?

Scott: At [Hatrack.com](http://Hatrack.com).

Whitney: Okay. Fantastic.

Scott: H-A-T-R-A-C-K, Hatrack, like you hang a hat on.

Whitney: Fantastic. Until next time, I'm Whitney Johnson, and you've been listening to Disrupt Yourself Live.

There is so MUCH more I wanted to ask Scott Card. Because as you know I am a fan.

Anyway, did you notice how he started in one direction, or I started in one direction. I had a plan. But then he went in a different direction. Pulling me along. Discovery-driven. Kind of like what happened for him in writing the *Homecoming Series* -- as well as with *Ender's Game*. He intended to go one way, the characters took him another way. There are people and ideas that pop in your life that you need to chase. Let them have a place. Building on that, I loved this from his Twitter feed.

*The essence of characters is only revealed in the way they treat each other; it's all in the relationships — and, of course, the motives and causes behind the things that the characters do.—*

Wasn't it interesting also to hear about what he's reading; it reminded me of my conversation with [Philip Sheppard in Episode 66](#). The most creative people are those that look for inspiration from a wide array of disciplines and sources. They don't read, they don't listen in just one genre. There was a study done that I cited in [Disrupt Yourself](#), that looked at a series of academic articles – actually, 18 million academic articles written over the course of a decade. And they divided them into low impact and high impact papers. For the low impact papers, 100% of their sources were highly conventional. For the high impact papers, 85-95% were highly conventional within their discipline, but 5-15% were highly novel sources. When these academics were willing to think outside of their discipline, they were 2x likely to have a breakthrough, a high impact, a paper that went viral. If you want to really have an impact, start thinking – even more so than you already do – outside your discipline.

Practical tip: If you are trying to improve your craft, do what Card's writing teacher did. Impose a constraint. If you want to say something in 50 words, how can you say it in 25. If you want an hour to get something done, do it in ½ hour. In Card's words--write a sonnet.

Speaking of writing, if you would like a copy of *Enchantment*, what Card considers to be his best work, send us an email at [wj@whitneyjohnson.com](mailto:wj@whitneyjohnson.com). We'll choose someone at random.

Thank you again to Orson Scott Card for being our guest, to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.