A man is walking in the woods one late-spring day. He is idly daydreaming, barely taking note of the surrounding birdsong, when something grabs his attention. He stops to watch a young pileated woodpecker tapping away at the hollow shell of a dead tree, the noise reverberating through the forest. He is about to move on when he thinks, “This bird is bashing its head into a tree with all its force and at an extraordinary rate. A human behaving this way would be knocked silly in a few seconds. So how does the bird do it?” Along with other researchers, this man, who is a neurosurgeon, eventually discovered how: The pileated woodpecker has a muscular tongue that extends down its neck, acting as a shock absorber; its brain and cranium are tightly encased by the hyoid bone, which acts as a sort of “seatbelt” restricting movement (brain damage in humans occurs when the brain is propelled into the hard bone encasing it); and the bird’s beak strikes directly with almost no lateral movement.

This may be more than we wanted to know about woodpeckers, but the observations allowed the neurosurgeon to eventually design a safer motorcycle helmet that has been widely adopted. For me, this anecdote illustrates several things that are of great value to a writer. First, it reminds us of how creativity and innovation are closely linked to seeing. We have all seen woodpeckers at work, but how many of us have stopped to ask the simple question, How does it do that? We have, in the words of Sherlock Holmes, “seen but not observed.”

You don’t need to be a neurologist to know that frequent hard blows to the head are likely to knock one unconscious, but this observer’s reactions do in fact come out of the field he works in, involving a more specialized and focused awareness of brain trauma. This is a convenient reminder that what someone does by way of work makes that person view the world differently. All too often, emerging writers give a character a job but don’t consider how that vocation becomes part of that character’s very being and is present in everything she does. The architect knocking on a friend’s door notices that its frame is slightly off-kilter, indicating that the house’s foundation is shifting. The neuropsychiatrist observes the repetitive finger motions of a fellow shopper who is always lost in his thoughts.

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in the supermarket as representative of tardive dyskinesia and guesses that this person has spent years on antipsychotic drugs. The linguist notes certain patterns in a person’s speech and assumes that the individual moved frequently in childhood.

By focusing on the notion of “seeing like a writer,” we can enhance our own creativity and, at the same time, we can create more believable and complex literary characters simply through the awareness that what someone sees tells us who they are.

**SEEING CREATIVELY**

We see with our brains; our eyes are only the conduit to that seeing. Brain damage of various kinds can cause a person with undamaged eyes and optic nerves to suffer blindness. This is an uncommon condition, but all of us, to some extent, can be “blind” due to our brain’s selecting out phenomena and becoming habituated to seeing only certain things. Take the famous man-in-the-gorilla-suit experiment conducted at Harvard: Its subjects were asked to watch a group of people—some dressed in white, some in black—passing a basketball around. Their task was to count the number of passes made by the people in white, ignoring those by the ones in black. At some point, a man in a gorilla suit ran into the middle of the court and stood, beating his chest. When asked afterward, about half the subjects simply did not see the “gorilla” and had no recollection of this event. Their attention had been selective, and their brain did not register something irrelevant to the task they’d been assigned.

The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky has distinguished between recognizing and seeing. Recognizing is what most of us do most of the time—we think we know what we are looking at, so we stop noticing it. Or, as Shklovsky puts it, “The man who has lived all his life by the sea does not hear the sound of the waves.” This is one of the reasons people more frequently have a car accident within a mile of home—they are so used to seeing the familiar landscape that they simply don’t see the unusual: a child running into the street, a car backing out of a driveway. Shklovsky’s solution is to engage in a process he calls ostranenie, or “making strange.” You have to train yourself to see as if everything is brand new, as if you’re an infant or from another planet. In other words, to defamiliarize what you see. This technique has been popular in literature since the 1700s—consider Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, whose eponymous hero sees things strangely first because he’s twelve times the size of the people around him (in Lilliput) and then one-twelfth their size (in Brobdingnag). Swift shocked his audience with his graphic description of a woman’s naked breast, something normally described as enticing or beautiful: “The Nipple was about the Bigness of my Head, and the Dug so varified with spots, pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous.”

From Voltaire’s 1776 satirical novella *Huron*, in which a Native American visitor makes devastating commentaries on the manners and customs of eighteenth-century France, to the 1988 hit movie *Coming to America*, the technique of defamiliarization has allowed writers and other artists to make the world new for audiences. Today’s writers tend to avoid the “noble savage” as commentator on society’s strangeness but rather employ a narrator with a neurological condition. Mark Haddon does so beautifully with his narrator, Christopher, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Doubleday, 2003). Christopher is on the autistic spectrum and he sees the world around him with his own singular form of literalness and obsession.

I see everything.

That is why I don’t like new places. If I am in a place I know, like home, or school, or the bus, or the shop, or the street, I have seen almost everything in it beforehand and all I have to do is to look at the things that have changed or moved. For example, one week the *Shakespeare’s Globe* poster had fallen down in the
The level of detail in Page’s childhood essay might, at first sight (and as it did to his teacher), seem replete with unnecessary asides and excessive detail. When we look more closely at it—guided by Page’s own commentaries on his process—we realize that what we are being presented with is another way of apprehending the world, a process of seeing that incorporates different emphases from the conventional ones. What his teacher took to be an off-the-point or inferior account of a school trip in fact offers much that is absent in a more normative, predictable approach, forcing us to question the very things we label as important.

As a child growing up in South Africa, I was passionately interested in animals and wanted to be a naturalist. My early iconoclasm toward religion arose from my feeling that the Bible was particularly unfair to snakes (which I found beautiful and intriguing), banishing them from Eden and wrongly declaring “Upon thy belly shalt thou go.” (Snakes “walk” on their ribs, not their bellies.) Visiting the homes of my parents’ friends, I would spend hours observing the wildlife in their gardens—the geckos and other lizards running up the rock walls, the chameleon nodding its head quietly on a branch, and, on another branch, the stick insect giving itself away by the slightest of movements, the weaver birds building elaborate nests in the blue-gum trees. I came to the conclusion that adults were, for the most part, quite blind, for whenever I mentioned this delightful cornucopia of wild creatures (I was careful to make no mention of the harmless brown snake under a hydrangea bush, knowing it would hastily be beaten to death), the response would be one of puzzlement. “What lizards?” they would ask. “What’s a stick insect and is it bad for my flowers?”

One of the things any budding naturalist learns is the importance of sitting quietly and just watching, eyes and mind open to the surroundings. The seemingly empty tide pool on the bare rocks slowly reveals itself to be teeming with inhabitants: the feathery feelers of barnacles emerging to filter the water for tiny copepods and other creatures; the empty periwinkle shell sprouting legs and then the head of a hermit crab, before scuttling about in the search for food; the “pebble” darting a few inches and then stopping still again, having revealed itself to be a blenny or other tide-pool fish. There’s plenty of life out there; you just have to pay attention and it will reveal itself.

Simply paying attention is something anyone can do, but it requires training and patience, a Buddhist quietness of mind that allows one to look steadily
and assiduously, to see and not just recognize. It requires an emptying of thought and an opening to vision. (Or, as the artist Robert Irwin put it, “Seeing is not naming the thing that one sees.”) Look closely, and slowly, at the world, and it will reveal itself to be quite different from what you once imagined it to be.

Vladimir Nabokov was expert in slowing down the moment to reveal its hidden beauty. In *Speak, Memory* (G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1947) he describes the slow glide of a raindrop off a leaf:

Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief—the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes: I say “patter” intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one.

Seeing involves not only patience—looking over and over again at the same thing until you abandon preconceptions and really see what’s there—but also training oneself to be aware of how and where to look. I forage for mushrooms in the Vermont forests near where I live, and I am always amazed at how one will search and search and not find any morels, but as soon as you find the first one, they seem suddenly to pop up everywhere in the vicinity. (In part, this has something to do with the shape of the mushroom, the way one needs to be looking at it directly with the fovea of the eye to distinguish its features.) Mycologist Sue Van Hook told me how when she was starting out, her professor told her to go out into the woods and bring back some fungi. She didn’t find much...and some of the objects she brought back turned out not to be mushrooms at all but oak galls. “Hmm,” said her professor. “I’d better take you into the woods and show you around until you develop mushroom eyes.”

We all, as writers, need to find our mushroom eyes, learning what and whom to look at, and how to do so. Flaubert famously trained Guy de Maupassant this way, meeting the younger writer for lunch every Sunday for seven years. Flaubert told him, “When you pass a grocer sitting in front of his door, a concierge smoking his pipe, or a cab rank, show me that grocer, that concierge, their attitude, their physical appearance and by the skill of the picture you draw of them, their whole moral nature as well and do this in such a way that I cannot confuse them with any other grocer or concierge; and with a single word show me how one cab horse is different from the fifty others ahead or behind it.” Occasionally, they would walk and retrace de Maupassant’s steps to see if Flaubert could recognize the characters from de Maupassant’s descriptions.

We can learn to be better seers by practicing description this way, and we can also learn by asking other people what they see—or saw. While writing an article during a return visit to South Africa, I asked a friend (a young man with an excellent design sense) how he would describe the Indian restaurant—a famous hole-in-the-wall that had been frequented by Nelson Mandela and other ANC high-ups in the early days, when planning their strategies to overcome the apartheid government. I was astonished by what my friend noticed that my eyes had simply glossed over—the Coke machine that I’d grabbed our sodas from was a classic, probably from the forties; the rubber plant in this dark room is real, not plastic, and it’s healthy, so how does it grow there? Someone must replace it fairly frequently for it to get some sunlight. Look closely at the photograph of the cook-owner holding an enormous fish he’s caught: The man
standing behind him is Fidel Castro. No matter how good an observer you might be, the people around you are noticing something you don't.

**WHAT YOU SEE IS WHO YOU ARE**
In *Lectures on Literature* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), Nabokov describes three “types” walking through the same landscape. The city man is mostly thinking of his destination (a nice restaurant) and barely notices the greenery around him. The botanist identifies and classifies the trees and grasses that he sees.

To him the world of the stolid tourist (who cannot distinguish an oak from an elm) seems a fantastic, vague, dreamy, never-never world. Finally, the world of the local farmer differs from the two others in that his world is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail, all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two—the humdrum tourist and the botanical taxonomist—simply cannot know in the given place at the given time.

Nabokov’s essay—part of an exploration of the idea of reality in *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*—is a reminder that what someone does changes the way he or she sees the world. It also underscores how a relationship with a landscape (and one’s awareness of that relationship) changes the way one sees it. A man entering his childhood home where his mother still lives does so with a different degree of confidence and awareness from a policeman called in because of a domestic disturbance. Someone who is in love sees the places he has sojourned with his inamorata with different eyes from the same man who visits that spot years later, newly divorced.

Tolstoy captured the importance of emotion to seeing when he shows Anna Karenina stepping off a train from Petersburg after she’s shared a carriage with Vronsky. From Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear's translation, published by Penguin in 2000: “The first face that caught her attention was that of her husband. ‘Ah, my God! What’s happened with his ears?’ she thought, looking at his cold and imposing figure and especially struck now by the cartilage of his ears propping up the brim of his round hat. Seeing her, he came to meet her, composing his lips into his habitual mocking smile....” We don’t need to be told about her growing disaffection with her spouse, it’s all in the way she looks at him.

Seeing sharply and accurately is part of the contract the author makes with the reader. When we talk about a writer’s vision, we’re usually talking metaphorically...but we’re most persuaded by an author who literally has an acuity of vision. Genre writers are aware of this, and the heroes of mysteries often have particular skills of seeing that are passed along to the reader. In Jo Nesbo’s *The Leopard* (Knopf, 2011), for example, the somewhat dissolute protagonist Harry Hole points out a man at the airport to his companion.

> “Let your eyes drift over to the taxi counter. There’s a man with narrow eyes, a bit slanted. See him?”

She nodded.

> “He’s tugged at his belt twice since we came out. As if there were something heavy hanging from it. A pair of handcuffs or a baton. An automatic reaction if you’ve been in patrol cars or in lockup for a few years.”

> “I’ve worked in patrol cars, and I’ve never—”

> “He’s working for Narc now and keeps an eye open for people who look too relieved after passing through customs...”

But this technique is just as likely to be employed by the literary writer. In *The Chemistry of Tears* (Knopf, 2012), Peter Carey’s narrator, an expert in ancient clocks and watches, comments:

> I tipped the contents into a metal tray.
The literary life

OPEN YOUR EYES

That they were small brass screws would be obvious to anybody. The horologist's eye saw more—for instance, most of them had been made before 1841. The later screws, about two hundred of them, had a Standard Whitworth thread with a set angle of 55 degrees. Could I really see those 55 degrees? Oh yes, even with tears in my eyes. I had learned to do that when I was ten years old, sitting beside my grandfather at his bench in Clerkenwell.

Both of these passages have a threefold effect: The author is shown to have done his homework, the protagonist is established as someone who observes precisely and knowledgeably, and the reader gets the marked impression of having learned some arcane and vaguely useful information. But the observant reader can discern a few more things between the lines. The policeman in Nesbo’s passage has become a drug addict and there’s already been some indication that he’s smuggling something, so his commentary on the airport observer has more motive than he may be aware of. The narrator of Carey’s passage has been upset by the death of her illicit lover, so the mention of tears is not just a hyperbolic way of indicating the extent of this skill but a reminder of the lingering tragedy that occasions the novel.

What you don’t see is also who you are

Writers frequently achieve irony through a character’s claiming something opposite to what the reader can clearly see—Charles Bovary remarking to Emma on their happiness, for example. We learn much about characters through what they either cannot notice or willfully refuse to. Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” is all about seeing and not seeing: The narrator willfully does not notice his wife’s unhappiness and his own discomfort until it is actively pointed out to him (by his wife) or demonstrated by the contrast with a blind man. His deliberate obtuseness is sad, funny, and poignant.

Revelation is learning to see what is already there

The most effective revelations in literary fiction seem to occur when understanding has been lurking all along in the shadows, unseen, suddenly coming to light when there’s just the slightest shift of perspective. We get caught up with the quality and poignance of the letters written by the protagonist of E. L. Doctorow’s “The Writer in the Family,” in his The Lives of the Poets (Random House, 1984), letters that purport to be written by his late father to the grandmother who hasn’t been informed of her son’s death. It’s only when the narrator has a conversation with his older brother that he (and the
importance of slowing oneself down, looking at the same thing over and over again, and only then (once you’ve bypassed your conscious knowledge of what you’re looking at) will you see its obvious features. Agassiz also tells his student: “A pencil is the best of eyes.”

Drawing—even if you do it badly (as I do)—is a valuable thing for a writer to do. Milton Glaser (who is best known for coming up with the “I ♥ New York” logo) described how, until he sat down to sketch his mother, he didn’t have “the faintest idea what she looked like.” The deep attentiveness drawing brought to the act of seeing his mother allowed Glaser to bypass the image he’d built up of her in his mind since childhood. “And it’s that act of attention that allows you to really grasp something, to become fully conscious of it. That’s what I learned from my mother’s face, that drawing is really a kind of thinking.”

We benefit, too, from paying deep attention to what others see…and to how writers show us who their characters are by what they notice. Looking at what others notice will not only make you a better writer-observer, it will open up new worlds filled with unexpected pleasures. I have been living in New England for a decade and a half, but it’s only recently, after reading James Elkins’s The Object Stares Back (Harcourt, 1996), that I’ve taken to looking at the winter sky rather than gazing almost exclusively at the icy ground at my feet. The particular combination of moisture, cold, and light in New England winters results in the frequent appearance of unusual sky objects—parhelia (“sun dogs”) of various sorts, crepuscular rays—visible on an almost daily basis. Yet many people who have lived here their whole lives have never seen a sun dog. It’s similar to that tide pool I described earlier: When you slow down and turn off acquired recognition, looking long enough and attentively enough to discern (in Flaubert’s words) that “portion of the unknown” that forms originality, the empty wasteland before you proves to be inhabited by a myriad of strange and wonderful sights.

**Training the Eye, the Mind**

“Look again; look again!” the great zoologist J. L. R. Agassiz tells his erstwhile student, Samuel H. Scudder, in the latter’s 1879 article on learning to see as a biologist. “Take this fish and look at it.” The article, “In the Laboratory with Agassiz,” published in *Every Saturday* on April 4, 1974, is a reminder of the