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it's not a game anymore....

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BASIS FOR THE MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

ORSON SCOTT CARD

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For Geoffrey,
who makes me remember
how young and how old children can be

INTRODUCTION

It makes me a little uncomfortable, writing an introduction to *Ender's Game.* After all, the book has been in print for six years now, and in all that time, nobody has ever written to me to say, "You know, *Ender's Game* was a pretty good book, but you know what it really needs? An introduction!" And yet when a novel goes back to print for a new hardcover edition, there ought to be *something* new in it to mark the occasion (something besides the minor changes as I fix the errors and internal contradictions and stylistic excesses that have bothered me ever since the novel first appeared). So be assured—the novel stands on its own, and if you skip this intro and go straight to the story, I not only won't stand in your way, I'll even *agree* with you!

The novelet "Ender's Game" was my first published science fiction. It was based on an idea—the battleroom—that came to me when I was sixteen years old. I had just read Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, which was (more or less) an extrapolation of the ideas in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, applied to a galaxy-wide empire in some far future time.

The novel set me, not to dreaming, but to *thinking*, which is Asimov's most extraordinary ability as a fiction writer. What *would* the future be like? How would things change? What would remain the same? The premise of *Foundation* seemed to be that even though you might change the props and the actors, the play of human history is always the same. And yet that fundamentally pessimistic premise (you mean we'll *never* change?) was tempered by Asimov's idea of a group of human beings who, not through genetic change, but through learned skills, are able to understand and heal the minds of other people.

It was an idea that rang true with me, perhaps in part because of

my Mormon upbringing and beliefs: Human beings may be miserable specimens, in the main, but we *can* learn, and, through learning, become decent people.

Those were some of the ideas that played through my mind as I read *Foundation*, curled on my bed—a thin mattress on a slab of plywood, a bed my father had made for me—in my basement bedroom in our little rambler on 650 East in Orem, Utah. And then, as so many science fiction readers have done over the years, I felt a strong desire to write stories that would do for others what Asimov's story had done for me.

In other genres, that desire is usually expressed by producing thinly veiled rewrites of the great work: Tolkien's disciples far too often simply rewrite Tolkien, for example. In science fiction, however, the whole point is that the ideas are fresh and startling and intriguing; you imitate the great ones, not by rewriting *their* stories, but rather by creating stories that are just as startling and new.

But new in what way? Asimov was a scientist, and approached every field of human knowledge in a scientific manner—assimilating data, combining it in new and startling ways, thinking through the implications of each new idea. I was no scientist, and unlikely ever to be one, at least not a *real* scientist—not a physicist, not a chemist, not a biologist, not even an engineer. I had no gift for mathematics and no great love for it, either. Though I relished the study of logic and languages, and virtually inhaled histories and biographies, it never occurred to me at the time that these were just as valid sources of science fiction stories as astronomy or quantum mechanics.

How, then, could I possibly come up with a science fiction idea? What did *I* actually know about anything?

At that time my older brother Bill was in the army, stationed at Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City; he was nursing a hip-to-heel cast from a bike-riding accident, however, and came home on weekends. It was then that he had met his future wife, Laura Dene

Low, while attending a church meeting on the BYU campus; and it was Laura who gave me *Foundation* to read. Perhaps, then, it was natural for my thoughts to turn to things military.

To me, though, the military didn't mean the Vietnam War, which was then nearing its peak of American involvement. I had no experience of that, except for Bill's stories of the miserable life in basic training, the humiliation of officer's candidate school, and his lonely but in many ways successful life as a noncom in Korea. Far more deeply rooted in my mind was my experience, five or six years earlier, of reading Bruce Catton's three-volume *Army of the Potomac.* I remembered so well the stories of the commanders in that war—the struggle to find a Union general capable of using McClellan's magnificent army to defeat Lee and Jackson and Stuart, and then, finally, Grant, who brought death to far too many of his soldiers, but also made their deaths mean something, by grinding away at Lee, keeping him from dancing and maneuvering out of reach. It was because of Catton's history that I had stopped enjoying chess, and had to revise the rules of *Risk* in order to play it—I had come to understand something of war, and not just because of the conclusions Catton himself had reached. I found meanings of my own in that history.

I learned that history is shaped by the use of power, and that different people, leading the same army, with, therefore, approximately the same power, applied it so differently that the army seemed to change from a pack of noble fools at Fredericksburg to panicked cowards melting away at Chancellorsville, then to the grimly determined, stubborn soldiers who held the ridges at Gettysburg, and then, finally, to the disciplined, professional army that ground Lee to dust in Grant's long campaign. It wasn't the soldiers who changed. It was the leader. And even though I could not then have articulated what I understood of military leadership, I knew that I *did* understand it. I understood, at levels deeper than speech, how a great military leader imposes his will on his enemy, and makes his own army a willing extension of himself.

So one morning, as my Dad drove me to Brigham Young High School along Carterville Road in the heavily wooded bottoms of the Provo River, I wondered: How would you train soldiers for combat in the future? I didn't bother thinking of new land-based weapons systems—what was on my mind, after *Foundation*, was space. Soldiers and commanders would have to think very differently in space, because the old ideas of up and down simply wouldn't apply anymore. I had read in Nordhoff and Hall's history of World War I flying that it was very hard at first for new pilots to learn to look above and below them rather than merely to the right and left, to find the enemy approaching them in the air. How much worse, then, would it be to learn to think with no up and down at all?

The essence of training is to allow error without consequence. Three-dimensional warfare would need to be practiced in an enclosed space, so mistakes wouldn't send trainees flying off to Jupiter. It would need to offer a way to practice shooting without risk of injury; and yet trainees who were "hit" would need to be disabled, at least temporarily. The environment would need to be changeable, to simulate the different conditions of warfare—near a ship, in the midst of debris, near tiny asteroids. And it would need to have some of the confusion of real battle, so that the play-combat didn't evolve into something as rigid and formal as the meaningless marching and maneuvers that still waste an astonishing amount of a trainee's precious hours in basic training in our modern military.

The result of my speculations that morning was the battleroom, exactly as you will see it (or have already seen) in this book. It was a good idea, and something like it will certainly be used for training if ever there is a manned military in space. (Something very much like it has already been used in various amusement halls throughout America.)

But, having thought of the battleroom, I hadn't the faintest idea of how to go about turning the idea into a story. It occurred to me then for the first time that the *idea* of the story is nothing compared to the importance of knowing how to find a character and a story

to tell around that idea. Asimov, having had the idea of paralleling *The Decline and Fall,* still had no story; his genius—and the soul of the story—came when he personalized his history, making the psychohistorian Hari Seldon the god-figure, the planmaker, the apocalyptic prophet of the story. I had no such character, and no idea of how to make one.

Years passed. I graduated from high school as a junior (just in time—Brigham Young High School was discontinued with the class of 1968) and went on to Brigham Young University. I started there as an archaeology major, but quickly discovered that doing archaeology is unspeakably boring compared to reading the books by Thor Heyerdahl (*Aku-Aku, Kon-Tiki*), Yigael Yadin (*Masada*), and James Michener (*The Source*) that had set me dreaming. Potsherds! Better to be a *dentist* than to spend your life trying to put together fragments of old pottery in endless desert landscapes in the Middle East.

By the time I realized that not even the semi-science of archaeology was for someone as impatient as me, I was already immersed in my real career. At the time, of course, I misunderstood myself: I thought I was in theatre because I loved performing. And I *do* love performing, don't get me wrong. Give me an audience and I'll hold onto them as long as I can, on any subject. But I'm not a good actor, and theatre was not to be my career. At the time, though, all I cared about was doing plays. Directing them. Building sets and making costumes and putting on makeup for them.

And, above all, *rewriting* those *lousy* scripts. I kept thinking, Why couldn't the playwright hear how dull that speech was? This scene could so easily be punched up and made far more effective.

Then I tried my hand at writing adaptations of novels for a reader's theatre class, and my fate was sealed. I was a playwright.

People came to my plays and clapped at the end. I learned—from actors and from audiences—how to shape a scene, how to build tension, and—above all—the necessity of being harsh with your own material, excising or rewriting anything that doesn't work. I

learned to separate the *story* from the *writing,* probably the most important thing that any storyteller has to learn—that there are a thousand right ways to tell a story, and ten million wrong ones, and you're a lot more likely to find one of the latter than the former your first time through the tale.

My love of theatre lasted through my mission for the LDS Church. Even while I was in São Paulo, Brazil, as a missionary, I wrote a play called *Stone Tables* about the relationship between Moses and Aaron in the book of Exodus, which had standing-room-only audiences at its premiere (which I didn't attend, since I was still in Brazil!).

At the same time, though, that original impetus to write science fiction persisted.

I had taken fiction writing courses at college, for which I don't think I ever wrote science fiction. But on the side, I had started a series of stories about people with psionic powers (I had no idea this was a sci-fi cliché at the time) that eventually grew into *The Worthing Saga.* I had even sent one of the stories off to *Analog* magazine before my mission, and on my mission I wrote several long stories in the same series (as well as a couple of stabs at mainstream stories).

In all that time, the battleroom remained an idea in the back of my mind. It wasn't until 1975, though, that I dusted it off and tried to write it. By then I had started a theatre company that managed to do reasonably well during the first summer and then collapsed under the weight of bad luck and bad management (myself) during the fall and winter. I was deeply in debt on the pathetic salary of an editor at BYU Press. Writing was the only thing I knew how to do *besides* proofreading and editing. It was time to get serious about writing something that might actually earn some money—and, plainly, playwriting wasn't going to be it.

I first rewrote and sent out "Tinker," the first Worthing story I wrote and the one that was still most effective. I got a rejection letter from Ben Bova at *Analog,* pointing out that "Tinker" simply

didn't feel like science fiction—it felt like fantasy. So the Worthing stories were out for the time being.

What was left? That old battleroom idea. It happened one spring day that a friend of mine, Tammy Mikkelson, was taking her boss's children to the circus in Salt Lake City; would I like to come along? I would. And since there was no ticket for me (and I've always detested the circus anyway—the clowns drive me up a wall), I spent the hours of the performance out on the lawn of the Salt Palace with a notebook on my lap, writing "Ender's Game" as I had written all my plays, in longhand on narrow-ruled paper. "Remember," said Ender. "The enemy's gate is *down.*"

Maybe it was because of the children in the car on the way up that I decided that the trainees in the battleroom were so young. Maybe it was because I, barely an adolescent myself, understood only childhood well enough to write about it. Or maybe it was because of something that impressed me in Catton's *Army of the Potomac*: that the soldiers were all so young and innocent. That they shot and bayoneted the enemy, and then slipped across the neutral ground between armies to trade tobacco, jokes, liquor, and food. Even though it was a deadly game, and the suffering and fear were terrible and real, it was still a game played by children, not all that different from the wargames my brothers and I had played, firing water-filled squirt bottles at each other.

"Ender's Game" was written and sold. I knew it was a strong story because *I* cared about it and believed in it. I had no idea that it would have the effect it had on the science fiction audience. While most people ignored it, of course, and continue to live full and happy lives without reading it or anything else by me, there was still a surprisingly large group who responded to the story with some fervency.

Ignored on the Nebula ballot, "Ender's Game" got onto the Hugo ballot and came in second. More to the point, I was awarded the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. Without doubt, "Ender's Game" wasn't just my first sale—it was the launching pad

of my career.

The same story did it again in 1985, when I rewrote it at novel length—the book, now slightly revised, that you are holding in your hands. At that point I thought of *Ender's Game*, the novel, existing only to set up the much more powerful (I thought) story of *Speaker for the Dead*. But when I finished the novel, I knew that the story had new strength. I had learned a great deal, about life and about writing, in the decade since I wrote the novelet, and it came together for the first time in this book. Again the audience was kind to me: the Nebula and Hugo awards, foreign translations, and strong, steady sales that, for the first time in my career, actually earned out my advance and allowed me to receive royalties.

But it wasn't just a matter of having a quiet little cult novel that brought in a steady income. There was something more to the way that people responded to *Ender's Game.*

For one thing, the people that hated it *really* hated it. The attacks on the novel—and on me—were astonishing. Some of it I expected —I have a master's degree in literature, and in writing *Ender's Game* I deliberately avoided all the little literary games and gimmicks that make "fine" writing so impenetrable to the general audience. All the layers of meaning are there to be decoded, if you like to play the game of literary criticism—but if you don't care to play that game, that's fine with me. I designed *Ender's Game* to be as clear and accessible as any story of mine could possibly be. My goal was that the reader wouldn't have to be trained in literature or even in science fiction to receive the tale in its simplest, purest form. And, since a great many writers and critics have based their entire careers on the premise that anything that the general public can understand without mediation is worthless drivel, it is not surprising that they found my little novel to be despicable. If everybody came to agree that stories should be told this clearly, the professors of literature would be out of a job, and the writers of obscure, encoded fiction would be, not honored, but pitied for their impenetrability.

For some people, however, the loathing for *Ender's Game* transcended mere artistic argument. I recall a letter to the editor of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, in which a woman who worked as a guidance counselor for gifted children reported that she had only picked up *Ender's Game* to read it because her son had kept telling her it was a wonderful book. She read it and loathed it. Of course, I wondered what kind of guidance counselor would hold her son's tastes up to public ridicule, but the criticism that left me most flabbergasted was her assertion that my depiction of gifted children was hopelessly unrealistic. They just don't talk like that, she said. They don't *think* like that.

And it wasn't just her. There have been others with that criticism. Thus I began to realize that, as it is, *Ender's Game* disturbs some people because it challenges their assumptions about reality. In fact, the novel's very clarity may make it *more* challenging, simply because the story's vision of the world is so relentlessly plain. It was important to her, and to others, to believe that children don't actually think or speak the way the children in *Ender's Game* think and speak.

Yet I knew—I *knew*—that this was one of the truest things about *Ender's Game.* In fact, I realized in retrospect that this may indeed be part of the reason why it was so important to me, there on the lawn in front of the Salt Palace, to write a story in which gifted children are trained to fight in adult wars. Because never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child. I felt like a person all along—the same person that I am today. I never felt that I spoke childishly. I never felt that my emotions and desires were somehow less real than adult emotions and desires. And in writing *Ender's Game,* I forced the audience to experience the lives of these children from that perspective—the perspective in which their feelings and decisions are just as real and important as any adult's.

The nasty side of myself wanted to answer that guidance counselor by saying, The only reason you don't think gifted children talk this way is because they know better than to talk this way in front of *you.* But the truer answer is that *Ender's Game*

asserts the personhood of children, and those who are used to thinking of children in another way—especially those whose whole career is based on that—are going to find *Ender's Game* a very unpleasant place to live. Children are a perpetual, self-renewing underclass, helpless to escape from the decisions of adults until they become adults themselves. And *Ender's Game*, seen in that context, might even be a sort of revolutionary tract.

Because the book *does* ring true with the children who read it. The highest praise I ever received for a book of mine was when the school librarian at Farrer Junior High in Provo, Utah, told me, "You know, *Ender's Game* is our most-lost book."

And then there are the letters. This one, for instance, which I received in March of 1991:

Dear Mr. Card,

I am writing to you on behalf of myself and my twelve friends and fellow students who joined me at a two-week residential program for gifted and talented students at Purdue University this summer. We attended the class, "Philosophy and Science Fiction," instructed by Peter Robinson, and we range in age from thirteen through fifteen.

We are all in about the same position; we are very intellectually oriented and have found few people at home who share this trait. Hence, most of us are lonely, and have been since kindergarten. When teachers continually compliment you, your chances of "fitting in" are about nil.

All our lives we've unconsciously been living by the philosophy, "The only way to gain respect is doing so well you can't be ignored." And, for me and Mike, at least, "beating the system" at school is how we've chosen to do this. Both Mike and I plan to be in calculus our second year of high school, schedules permitting. (Both of us are interested in science/math related careers.) Not to get me wrong; we're all bright and at the top of our class. However, in choosing these paths, most of us have wound up satisfied in ourselves, but

very lonely.

This is why *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* really hit home for us. These books were our "texts" for the class. We would read one hundred to two hundred pages per night and then discuss them (and other short stories and essays) during the day. At Purdue, it wasn't a "classroom" discussion, however. It was a group of friends talking about how their feelings and philosophies corresponded to or differed from the books'.

You couldn't *imagine* the impact your books had on us; *we* are the Enders of today. Almost everything written in *Ender's Game* and *Speaker* applied to each one of us on a very, very personal level. No, the situation isn't as drastic today, but all the feelings are there. Both your books, along with the excellent work of Peter Robinson, unified us into a tight web of people.

Ingrid's letter goes on, talking of the *Phoenix Rising*, the magazine that these students publish together in order to maintain their sense of community. (In response I have given them this introduction to publish in their magazine before its appearance in book form.)

Of course, I'm always glad when people like a story of mine; but something much more important is going on here. These readers found that *Ender's Game* was not merely a "mythic" story, dealing with general truths, but something much more personal: To them, *Ender's Game* was an epic tale, a story that expressed who they are as a community, a story that distinguished them from the other people around them. They didn't love Ender, or pity Ender (a frequent adult response); they *were* Ender, all of them. Ender's experience was not foreign or strange to them; in their minds, Ender's life echoed their own lives. The truth of the story was not truth in general, but *their* truth.

Stories can be read so differently—even clear stories, even stories that deliberately avoid surface ambiguities. For instance, here's

another letter, likewise one that I received in mid-March of 1991. It was written on 16 February and postmarked the 18th. Those dates are important.

Mr. Card,

I'm an army aviator waiting out a sandstorm in Saudi Arabia. I've always wanted to write you and since my future is in doubt—I know when the ground war will begin—I decided today would be the day I'd write.

I read *Ender's Game* during flight school four years ago. I'm a warrant officer, and our school, at least the first six weeks, is very different from the commissioned officers'. I was eighteen years old when I arrived at Ft. Rucker to start flight training, and the first six weeks almost beat me. Ender gave me courage then and many times after that. I've experienced the tiredness Ender felt, the kind that goes deep to your soul. It would be interesting to know what caused you to feel the same way. No one could describe it unless they experienced it, but I understand how personal that can be. There is one other novel that describes that frame of soul and mind that I cherish as much as *Ender's Game.* It's called *Armour* and its author is John Steakley. Ender and Felix [the protagonist of *Armour*] are always close by in my mind. Sadly, there is no sequel to *Armour* as there is to *Ender's Game.*

We are the bastards of military aviation. Our helicopters may be the best in the world, but the equipment we wear and the systems in our helicopter, such as the navigation instruments, are at least twenty years behind the Navy and Air Force. I am very happy with the Air Force's ability to bomb with precision, but if they miss, the bombs still land on the enemy's territory. If we screw up, the guys we haul to the battle, the "grunts," die. We don't even have the armour plate for our chests—"chicken plate"—that the helicopter pilots did in Vietnam. Last year in El Salvador, army aviators flew a couple of civilian VIPs and twenty reporters over guerrilla-

controlled territory and there were no flares in their launchers to counteract the heat-seeking missiles we knew the rebels had. One of our pilots and a crew member were killed last year on a training flight because they flew the sling load they were carrying into the trees at 70 miles an hour. It could have been prevented if our night vision goggles had a heads-up display like the Air Force has had for forty years. I'm sure you heard about Colonel Pickett being shot down in a Huey in El Salvador just a few months ago. That type of aircraft is at least thirty years old and there are no survivability measures installed. He was a good man, I knew him.

The reason I told you about these things is because I wanted to paint a picture for you. I love my job but we aren't like the "zoomies" that everyone makes movies about. We do our job with less technology, less political support, less recognition, and more risk than the rest, while the threat to us continues to modernize at an unbelievable rate. I'm not asking for sympathy but I was wondering if you and Mr. Steakley could write a novel about helicopters and the men that fly them for the Army twenty years in the future. There are many of us that read science fiction and after I read *Ender's Game* and *Armour* three times each I started letting my comrades read them. My wife cried when she read *Ender's Game.* There is a following here for a book like the one I requested. We have no speaker for us, the ones that will soon die, or the ones that survive …

As with those gifted young students who read this book as "their" story, this soldier—who, like most but not all of the Army aviators in the Gulf War, survived—did not read *Ender's Game* as a "work of literature." He read it as epic, as a story that helped define his community. It was not his only epic, of course—*Armour,* John Steakley's fine novel, was an equal candidate to be part of his self-story. What matters most, though, was his clear sense that, no matter how much these stories spoke to him, they were still not *exactly* his community's epic. He still felt the need for a "speaker

for the dead" and for the living. He still felt a hunger, especially at a time when death might well be near, to have his own story, his friends' stories, told.

Why else do we read fiction, anyway? Not to be impressed by somebody's dazzling language—or at least I hope that's not our reason. I think that most of us, anyway, read these stories that we know are not "true" because we're hungry for another kind of truth: The mythic truth about human nature in general, the particular truth about those life-communities that define our own identity, and the most specific truth of all: our own self-story. Fiction, because it is not about somebody who actually lived in the real world, always has the possibility of being about ourself.

Ender's Game is a story about gifted children. It is also a story about soldiers. Captain John F. Schmitt, the author of the Marine Corps's *Warfighting,* the most brilliant, concise book of military strategy ever written by an American (and a proponent of the kind of thinking that was at the heart of the allied victory in the Gulf War), found *Ender's Game* to be a useful enough story about the nature of leadership to use it in courses he taught at the Marine University at Quantico. Watauga College, the interdisciplinary studies program at Appalachian State University—as *un*military a community as you could ever hope to find!—uses *Ender's Game* for completely different purposes—to talk about problem-solving and the self-creation of the individual. A graduate student in Toronto explored the political ideas in *Ender's Game.* A writer and critic at Pepperdine has seen *Ender's Game* as, in some ways, religious fiction.

All these uses are valid; all these readings of the book are "correct." For all these readers have placed themselves inside this story, not as spectators, but as participants, and so have looked at the world of *Ender's Game,* not with my eyes only, but also with their own.

This is the essence of the transaction between storyteller and audience. The "true" story is not the one that exists in my mind; it