

## Orson Scott Card: Waterbaby

### Introduction:

The hardest thing for writers to do is take ourselves out of our own culture and put ourselves into another. Li-fi writers don't have to do that—in fact, they consider it their job, in part, to document their own culture in their fiction. But we sci-fi writers, by definition, move into alien worlds and alternate realities.

At best we only partly succeed. Anyone who has read even the best sci-fi of the fifties, sixties, or seventies can easily see how, without realizing it, in the midst of inventive and strange fiction, the cultural biases of the writer's own time still reveal themselves.

Well, if I thought getting into an alien culture was hard, it was child's play compared to shifting into an existing, contemporary culture that I'm not part of! For the past couple of years, I've been preparing myself to write a novel set in a contemporary middle class African-American community. Now, I know what happens whenever non-Mormons try to write about Mormon culture – they never, never get it right. And in writing stories within the African-American community, my biggest hurdle was to get rid of the images and stereotypes of African-Americans that contemporary American culture bombards us with.

Let's face it. I've watched too much TV, which gives us either Cliff Huxtable or a gang-banger, pimp, or drug lord. What our culture keeps stressing, these days, is how different European-Americans are from African-Americans. But in my reading and conversations, what I've gradually learned is that the "American" part of those hyphenates is at least as strong as the "European" and "African" parts. And the unmentioned "human" part is far stronger than either.

So ... here is the first story to emerge from these years of work. The family in this story is African-American. But the story is not purporting to be "about" their Africanness, or even their Americanness. The story is about them as human beings, struggling to deal with the impossible, ready to pay the price of a miracle.

First off you got to know about Tamika, how it was with her and water. First time she got into a pool, she was only two, we had those tube things around her arms to hold her up and me and Sondra, we were both there in the water, she was our baby and no way she was going to be out of our sight for a second, so we were both there kind of holding her up and making sure those air things really kept her from sinking. So Sondra was kind of holding her on one side and me on the other and Tamika just laughed and shrieked and we could feel how she was kicking and wiggling her arms and it sort of came to me how maybe by holding onto her I was holding her back, and so I let go, figuring Sondra had her on the other side anyway, so she'd be safe. Only later on Sondra tells me she had the same thought at the same moment and she let go and right away, Tamika starts moving forward through the water, kicking her legs, pulling with her arms, smiling and keeping her head above water and there was no mistake about it, she was swimming. By the end of that day we had those tubes off her arms and never looked back. She was born for the water, she was born to swim.

It's been like that ever since. We just couldn't keep her away from swimming pools. We called her our

waterbaby, she'd catch sight of a pool and one way or another, in five seconds she'd be in the water. We took to dressing her all summer in a swimsuit instead of underwear cause if we didn't, she'd go in fully dressed or stark naked, but she was going in, right now. Anybody with a pool, they were Tamika's best friends whether Sondra and me liked them or not. At three years old she'd head on out the front door to go over to a house with a pool. We had to put locks high up on the door to keep her in. Sometimes it was scary, she loved the water so much, but we were proud, too, because that girl could swim, your honor. You had to see her. She'd go underwater quick as a fish, move like a blur, pop up so far from where she went under you'd be sure there had to be a second kid, nobody could move that fast. When she dove off the board — she was never afraid of heights as long as there was water under her — she was like a bird, but even so, when she slipped into the water it's like there wasn't even a splash, the water opened up to take her in. I can hardly think of her except soaking wet, drops glistening on her brown skin like jewels in the sunlight, smiling all the time, she was so beautiful, she was so happy.

Tamika said it all the time. "Oh, Daddy, oh Mama, I wish I didn't ever have to come out of the water. I wish I was a fish and I could live in the water." And Sondra would always say, "You're no fish, Tamika, you're just our own little waterbaby, we found you in a rain puddle and fished you out and took you home and dried you off and your Daddy wanted to name you Tunafish but I said, No, she's Tamika." Said that all the time when Tamika was three and four. By the time Tamika was six, she'd say, "Oh, Mama, not that again," but she still loved to hear it.

Sondra and me, our dream was to make enough money to get a house with a pool so she didn't always have to go somewhere else to swim. But you know how it is, that wasn't going to happen. We used to joke that the closest thing to a swimming pool we'd ever have was the waterbed me and Sondra slept on. My parents thought we were crazy when we bought that bed. "Black people don't sleep on waterbeds," my daddy told me. "Black people have more sense with their dollars." I wish to Jesus I'd listened to my daddy.

It was a hot summer night, you know how it gets here in LA late in August, you got the ceiling fan going full blast and no covers on top of you but you still got sweat dripping all along your body like rain and your pajamas are soaked and you toss and turn all night and you're half the time dreaming and half the time thinking about work and problems and worries and you can't even tell where one leaves off and the other begins. And so that's why I thought it was a dream at first. I was there on the waterbed only something was moving under me. The bed was rocking a little and I thought that meant Sondra had gotten up or just lain back down or something, only it kept rocking and I could hear her breathing and she was asleep, and then I felt something bump into me. From below.

Like a fish in the water, a big fish, it bumped me hard. I was awake right away, only I wasn't sure I was awake, you know? How you're thinking that you're dreaming that you're awake, only maybe you are awake, only you know that it's still part of the dream? I felt something start pummeling me from below. Like fists punching straight up at me, pounding on my back from inside the waterbed. Hard enough to almost hurt. Little fists. And I got this picture in my mind of a mermaid trapped inside the waterbed, pounding on me to get me to get off and that's when I woke up, or anyway that's when I rolled over and got off the bed, and I was thinking, This dream's too much for me. I got up and went to the bathroom and took a piss and got a drink and I was kind of shaking from the dream, it was so real, and then I thought, I gotta look in on the kids, and I knew it was dumb but whenever I felt afraid from a dream or a noise in the night, even if I knew it was nothing, I still had to look at the kids and make sure they were all right.

The boys were fine, the four-year-old, the two-year-old, breathing steady and soft in their beds. And from the door of Tamika's room she looked fine, too, in a jumble of covers, only then I thought, how can she stand to have so much blanket on her in this heat? So I went over to see if she was maybe sweating

too much and I ought to pull off the covers and she wasn't there. Just her pillow and the covers all wadded up where she must have kicked them in the night and a damp area on the sheets where she'd been sweating and dreaming just like the rest of us.

She must have gotten up to go to the bathroom, I thought.

Only I knew it wasn't that at all. I knew right then that I hadn't been dreaming. All the times Tamika had wished she was a fish in the water, tonight somehow she'd dreamed her way or wished her way into the only pool of water in the house that was big enough to hold her and she had somehow realized where she was and knew it was me sleeping right above her and she'd pounded on me to wake up and save her and what was I doing still standing here in her room feeling the sheet when she was drowning?

I knew I was crazy — that's why I started calling her name, just shouting it, even though I knew it would wake up the boys and wake up Sondra, because I was still hoping I was wrong, that she'd hear me and she'd call out to me from the bathroom or from the kitchen, "I'm in here, Daddy, what's wrong?" only she didn't make a sound but I keep on yelling her name so maybe there in the water she can hear me and she'll know I'm coming. I run into the kitchen and open the high cupboard where we keep the sharp knives and I get the big heavy meat-chopping knife cause I know I can get that one through the rubber of the waterbed and then I'm heading back to my bedroom and Sondra sees me coming with this big knife shouting Tamika's name and I don't know what she's thinking but she grabs me and tries to stop me and I just flung her away, that's why she had that cut on her head, I didn't hit her, I was only thinking, don't slow me down, my baby's in that water and I've got to get her out.

So the boys are crying and Sondra's crying but all I know is, Tamika's been under there too long, the whole time I was peeing and getting a drink and looking at the boys and checking her bed and getting this knife, she's been under there alone in the dark scared to death and trying to hold her breath. She could hold her breath a long time, but who knows how much air she had in her when she found herself under there? It's not like diving in when you can take a deep breath.

That was all going through my mind while I'm pulling off the sheet and the pad and I raise up the knife and I think, I can't just jab down into this waterbed, I don't know where Tamika is, I don't want this knife to go right on through into my baby. So I press down on the corner and make sure she's not under there and then I jab with the knife, and that mattress skin is tough, it just shies away under the knife, it's not till the third time that I get that knife through and the water starts gushing out and I'm pulling the blade through the mattress, ripping through and now it cuts real smooth and Sondra isn't crying anymore, she's saying, "Where's Tamika? Where's Tamika?" Well I cut about a five-foot slice along my side of the waterbed and there's water sloshing around, a real stink from the algae and the chemicals, it's like the filthiest industrial pond and I'm thinking, My baby's in that muck, I've got to get her out. So I plunge in my arms up to my neck, some of that stuff sloshes right into my mouth and I spit it out but I can't feel her under there and my first thought is, Thank the Lord, it was just a dream.

But I know it's not a dream. I yell to Sondra, "Push her over here," and Sondra knows what I'm talking about by now, she knows Tamika didn't answer me when I called, so she doesn't ask me what I'm talking about, she just gets on her side of the bed and pushes straight down onto the mattress and she cries out cause she felt Tamika under the water and Sondra says, "I pushed her!" and right then I feel her bump up against my hands there in the dark water, and I grab onto her ankle and I start pulling and then with my left hand I find her arm and I pull now with both arms and she just comes sloshing right out, water all over everything, but I got my baby out of there.

No, I'm not thinking about how she got in there, all I'm thinking is, how long was she under? Is she breathing? And no, she wasn't breathing. And I start yelling to Sondra, "Call 911!" And she grabs the

phone and I hear her calling while I'm pressing on Tamika's chest and water whooshes out of her mouth and then I go back and forth between pressing on her and blowing air into her little mouth and I'm still doing that when the paramedics come and pull me out of the way and they take over and get her on oxygen and you already heard them testify about how they saved her life.

Or partly saved her, anyway. There was brain damage from being without air so long, and so she doesn't walk right and she has a hard time talking and she's forgotten how to read but that's still our little Tamika in there, we know she's there, our little waterbaby, she's just got to learn how to do all those things again.

As for what that social worker said, I didn't confess to anything, but I did say what she said I said. Because she was explaining to us how our little girl wasn't coming home till they could find out what really happened that night, and I knew she didn't believe us because who would? Who could believe this story? How does a little girl who's having dreams on a hot night suddenly get inside a waterbed mattress? She's dreaming, she's wishing she was in the water, and suddenly her wish comes true? If I hadn't cut into that waterbed myself, if I hadn't felt her fists pounding me from inside it, I would never have believed it. But Sondra saw that there wasn't no cut in that mattress till the cut she saw me make, and she pushed our baby over to me, she felt it, she knows what's true, and we were the only ones there, and if I was making up some lie to tell you, don't you think I'd make up a better one than this?

My lawyer, he as much as told me to make up something better. He says to me, You got to realize that it isn't what's true that matters, it's what a jury can actually believe, and nobody's going to believe what you're telling me. And he starts telling me all these maybes, like Maybe you dropped a ring into the waterbed so you cut into it to try to get it out and maybe your daughter thought she could help you find it and when your back was turned she went into the water to look for the ring and you didn't realize she was trapped under there until too late.

But I said to him, When I put my hand on God's word and promise the Lord God that I'll tell the truth, that's what I'll do, even if it means I lose my baby, even if it means I go to jail, because my family needs the Lord now more than ever, more than they need me, so I'm not going to spit in the eye of Jesus. I will tell it the way it happened. And as for that so-called confession, all I ever said was, "Lay it all on me. I'll move out of the house so you'll know Tamika will be safe, but you let her go home to her mama and her brothers." I didn't confess to nothing, but I took all their suspicions on myself so that when I left the house they'd let her go back home. And I kept my word, I haven't come near the house this whole time, Sondra and I talk on the phone and I've talked to Tamika on the phone cause even though she doesn't talk so good she can still hear me and I can tell her how much I love her. And no matter how this trial comes out, I know that my baby said to me, one time on the phone she said, "Thank you Daddy," and I knew she was thanking me for waking up when she pounded on me and for getting her out of the water.

If I hadn't believed in the impossible then I would never have cut into that waterbed. I would have stripped off the sheet and seen there was no break in the mattress and I would've known there's no way she could be in there, and we would have searched the whole house and yard for Tamika and called the cops and woke the neighbors and after a while somebody would have realized there was some big lump inside the waterbed and if we'd got one of the cops to cut into the mattress or a paramedic or even a neighbor, with a bunch of witnesses, then I wouldn't be on trial, it'd just be some story in Weekly World News and I wouldn't be trying to make some jury believe the impossible.

But my baby would be dead.

So I'm glad I'm here and I'm glad I'm on trial, because I'd rather go to jail and never see my baby again, as long as I know she's alive and she's with her Mama and her brothers and she's got a chance to be

herself again. But I'd rather be with her. My boys need me, and she needs me. I'm a good father to my family, I never raised a hand against them, I work hard and I make a fair living. Put me in jail and that's all gone, Sondra has to go to work or live off welfare or what her family and my family can spare. But whatever we go through, that's fine, we thank Jesus all the same, because our baby's alive.

And maybe I do deserve to go to jail. Cause I'm not the one who put her in the water, but I am the one who pulled her out too late.

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Orson Scott Card is the multiple award-winning author of the novels *Ender's Game* and the recent *Ender's Shadow* among many others. He is a celebrated short-story writer, playwright and scriptwriter, as well, and has also written two highly respected books on the craft of writing.