

Reneé Carter is just one of those writers. She has spent the semester completing not one, but two novels, producing both characters and dialogue that are believable and entertaining. Keep an eye out – she'll be landing in a bookstore near you any day now.
~Kris Hess, Tutor

The Puppet Master By Reneé Carter

The house stood alone in the midst of a dark forest. Like tears of an unloved soul, a gentle rain ran steadily down its walls. The only sound heard inside them was the haunting wail of the wind through the wood-hewn door. Six patrons, wearing garments of fine linen, did not dare to move in the darkened room. The seventh guest sat calmly in a rugged cloak, her gray hair braided tightly to her head. She sipped her wine and her attention focused expectantly on the front of the room.

The puppet master materialized from the shadows, a beautiful woman holding his arm. She was radiant, wearing a rose-colored dress that flowed down to cover her feet. Her hair was of the finest threads of brown silk. Her eyes, wide in the clearest blue, focused only on him. Her lips were two pink buds, curving gently down at the corners. On her pale cheeks rested three glistening tears.

An organ began to play and the two glided about the room. There was something magical about their dance. In perfect harmony, he touched her back and held her hand as they waltzed. The music rose in a crescendo, the notes melodic and mournful. The poignant scene captivated the viewers, who had even given up on breathing. As the organ struck its final chord, the pair slowly entered one last turn and stopped. The woman bent gracefully against his arm; their eyes locked. In the flickering candlelight, she almost appeared to be alive. If not for the glass tears forever frozen to her cheeks, the applauding patrons would have sworn they had seen Aphrodite herself dancing this night.

Carefully holding his finest creation, the puppet master took a deep bow and his dark hair brushed forward over his obdurate eyes. He was unmoved as his patrons rushed to him, raising their goblets in tribute to his genius and offered their coins; he saw this skill as his livelihood and nothing more. He closed his fist around the money and ushered the nobles from his home. As he closed the door behind them, he again sealed his fate to live in solitude with his puppets.

The puppet master threw the coins he had received onto the table. Leaving the performance room, he walked down a hallway lined with oil lamps and did not notice the figure behind him, watching from the shadows. He came to the door of his workroom and pushed it open with his leg. His workbench was covered in sawdust and smeared with old paint. Next to the bench were piles of wood – dark, light, those

with straight grain and those without. His tools sat a shelf, ready for their master's hand. The walls were lined with rows of puppets in all shapes and sizes; some were ready to cry, others to yell, and joke, and sing.

The dim light from the hallway lit the room enough for him to maneuver around the other puppets and set his beauty on her stand. As he smoothed the wrinkles from her dress, the puppet master heard the faint sound of his organ beginning to play. His brow furrowed and he rushed back to the performance room, his eyes casting about. He saw that the table was just as he had left it, strewn with the patrons' coins. But a gray-haired woman was standing in front of the fireplace.

"The show is over," he told her and paused to see if she would respond. When she remained silent, he asked, "Who are you? I do not recognize your face and you do not dress like my normal patrons."

The strange woman turned away from the flames and walked slowly around the table, studying him. The puppet master looked at his organ as it played in the corner and explained, "It is very expensive, from seas away; my last lavish possession. Did you turn it on?"

The woman addressed him. "Leighton, why do you live in seclusion?"

The puppet master stood as still as an oak rooted in place. His tone was guarded. "This name, it has been a time since someone has called me it. Had I known you?"

The woman's eyes seemed to pierce his flesh. "You speak as if you had been a different person. That is not true, is it, Leighton?"

He took two long strides toward the door. "The hour is late and the weather unfriendly, but I must ask you to leave."

"Do you live alone out of fear? Has the cruelty of one woman made you hide your own heart?"

"Woman! How dare you!" The puppet master began to turn toward her, to face her accusations, but some invisible force suddenly swept through the room, paralyzing him. Even the organ music froze in the air.

"Master!" The terrified shriek of a young woman echoed through the home. The man gasped, unsure of what had happened.

"Master!"

The shriek came again and the man realized he was awake and hearing a real voice. He locked eyes with the gray-haired woman for a moment, before tearing down the hallway; he knew innately where the voice came from. He threw open the door to his workroom and looked around, expecting to see the figure of a woman who had somehow been lost in his home. He felt something under his boot and saw that he had stepped on the hem of his beautiful puppet's dress. Leighton knelt down, realizing that she had fallen from her stand. As he reached for her, her head rolled to the side and her lips moved. "Master."

Horrified, the man's eyes widened and he fell backwards. His hands were quick and he scrambled to his feet and sprinted out the door. He charged down the hallway to the performance room.

"Woman!" he yelled. "What have you done?!"

He stopped as soon as he set foot in the room, immediately seeing that she was gone; the door was open wide and rain was beginning to accumulate on the floor. He cursed, grabbing the nearest goblet off of the table and throwing it onto the floor. The metal clattered loudly against the wood, splattering dark wine like droplets of blood. He slammed the door shut, shivering as raindrops ran down his cheeks and another shriek of "Master!" assaulted his ears.

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