READING BETWEEN THE LINES

What do Ebenezer Scrooge, Charlie Chan, Alice, Huckleberry Finn and Sherlock Holmes have in common? Authors based these fictional characters on real people: Charles Dickens based Ebenezer Scrooge on a miser named John Elwes; novelist Earl Derr Biggers created his Charlie Chan character after learning of the exploits of Honolulu detective, Chang Apana; Charles Dodgson modeled Alice after Alice Liddell, the daughter of one his Oxford colleagues; Samuel Clemens based Huckleberry Finn on his boyhood friend, Tom Blankenship; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes in the likeness of his friend, Dr. Joseph Bell, who honed his ability to discern uncanny insights into people based on the minutia of their appearance.

Great works of fictional literature reflect reality, but through different methods. Type characters—characters who represent a particular class or group of people—populate literary works: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reveals archetypal characters, representative of classes of people in fourteenth-century England, through the stories of a group of fictional pilgrims. *West Side Story*, a modern retelling of Romeo and Juliet, reflects the unwritten rules of gang warfare and the consequences to those who defy those rules.

Other literary characters are based on actual individuals. James Annesley, sold overseas as an indentured servant by his greedy and dastardly uncle who usurped his inheritance, was immortalized as David Balfour in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. The actress Fanny Kemble related the sad tale of her brother, Henry Kemble, and Mary Anne Thackeray to her dear friend, the novelist Henry James. The true story of the prosaic and plain Miss Thackeray and the handsome, and greedy roué inspired James' *Washington Square*. Christopher Isherwood shared a lodging house in pre-Nazi Berlin with Jean Ross, an underground nightclub singer. Isherwood immortalized Jean as the decadent Sally Bowles in his book *Goodbye to Berlin*, which was transformed into the stage play and movie *Cabaret*. Reverend March, the protagonist of Geraldine Brooks' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *March* is a re-imagined depiction of Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, depicted as Reverend March in *Little Women*.

Writers are encouraged to write about what they know to give their work authenticity. The fear of lawsuits, however, gives writers pause when they portray real people or create characters from them. The estate of J.R.R. Tolkien threatened to sue writer Stephen Hilliard for including Tolkien as a character in his book, *Mirkwood, A Novel About J.R.R. Tolkien*. Hilliard took the estate to court, claiming a first-amendment right to publish. He settled the issue by agreeing to add the disclaimer that *Mirkwood, A Novel About J.R.R. Tolkien* was a work of fiction, and that the J. R.R. Tolkien Estate did not endorse the book. Kathryn Stockett, the author of the best seller, *The Help*, was sued by her brother's nanny, Ablene Cooper. Ms. Cooper claims that Stockett based one of the book's main characters, Abilene Clark, on her without her permission. Ms. Cooper claims the portrayal humiliated and demeaned her. Stockett claims to have met Ablene only briefly and to have actually based the character of Abilene Clark on her own beloved nanny, Constantine. Ernest Hemmingway avoided legal entanglements by publishing *A Moveable Feast*, his juicy memoir of his early years in Paris—including salacious tidbits about Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald—only after his death.