



IllusionForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the IllusionForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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Introduction

The IllusionForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it.

Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Fade

*AFTERIMAGE — *the visual trace left after a stimulus is removed. the foundation of animation, film, and many magic tricks.**



In the dark corner of the meadow, a firefly-tween named Fade pulsed her glowing belly once — a single warm flash — and then held perfectly still to watch what the dark did with it.

A cluster of younger fireflies drifted over, bored. "You flashed once," one grumbled. "That's it? One flash?"

"Keep looking at where I was," Fade said.

They did. And there it was: in the black air, a faint amber ghost of her glow, hanging on for just a heartbeat after the light itself had gone out. One of the little ones gasped and reached for it. His tiny claws closed on nothing.

"It's gone," he said, confused. "But I still *saw* it."

"You still see it," Fade corrected, gently. "Your eyes are keeping the picture for a moment after the picture leaves. Everybody's do." She flashed again — flick — and let the ghost fade in the dark. "That little bit of holding-on is the most useful thing about you, and almost nobody notices it."

Then she did something the younger ones would talk about for weeks. She began to pulse — flash, flash, flash, faster and faster, dancing left across the meadow — until the separate flashes smeared into a single glowing streak, a ribbon of light that seemed to *slide*. It looked exactly like one bright thing moving. It was really a dozen still flashes their eyes had blended together.

"There is no ribbon," Fade said, landing. "There's just flashes, and a brain that keeps each one a heartbeat too long. Stack them fast enough, and *poof* — motion out of stillness." She grinned. "That's not a trick played on you. That's a trick you can learn to play."



Fade had learned it the hard way, when she was small and easily fooled.

Her family were the village signal-flashers — fireflies who blinked messages across the dark so the whole meadow could talk after sundown. The first time little Fade tried to read a fast message, she couldn't. The flashes came too quick; they ran into one blurry glow, and she felt slow and stupid, like everyone else could see something she couldn't.

Her grandfather, an old firefly with a dim, steady light, settled beside her. He didn't tell her to try harder. He said, "You saw them blur together, didn't you? All those flashes turning into one smear?"

Fade nodded, miserable.

"That blur isn't you failing, little spark. That's your eye *holding* each flash — keeping it lit inside you for a breath after it's gone out there. Every eye does it. It's not a broken thing. It's the whole reason a string of flashes can become a word at all." He pulsed slowly. "The trick isn't to see faster. It's to trust the holding. Let the flashes stack up

inside you, and the message will arrive on its own."

Fade didn't read the message that night. But the blurry, behind-feeling had a shape now, and knowing its shape made it feel less like a flaw. Her eye kept the picture a moment too long — and that, it turned out, was the point.



She walked to IllusionForge at twelve, because a place that studied how eyes get fooled ought to understand the little bit of holding-on that fooled them.

Veil, the mentor who ran the studios, met her at the door. Veil didn't ask her to prove she was clever. Veil asked one question. "What happens to a picture after it's gone?"

Fade didn't answer with words. She flashed her belly once, bright, then went dark — and pointed at the empty air where the ghost of her glow still hung between them for a heartbeat.

"That," she said. "It stays. Just for a moment. Every eye keeps the last picture a little too long before it lets go."

Veil watched the amber ghost dissolve. "And what's it good for?"

Fade pulsed fast — flash-flash-flash — until the flashes blurred into a sliding streak across the doorway, one thing out of many. "This," she said. "Everything that seems to move but is really just stillness, stacked fast. Cartoons. Flip-books. Firelight on a wall. It all works because the eye won't let go quickly enough."

Veil was quiet a long moment. "You belong here," Veil said.



Fade's studio was full of things that were secretly just holding-on.

A girl came in one afternoon, deflated, holding a flip-book she'd drawn herself — a little stick figure, one drawing per page. "I did all this work," she said, "and it doesn't move. It's just pages. It looks stupid."

Fade knew that slump. She'd felt it reading her first message.

"Flip it," Fade said. "Fast."

The girl riffled the pages with her thumb. The stick figure *ran*. She yelped and did it again, slower. The running fell apart into separate still drawings. Fast again — and it ran.

"It's not moving," the girl said slowly. "It's just... pages. But when I go fast—"

"Your eye keeps each drawing lit for a blink after your thumb's already past it," Fade said. "So the next one lands on top of the last one before it's gone. Twelve drawings a second and your brain stitches them into a runner. That's every cartoon you've ever loved. Twelve to twenty-four still pictures, and one eye that holds on a beat too long."

She set a red card on the bench. "Now stare at this. Don't blink. Count to thirty."

The girl stared. Fade whisked the red card away and dropped a white one in its place. "There," the girl breathed. "A green one. A green ghost, floating. But you didn't put a green card—"

"I didn't," Fade said. "You made it. Stare at red long enough and the red-catchers in your eye get tired; the green ones speak up for a moment when you look away. Real ghost, your ghost." She smiled. "Not a magic card. A tired eye, holding on."

The girl laughed and pressed her thumb to her flip-book again, watching the little runner run.



Later, when the studio had emptied, the girl came back with one more question, quieter now.

"When it's just still pages," she said, "or just a plain white card... how do you know the moving thing is really *in* there?"

Fade thought about the meadow. About the blurry message and her grandfather's slow, steady light.

"You feel it," she said. "That little in-between moment — when the flashes are stacking up and you can't quite tell yet if it's many things or one thing. That almost-moment, right before it turns into motion. That feeling isn't your eyes being wrong. That's them holding the last picture safe, just long enough to hand it to the next one." She looked toward the dark meadow through the window. "Nothing you see is really smooth. It's all stillness, caught and held and passed along. The wonder isn't ruined by knowing that. The wonder *is* that — that a tired little eye, holding on a beat too long, can turn a stack of nothing-much into something that runs."

The girl nodded slowly, and Fade watched the slump lift off her shoulders — the same way, years ago, hers had lifted in the dark.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she thought it, warm and glowing: *the blurry, behind-feeling was never a flaw. It was the holding. And the holding is where every moving picture is born.*

Stack

*PERSPECTIVE TRAP — *geometric arrangements that mislead size + depth judgments. Müller-Lyer, Ponzo, Ebbinghaus, vanishing-point.**



In the middle of the IllusionForge courtyard, a small armadillo-tween named Stack laid two lines of chalk on the flagstones and dared a whole crowd of students to tell him which was longer.

The lines were plain. One had little arrows flaring outward at each end, like a bird spreading its wings. The other had arrows tucked inward, like a bird folding them. Stack stepped back and let his shell-bands catch the sun.

"Left one's longer," a tall girl said at once.

"Obviously," said a boy behind her. "Way longer."

The whole crowd murmured agreement. Stack said nothing. He just pulled a knotted string from his vest, stretched it along the first line, pinched the knot, and laid the exact same string against the second.

Same length. Not close — identical.

The crowd went quiet in that particular offended way people go quiet when their own eyes have betrayed them. The tall girl leaned in, measured it herself, and made a small strangled noise.

"They're the *same*," she said, almost angry. "But I *saw* —"

"You did see," Stack agreed cheerfully. "Your eyes worked perfectly. Your brain just measured with context — and the arrows leaned on the answer." He tapped the outward wings, then the folded ones. "The lines borrowed meaning from their neighbors. That's the whole trick. Vision isn't a camera. It's a guess, built out of light and everything sitting nearby."

He grinned at the girl's outrage. "Don't worry. Everybody loses that one. I lose it, and I made it."



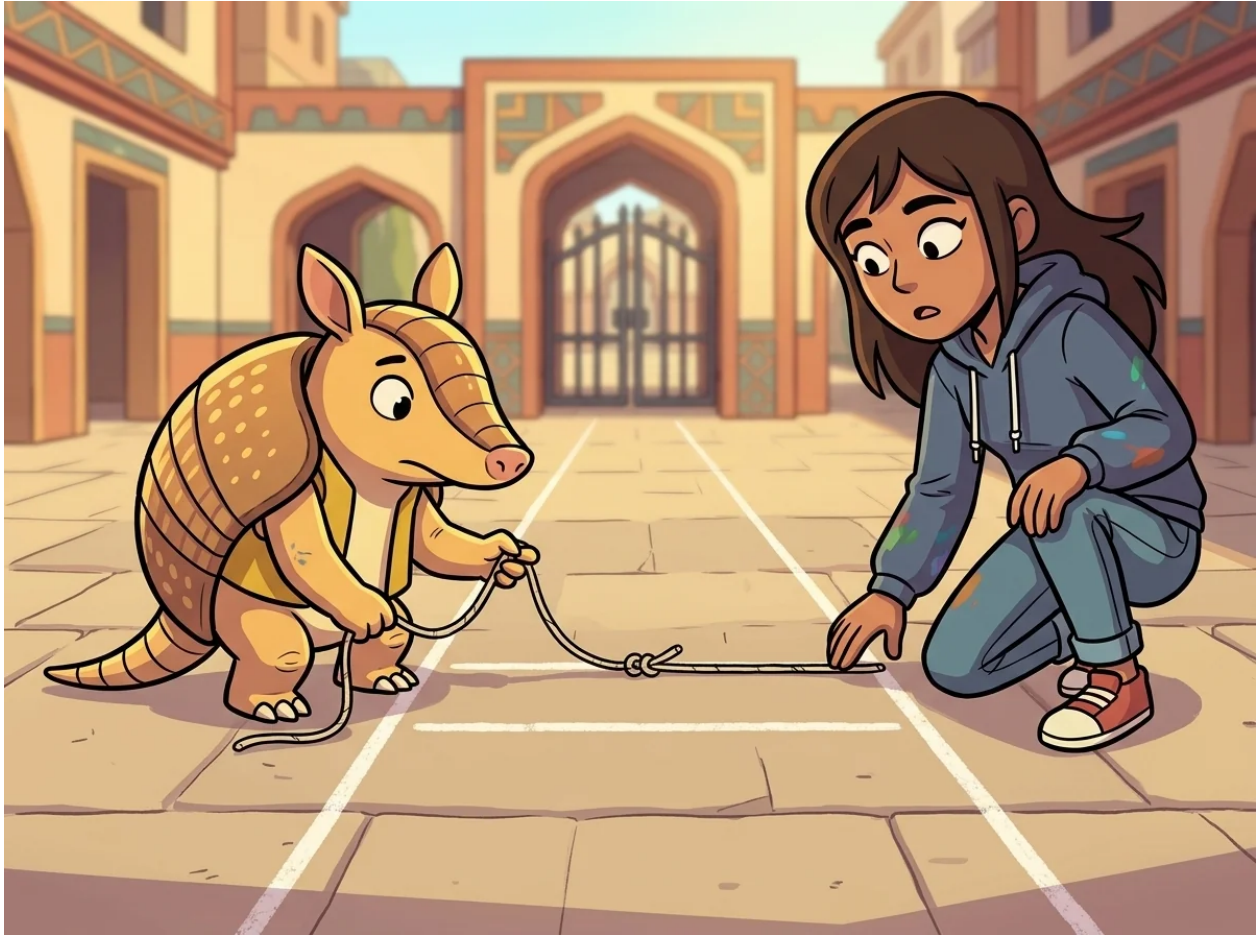
Stack had not always found the trick delightful. When he was small, it had frightened him.

He'd grown up in the desert village, where his family were terrain-trackers — armadillos who read the land for burrow-routes. One evening his grandfather sent him to fetch water from a well at the base of a distant mesa. Stack had judged the mesa close, an easy trot. He walked. And walked. The mesa never seemed to arrive. The flat expanse stretched featureless and endless, and the light bent the distance until he could not tell if he'd gone a hundred paces or a thousand.

He came home well after dark, shaking, sure something was wrong with him. "I couldn't measure it," he told his grandfather, ashamed. "My eyes lied to me the whole way out. How can I be a tracker if I can't even trust what I see?"

His grandfather didn't scold him. He sat him down and said, quietly, "Your eyes didn't lie, little one. The desert plays fair — it just plays with context. Flat ground gives your eye nothing to measure against, so your eye borrows a guess. Distant mesas look close. Close dunes look far. Every tracker before you learned it the same scared way you did tonight."

The tight, wrong-footed feeling in Stack's chest loosened, just a little. It wasn't that he was broken. It was that seeing was a kind of construction — and the desert had shown him the seams.



He walked to IllusionForge at twelve, because he wanted to understand the seams.

Veil, the mentor who ran the studios, met him at the gate with paint on her sleeves. She did not ask him to prove his eyes were sharp. She asked one thing. "What is a perspective trap?"

Stack didn't answer with a speech. He crouched, drew two short horizontal lines on the ground — one near, one further off — and around them sketched two long rails racing away toward a single far point, like a road shrinking into the distance.

"Which line's longer?" he asked.

Veil looked. "The upper one."

Stack measured them with his knotted string. Equal. "The rails told your brain the upper line was further away," he said. "And your brain thought, *if it's further and still looks that big, it must really be bigger*. So it stretched it for you. Helpfully. Wrongly."

Veil crouched down beside the drawing for a long, quiet moment, studying her own mistake. Then she looked up at him. "You belong here," she said.



Stack's studio filled up with things that fooled people, and he loved every one.

A boy came in one afternoon, red-faced and cross. He'd been trying to draw two friends the same size, and no matter what he did, the one he'd surrounded with big circles kept looking tiny. "I measured them," he said, shoving the paper at Stack. "They're the same. But this one looks *shrunk*. My drawing's broken."

Stack knew that flustered, betrayed feeling. He'd felt it walking to a mesa that never came closer.

"Your drawing's not broken," he said. "Look here." He set down a card: one dot ringed by huge circles, an identical dot ringed by tiny ones. "Which dot's bigger?"

"The right one."

"Same dot." Stack let him measure it. "A small thing next to giants looks smaller. A small thing next to specks looks bigger. Your brain doesn't measure the dot — it measures the dot *against its neighbors*."

The boy stared. "So how do I make my friends look equal?"

"Give them equal neighbors, or none at all." Stack slid the card away. "That's the secret every painter learns. The rails, the circles, the arrows — those aren't mistakes. They're *tools*. Point them one way and you fool the eye by accident. Point them on purpose and you build depth on a flat wall, a whole road going nowhere on a scrap of paper. Same trick. You just get to decide who it fools."

The boy looked at his drawing again — not embarrassed now, but curious. "So I didn't do it wrong."

"You did it *powerfully*," Stack said. "You just didn't know you had your hand on the lever yet."



Later, when the studio had emptied, the boy came back with one more question. He was quieter.

"If my eyes fool me even now," he said, "even when I *know* — how do I ever trust what I see?"

Stack thought about the mesa. About the endless flat walk and the loosening in his chest when his grandfather named it.

"You don't stop trusting your eyes," he said. "They're right almost always — fast and easy and usually correct. You just learn the feeling of the moments they might not be." He touched his own chest. "There's a little jolt when the ruler disagrees with you — that surprised, off-balance feeling, like a stair that isn't where your foot expected. Most people hate that feeling. I chase it. Because that jolt is the exact spot where you get to *see how seeing works*."

The boy nodded slowly, and Stack watched the crossness melt off him into wonder — the same way, years ago in the dark, his own fear had melted into something he could hold.

He didn't say the rest aloud, but he thought it, warm and sure: *the moments your eyes surprise you are not the moments you're failing. They're the windows. That startled little jolt is just your own mind, showing you how patiently it's been guessing all along.*

Notch

IMPOSSIBLE FIGURE — locally coherent; globally cannot exist. the figure that breaks 3D logic at the joins.



In the crooked drawing-room at the bottom of the tunnel-village, a ferret-tween named Notch was building a triangle that could not exist.

She had three long grey beams laid out on the floor, and she was fitting them together, corner by corner. First corner: a clean right angle, the kind you'd find on any table leg. Notch nodded. Second corner: another tidy right angle, the beam rising away toward the ceiling. She nodded again. Third corner, joining the top beam back down to the first — and here she went very slow, easing the ends together with her paws until, from exactly where she was crouched, the three beams seemed to close into a neat, solid triangle.

A younger tunnel-kit poked his head in. "That's just a triangle."

"Come stand where I'm standing," Notch said.

He crouched beside her. From that one spot, the beams locked into a perfect three-cornered shape. Then Notch reached out and tapped the top beam — and it swung freely in the air, attached to nothing on the far end. The triangle had *no* far end. It only looked closed from that single crouching angle.

The kit's whiskers twitched. "But — I *saw* it close."

"You saw each corner behave," Notch said, grinning. "Every join looked honest on its own. It's the whole thing that lies." She traced the three beams around with one claw. "Follow it all the way around and it never actually meets itself. Up close, everything's fine. Step back, and it can't be real."



Notch had learned to trust that feeling underground, long before she could name it.

Her family were passage-mappers — the ferrets who kept the tunnel-village's twisty warren straight in their heads so nobody got lost in the dark. The first time she'd mapped a passage alone, she'd done everything right. Turn left, she wrote. Slope down, she wrote. Each step, on its own, was true. She was certain.

Then she came out into a chamber she'd already mapped an hour ago, from the wrong side, when the map said that was impossible.

Her chest went tight and hot. She felt tricked — furious at herself, sure she'd made some dumb mistake. Every single step had been *correct*. How could correct steps add up to something that couldn't be?

Her great-aunt, an old mapper with a slow voice, found her there. She didn't scold. She looked at Notch's map and said, "Every turn here is honest, little one. I believe each one." She tapped the whole page. "But honest turns can still curl into a shape that lies. That's not your failure. That's the *tunnels*. You checked each step. You forgot to check the shape."

The furious-tricked feeling loosened. It had a name now: *local's fine, it's the global that fools you*. Somehow that made the strange chamber feel less like a mistake and more like a puzzle worth keeping.



She walked to IllusionForge at twelve, because a place that studied how eyes get fooled ought to understand the kind of trick her tunnels had taught her.

Veil, the mentor who ran the drawing-rooms, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was clever. He asked one question. "What makes a figure impossible?"

Notch didn't answer with words. She pulled a card from her vest — a staircase drawn climbing in a square loop — set it on the table, and put her claw on the bottom step. "Up," she said, moving to the next. "Up. Up. Up." She went all the way around the loop, every step honestly higher than the last, until her claw arrived back exactly where it had started. "Four flights up," she said, "and I'm standing where I began."

Veil looked at the little staircase that climbed forever without going anywhere. "Each step was true," he said quietly.

"Each step was true," Notch agreed. "The whole staircase is a lie. The stairs are honest. The *loop* is impossible." She tucked the card away. "The eye checks one step at a time. It never checks the whole climb — unless you make it."

Veil was quiet a long moment. Then: "You belong here."



Notch's drawing-room filled up with figures that were honest everywhere and impossible on the whole.

A girl came in one afternoon, scowling at a fork she'd drawn — three prongs at one end that somehow melted into two at the other. "I ruined it," she said. "I can't figure out where the drawing went wrong."

"Show me where it's wrong," Notch said.

The girl pointed at the three-prong end. "That's fine." She pointed at the two-prong end. "That's fine too."

"So point at the wrong part."

The girl's claw hovered over the middle — then drifted, unsure, unable to land. Every inch of the fork looked correct. There was no single wrong spot to point at.

"You can't find it," Notch said gently, "because it isn't in any one place. It's in the *travel* between the ends. Three prongs, honestly drawn. Two prongs, honestly drawn. But you can't get from one to the other in anything real." She tapped the paper. "That's not a ruined drawing. That's a *made* one. You built a shape your eye accepts corner by corner and rejects all at once. That's the hardest thing to draw on purpose."

The girl stared. "So it's... supposed to break?"

"It's supposed to be honest up close and impossible far away," Notch said. "Move your eye slow, it works. Take in the whole thing, it snaps. That snap *is* the art." The girl laughed, delighted, and started a fresh one.



Later, when the room had emptied, the girl came back with a smaller question. She was quieter now.

"When every part looks right," she said, "how do you ever catch the lie?"

Notch thought about the chamber underground, and the tight-hot feeling, and her great-aunt's slow voice.

"You feel it before you see it," she said. "There's a moment where everything's checked out — every corner, every step, every prong — and something in your chest still tips, like the floor of a tunnel curling under you. That wobble isn't you being wrong. It's the part of you that finally looked at the *whole* thing." She glanced toward the dark mouth of the passage she'd grown up in. "The eye trusts one corner at a time. It has to — that's how it moves fast. But every so often you stop, you step back, and you let the whole shape land at once. And when it doesn't fit, you get that lovely dizzy tip." She smiled. "That tip's not a mistake. It's your mind, waking up to the join where the lie was hiding."

The girl nodded slowly, and Notch watched the scowl slide off her, the way, years ago, her own had.

Cue

AUDITORY ILLUSION — sound-perception mechanism. Shepard tones, McGurk effect, phantom-melody, missing-fundamental.



In the echo-hall at IllusionForge, a small fruit-bat-tween named Cue hung upside-down from a beam and played a single tone that climbed, and climbed, and would not stop climbing.

He tapped the little box strapped to his audio-vest. The note slid upward — higher, higher, straining toward some ceiling it never reached. Cue let it run for a full minute. A cluster of students below tipped their heads back, following the tone up like it was a staircase into the rafters.

"When does it stop?" one of them whispered.

"It doesn't," Cue said, still hanging, soft ear-tufts twitching. "It only *sounds* like it's going up. Overall, it hasn't gone anywhere at all. It's the same handful of pitches, layered so your ear keeps grabbing the rising one and letting the low one fade out." He flicked the box off mid-climb. The tone vanished, and the students flinched like a stair had been pulled out from under them.

"You *heard* it climbing," Cue said gently. "But your ears didn't measure a climb. They built one. That's the whole secret of my workshop, and I've been chasing it since I was very small: your ears don't just *catch* the world. They *guess* it. And sometimes they guess something that was never in the air at all."



Cue had learned that in the dark, before he could fly properly.

His family were echo-readers for the cave-village — fruit-bats who sent little clicks into the black and listened to what came back. One night, small and clumsy, he'd sent a click down a tunnel and *heard* a wall right in front of him. He'd stopped cold, heart hammering, certain he was about to smack his nose into stone.

There was no wall. Just open air, and further down, a bend that had folded the echo back strangely.

"I *heard* it," he'd told his grandmother afterward, embarrassed and a little scared. "I heard a wall. It felt so real. Was I lying to myself?"

She'd hung beside him, warm and unbothered. "You weren't lying. You were listening honestly. But listening isn't catching, little one. Your ears took the echo and *built* a picture — and this time the picture was wrong." She clicked once, softly. "That doesn't make your ears broken. It makes them *builders*. Every wall you ever hear, you're building. Most of the time you build it right and you never notice you were building at all."

Cue had sat with that a long time. The scared, tricked feeling didn't go away, but it changed shape. It stopped being *I can't trust myself* and became something stranger and better: *my ears are making the world, all the time, and I never even catch them doing it.*



He walked to IllusionForge at twelve, because a place that studied how senses fool people ought to know that the ear fools you too.

Veil, the mentor, met him at the door and asked one question. "What are auditory illusions?"

Cue didn't lecture. He unclipped a small speaker, played six thin overtone notes stacked together, and looked up. "What note is that?"

"A low one," Veil said. "A deep bass note."

"There's no bass note in there." Cue turned the speaker so Veil could see the readout — only the high overtones lit, the low fundamental dark and silent. "The deep note you're hearing isn't playing. Your brain heard all its overtones and filled in the bass that *should* be under them. You inferred a sound that isn't there. Your hearing is construction, same as your seeing."

Veil was quiet, listening to a note that didn't exist. "You belong here," he said.



Cue's workshop was full of sounds that weren't quite what they seemed.

A girl came in one afternoon, arms crossed, skeptical. "My eyes get fooled, sure. But ears just hear what's *there*. Sound is sound."

"Watch a screen with me," Cue said. He played a clip: a face saying *ga, ga, ga*. "What do you hear?"

"Da," she said. "Da, da, da."

"Now close your eyes. Same clip." She did. Her face shifted. "...Ba? It's saying *ba* now."

"The audio never changed," Cue said. "It was always *ba*. But with your eyes open, you watched the lips make a *ga* shape — and your brain smashed the two together and handed you *da*, something neither one ever said. Open your eyes: your eyes rewrote your ears. Close them: your ears got their say back."

The girl uncrossed her arms slowly. "That's — I did that? I made up *da*?"

"Your brain did, in about a tenth of a second, without asking you." Cue tapped a rhythmic pulse of frequencies, and a faint melody seemed to swim up out of it.

"There's no tune in that. Just pulses. But hang around long enough and you'll swear you hear a song — your ear stitching the beats into a shape it likes." He grinned.

"Every sense you've got is doing this. Not just your eyes. Hearing, touch, taste — none of them are pure measuring. They're all guessing, all building, all the time. The world you live in is a really, really good guess."



Later, when the hall was empty, the girl came back with a quieter question.

"If my ears just make stuff up," she said, "how am I supposed to trust anything I hear?"

Cue folded his wings and thought about the tunnel, and the wall that wasn't there, and how scared he'd been.

"You trust it the way you trust a good friend who's usually right," he said. "Your ears build the world for you almost perfectly, almost every time. The illusions aren't proof they're broken. They're the seams — the little places where you catch your own brain in the middle of making something. And honestly?" He looked out toward the dark of the caves. "The first time you feel it — that jolt of *wait, that wasn't real, I built that* — it's scary. Then it turns into the best feeling I know. Because it means the whole rich, loud, beautiful world isn't just landing on you. You're helping make it. Every sound you've ever loved, you built a little of it yourself."

The girl smiled, uncertain and delighted at once, and Cue watched the same wonder settle onto her that had settled onto him in the dark, years ago — the strange comfort of a mind that never stops quietly building.

Loop

PERCEPTUAL LOOP — the recursive / endless / barber-pole motion illusion. the brain sees motion that can't end.



In the middle of the courtyard, a small snail with a spiral-marked shell was making a striped pole climb into the sky, even though the pole wasn't going anywhere.

Loop had propped the pole upright and set it slowly spinning. Diagonal stripes wound up around it like a candy cane. And as it turned, the stripes seemed to march *upward* — up and up, off the top, forever, feeding an endless supply of stripe out of thin air.

A cluster of younger students had stopped to gawk. One of them tipped his head back and back, following the climb, until he nearly fell over.

"It's going up," he said. "Where's it all going?"

"Nowhere," Loop said. "It's a pole. It's spinning in a circle. Nothing on it is moving up at all."

"But I can see it—"

"I know." She sounded delighted, not sorry. "Keep watching. Try to make it stop climbing."

He tried. He squinted, he frowned, he ordered his own eyes to knock it off. The stripes kept climbing. He made a small strangled noise and everyone laughed.

"You can't switch it off, can you?" Loop said gently. "Your eyes have their own little watchers inside — motion-catchers. They don't see the whole pole. They see one small patch, and the stripe in that patch is sliding sideways-and-up. So they shout *up!* And they keep shouting it, patch after patch, and your whole head believes them." She reached out and stilled the pole with one soft tap. The climbing stopped instantly. "There is no top. There is no bottom. There's just a circle, dressed up to feel like forever."



Loop had grown up in the spiral-shell village, where every snail carried a curl of endlessness on its own back.

When she was small, she used to trace the line of her own shell with a fingertip, round and round, following the spiral inward. It went in, and in, and in — tighter, smaller — and there was never a place where it *ended*. It just got too small for her finger to follow. It made her chest go funny. A line with no end, right there on her own body, and she was carrying it everywhere.

"Grandmother," she'd said once, dizzy from tracing, "does my shell stop somewhere? Or does it go forever?"

Her grandmother had been an old snail with a slow, warm way of talking. She'd looked at Loop's shell for a long moment. "It stops, little one. Everything real stops. But the *pattern* doesn't need to." She traced her own spiral, round and inward. "The shape is just a curl that keeps curling. Your eye follows the curl and expects more curl — so it *feels* endless, even though the shell is small enough to hold in a hand." She smiled. "The endlessness isn't in the shell. It's in the way you follow it."

Loop stopped feeling dizzy after that, mostly. The no-end feeling still came, but now it had a shape she could hold: the endlessness lived in the *following*, not in the thing. That, somehow, made it something to enjoy instead of something to fall into.



She walked to IllusionForge at twelve, carrying a spinning barber-pole and a little slotted drum, because a place that studied how eyes get fooled ought to understand the trick of forever.

Veil, the mentor who ran the studios, met her at the gate and asked one question. "What is a perceptual loop?"

Loop didn't explain. She set the striped pole spinning between them and let it climb. Veil's eyes went up with it, up and up, and stayed there.

"It's climbing," Veil said.

"It's turning," Loop said. "Your motion-catchers see the stripe slide in one small spot and cry *up*. Do it enough spots at once and the whole thing looks like it's pouring upward with nowhere to pour from." She stopped the pole. Veil's gaze snapped back down, a little startled. "The forever isn't real. It's built — one small honest signal at a time, stacked into a lie your eyes love."

Veil watched the still pole for a long moment, then looked at the snail who'd made forever out of a circle. "You belong here," she said.



Loop's studio was full of things that seemed to move and didn't.

A girl came in one afternoon, arms crossed, cross about it. She'd been staring at a spinning slotted drum full of little drawings, and now she felt tricked and a bit sick. "It looked like a horse *running*," she said. "It's just paper. There's no horse. I feel stupid for believing it."

Loop knew that particular crossness. She'd felt it, dizzy, tracing her own shell.

"Spin it again," she said, "but this time, don't look through the slots. Look at the drawings straight on."

The girl did. Just a ring of still paper horses, each frozen in a slightly different pose. No running. No motion. Nothing.

"Now the slots."

The girl leaned in through the slits — and the horse *galloped*. She jerked back. "How —"

"Each slit shows you one still horse for a blink, then hides it, then shows you the next one. Your eyes hold each blink a heartbeat too long, so they overlap." Loop tapped the drum. "Still picture, still picture, still picture — and your brain sews them into a run. You didn't believe a lie. Your eyes did exactly their job, and their job is to *fill in the moving*." She grinned. "That's not being fooled. That's the same trick every cartoon you've ever loved is built from. You just caught it with the lights on."

The girl looked back through the slits, at her galloping paper horse, and this time she laughed instead of flinching.



Later, when the studio was quiet, the girl came back with one more question, softer now.

"When it looks like it's moving," she said, "and I *know* it isn't — which one do I believe?"

Loop thought about her shell. About the spiral with no end, and the dizzy chest, and her grandmother's slow warm voice.

"Both, a little," she said. "Your eyes aren't lying to you — they're telling you the honest, patch-by-patch truth they can see. It's just that the whole picture is bigger than any one patch, and the whole picture is a circle, or a stack of stills, or a curl that keeps curling. The forever-feeling is real *as a feeling*. It's just not out there in the world." She looked toward the window, where her barber-pole stood quiet. "That funny pull in your stomach when something climbs and climbs with nowhere to go — that's your eyes and your knowing having a friendly argument. You don't have to win it. You can just stand in the middle and enjoy the fact that you get to see the seams."

The girl nodded slowly, and Loop watched the crossness slide off her shoulders — the way, years ago, her own dizziness had finally settled into wonder.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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