

## **Giving Life to Your Characters**

For years, probably centuries, pundits have been debating whether character or plot reigns supreme in developing a quality novel. I'm not sure there's a final answer. A novel certainly can't exist without a plot to move the reader along. But then again, plots would be meaningless without the characters that people them. Without them, the episodes in your story would have little reality.

Stop and think about the fiction you have read. I would wager that while you recall the principal events of some of the books, there are characters that stand out in your mind and represent the essence of the book. Indeed, in many cases, a character, not the story, makes the book memorable.

### **Characters Need Substance**

Nothing will turn a reader off more quickly than a papier mache character. One dimensional. So thin he/she seem like cardboard, not flesh and bones. Yes, in real life, you may meet an occasional soul who seems this thin. But to be believable, a fictional person must have greater depth. We authors must probe our make-believe people and understand everything that impacts their personality, their physical appearance, their total persona. That is the only way to avoid creating single dimension characters.

The development of a person begins at birth. Events that occur during childhood and teen years greatly influence what that person becomes. Therefore it is incumbent upon an author to understand the history of his primary characters: Who they are? What was their life like from early years on? What influences made them what they are at the time they enter your story? I tell my students to approach this the same way they would prepare when writing a profile of a real life subject. Converse individually with your key

characters. Ask endless questions until you feel so deeply immersed in their psyches that you are confident enough to guide them through the ups and downs of your novel and keep them true to their essence.

### **Believability Is Essential**

Every action a character takes in your fiction must have a direct motivation to be believed by the reader. That doesn't mean you stop the action to explain the reason for it at the time it occurs. That would derail the movement of your story and anger your reader. To make the action plausible, you must prepare the reader by inserting the reason, the motivation, earlier in the book. That is essential if you are to keep your characters consistent...ensuring that every action they take or statement they make falls within the parameters of the ethos you established for them.

That doesn't mean your character, particularly your protagonist, can't change in the course of the story. In almost every novel, the protagonist grows as he/she struggles to reach the goal that was set out at the beginning of the book. But that change must be consistent with the essence of your character and must have a believable motivation.

### **Bringing Your Characters to Life**

If you were asked to describe any of your friends or acquaintances, I am certain a specific aspect of each person would immediately stand out in your mind. Those idiosyncrasies might be physical or a quirk of their personality. Possibly a phobia. Your friend might twitch. He might have a highly visible scar. He may limp or have some other deformity. Whatever it might be, that feature distinguishes your friend from others. Adding a unique trait will make your fictional folks stand out, and will also make them more believable.

Just as you decide which physical features to give your characters...whether to make your characters tall or short, fat or thin, so you must give them distinguishing personalities. Some will be fiery and hot tempered. Passionate. Others will be lethargic. Disinterested. Possibly diffident, perhaps outgoing. Timid or maybe self assured, even cocky. You pick the suitable characteristic. Regardless of what you choose, make certain you add suitable traits that make your person distinctive.

Free your mind to think of the various characteristics you can call on to distinguish each of your people: As an example, they can twitch, limp, pick their noses, fold their hands, shout, whimper, patronize, be abrasive...the list goes on endlessly.

### **Unveiling Your Characters**

You've heard the admonition "Show Don't Tell" any number of times. Well worn advice, but once again extremely relevant. As you create your principal characters and plan specific traits, quirks and other characteristics, give them life. Pour breath into them. Get their blood coursing. Do it by showing not telling when you describe them to your readers. Avoid dull adjectives. As Mark Twain counseled, "Whenever you see an adjective, kill it!"

Think of the many ways you can reveal your characters to your readers. Dialogue is an excellent tool. The accent, choice of words and tempo of their speech tell a great deal about them. Body language adds even more. Your readers associate John's curt, unpleasant responses with a crank or possibly self-centered person. When Ruth fidgets in her chair, toying nervously with the buttons on the blouse, you create a personality very different from Joan who sprawls across the sofa caring little for the fact that no one else can sit there. If Bill has to duck his head when he enters a room, you know he is far taller

than Dave who must use a pillow when driving to see over the steering wheel. You get the idea, I am sure, without my boring you with myriad more examples.

### **Staying Alert**

A careful writer is constantly on the lookout for interesting speech patterns and distinctive features. Whether you're riding the bus, standing in a theater line or even just sitting on a park bench, look and listen. Use your eyes and ears. Make note of the most interesting and potentially useful characteristics. Write them down as quickly as you can, for they are easily forgotten in the rush of the day's activities. Follow these simple instructions, and watch your characters spring to life.