Character Building Workshop

May 7th 2016

bournetowrite.co.uk

Strong characters are at the heart of all great literature and always will be.

Plot, even in detective fiction, is a secondary matter. Strong characters are at the heart of all great literature and always will be. Not many readers could outline the plot of The Sign of the Four but no one has any difficulty bringing Holmes and Watson to mind.

A writer who creates thrilling, troubling, seductive, insistent characters need not worry too much about any other aspect of writing. Fortunately, the raw material is close to hand. For every writer, it is his own enigmatic being that constitutes the focus of his research. Year after year, he sits on a kind of umpire's chair watching the antics of his body, listening to the bubbling of his thoughts, sifting the material of his dreams. And when he wants more – other bodies, other thoughts – he simply looks up at those around him.

Think, for a moment, of your own family. Almost everybody has one. You might never need to go beyond them. You could keep them all in a kind of mental aquarium, sketching them into stories all your writing life. Change their names, of course, their hair colour, their tattoos; move them from that little town in the north you grew up in to a little town on the Cornish coast you once drove through and wondered about.

But a writer is not confined to such a tactic. It may even be that such a tactic is not particularly common. The great majority of fictional characters are "inventions". They emerge from our inner worlds quickly or slowly, shyly or boisterously.

It does not matter. No one writes for long without understanding that they are entering mystery and will never leave it. What matters is that we can, through unnamed processes, secrete these figures who will loom and mouth off in our fictions.

A painter who wants to paint a tree needs to do two things: look at trees and look at paintings of trees.

There is, of course, another great reservoir of characters: those ready-made for us in books. It is not that we intend to steal Mr Micawber from Dickens or Atticus Finch from Harper Lee, but such characters show us the dimensions of the possible. A painter who wants to paint a tree needs to do two things: look at trees and look at paintings of trees.

The first task shows what trees are like, the second shows the possibilities of the medium. Likewise, as a writer, it is by reading that you learn how, in language, a character can be presented – through dialogue, through action, through physical attributes, interior monologue etc – a process that continues until you have absorbed these methods, and they have become a reflex so embedded in your apprehending of the world that you will never notice anything about anybody without secretly assessing its potential for fiction writing. And this, indeed, we could call "technique", though we should not confuse the method with the task.

At its simplest, its barest, characterisation is about a writer's grasp of what a human being is. When we set out to write, we do not do so out of a sense of certainty but out of a kind of radical uncertainty. We do not set out saying: "The world is like this." But asking: "How is the world?"

In creating characters we are posing to ourselves large, honest questions about our nature and the nature of those about us. Our answers are the characters themselves, those talking spirits we conjure up by a kind of organised dreaming. (Andrew Millar)

Start With a Cliché

When you first start creating a fictional character, your impulse might be to create a completely unique individual, with a background that's new and different, or a person with a weird way of looking at the world, an unconventional mind.

But at our core, every human being is essentially a cliché. You'll have a very hard time creating a character who meets absolutely none of the standard types, whether you're writing conventional literature, fantasy or a mystery. As the saying goes, every story has been told a thousand times before. So has every character.

Pretending your character is somehow going to transcend every single fictional types that ever existed is very optimistic. They're types because they come up again and again in real life. Don't try to work against the grain on that one.

So go ahead. Create your character and let this person fit into a cliché. Give him or her a background and a basic outline for the person's life. She's a middle-aged woman struggling to balance her work and her family, and she has issues with her mother. Don't worry, she's not going to stay a cliché for long.

Imbuing a Personality

Once you have your character's basic circumstances sorted out, you need to give her a personality (your character may very well be a he, but we began with a female example so we're going to stick with it). Imbuing a personality is harder than it might seem.

Think about your best friend, someone that you know very well. Think about whether she fits any clichés. She probably does; she probably fits half a dozen clichés.

But until now you probably never thought of your friend as a cliché. She could be the most stereotyped person in the world, she could have shown up in literature since the dawn of the written word, but you would never have thought of your best friend as a cliché.

Why? Well, because she's your best friend. She's not a cliché. There's a reason for where she is in her life and why she feels that way.

And she's, well, *her*. She's your friend. She makes you laugh and she has a funny way of sticking her finger out from her coffee mug as though she's always having tea with the queen. She remembers you like daffodils, but she can't be relied upon to remember a birthday. You like the way she thinks, the things she says, and the way she sits next to you at a movie.

Her circumstances, the clichéd part of her, are secondary, tertiary, even farther back. They are not who she is; they are simply what has happened to her. Who she is, is the person who reacts to those circumstances in a particular way.

To know how to create a character with personality, you need to figure out what sort of person your character is. You need to give that person a handful of quirks that are hers and hers alone. It's rather like creating a recipe – many dishes require flour or eggs or cinnamon, but in differing amounts and in combination with different other ingredients, they'll result in different final dishes.

So it goes with personality creation. Your character won't have any personality quirks that don't show up in other people – impossible. What your character *will* have are those qualities in different amounts and in unique combinations.

A Little Character Creation Exercise.

Write out a full conversation between yourself and this character. Pretend you're stuck in an elevator together and have nothing else to talk about but one another. See what kind of humour develops, how quickly this person trusts you with new information, the way her mind works in a time of minor stress, what she's worried about, who she's concerned about knowing.

Don't assume that all people react the same way, and don't assume your character spills everything about herself at the drop of a hat. The point isn't to get the entire character history on paper; the point is to see what other people see when they meet this person on the page.

What sort of person is this? How would you describe your character to a friend later on, when you've gotten out of this elevator? What would you remember?

Creating Better Fictional Characters

Creating fictional characters is a big subject, and something you simply can't afford to get wrong if you want your work to be successful. There is a huge potential stumbling block you face right at the beginning of this process, and it is this...

Creating the wrong kinds of characters in the first place.

Imagine if you went to a party and all of the guests were either dislikeable or, worse, deadly dull. How long would it take you to make your excuses and get out of there? Five minutes? It's the same when you're reading fiction: your audience just isn't going to stick around if all your characters, like the guests at that party, are either not very nice or not very interesting. With that in mind, here is the first rule of creating fictional characters: **Make the readers care.** Make them care if your characters win or lose, succeed or fail, live or die.

So how do you make the readers care?

1. Make the Characters Charismatic
Not good looking, necessarily - though readers will more readily warm to a handsome or a beautiful character than to an ugly one. Shallow, I know, but such is life. Nor do your fictional characters need to be eloquent and witty and have the ability to always know the right thing to say - though, again, these things certainly won't hurt.
There simply has to be *something about them.*

They have to be the kind of people whose presence electrifies a room, the kind of people you can't take your eyes off. If a fictional character can walk into a room unnoticed, readers probably won't take much notice of them, either.

2. Make the Characters Likeable
Or better still, loveable! We all know that there are people in life that we instantly take to, and people we duck into doorways to avoid. The question is, what qualities separate the nice from the not-so-nice? Kindness? Generosity? Selflessness? Yes, all of these things - plus probably a thousand other traits.

Readers tend to love fictional characters who...

- Are dependable.
- Are modest.
- Keep their promises.
- Play fair.
- Don't see themselves as being better than others.
- Help others for no personal gain.
- Have a sense of humour.
- Are courageous.
- Are willing to make sacrifices for the wider good.
- Have goals we can sympathize with.
- Tell the truth.
- Are level-headed.
- Are smart - more in a street wise way than an intellectual one.
- Are even-tempered.
- Are kind and generous and compassionate to others.
- Are the victims of an injustice.
- Are uncomplaining.
- Are volunteers
- Are cool under pressure.

It goes without saying that you don't want all the characters in your work to be likeable or loveable, particularly not the villains. These characters, you want to make dislikeable.

And, yes, making a character dislikeable is still a way of making the reader care - they will simply care that the character gets what is coming to them.

Readers tend to dislike fictional characters who...

- Cannot be relied upon.
- Are immodest braggers.
- Break promises and let people down - and don't care that they do.
- Play dirty. (Not only do they break the rules, they break the "unbreakable" rules.)
- Are ugly or deformed. (Movie villains often have scars or a bad complexion.)
- Think of themselves as superior to others.
- Are self-serving.
- Are humourless.
- Are ultimately cowards.
- Are selfish, only out for what they can get for themselves.
- Have goals and dreams and ambitions, which don't strike us as worthy.
- Tell lies.
- Are insane - a little or a lot.
- Are overly intellectual.
- Are inconsistent in their behavior and suffer from mood swings.
- Are bullies, even sadists.
- Are responsible for injustices against others.
- Whine and complain about their own problems.
- Never volunteer but have to be drafted.
- Panic under pressure.

Caveat

Whether you make the reader care about a character by making them likeable or dislikeable, beware of making the good characters in a novel too good, and the bad ones too bad...

- If a hero is pure and noble with no flaws or imperfections whatsoever, readers, far from loving them, might go to the opposite extreme and hate them for being too saint-like. (Or maybe hate is putting it too strongly, but they will certainly want to see the character's halo knocked off!)
- Equally, if a dislikeable character is wholly evil with not a single redeeming virtue, they might end up more like a pantomime villain - hated, yes, but in more of a comic way.

Yes, you still want the readers to basically love your hero and basically hate whichever character is trying to thwart the hero's plans. But if you can work some ambiguity into the story, by having the protagonist not be wholly good and the antagonist not wholly bad, the story will be much stronger as a result. As a matter of fact, it's a good idea to think of your work as not having heroes and villains at all, but rather characters with opposing goals, each of whom is right in his or her own mind.

3. Make the Characters Interesting

Let's say that your central character is an accountant who has been married for over 40 years and is nearing retirement. But why not also make him a roulette expert who is planning to cheat the casino out of millions with the help of a 19-year-old pole dancer called Kandy? Then the readers will sit up and take notice!

As with all of these character traits I am discussing, the specific qualities which make a character interesting - or charismatic, likeable, whatever - are ones you will have to decide upon for yourselves. But here are some of the things that might make a fictional character interesting:

- The job they do - a spy, perhaps, or someone who quit the rat race to farm Alpacas, or a tightrope walker with vertigo.
- The places they have been and the sights they have seen - the more exotic and unusual, the better.
- Their skills and talents - playing the harpsichord, perhaps, or the ability to perform magic or to walk on fire.

Your list would probably look very different, but if the things you use to make fictional characters interesting are interesting to you, you will be able to write about them with enough passion to interest the people who count: the readers.

4. Make the Characters Both Ordinary and Extraordinary

This one touches upon some of the traits I have already mentioned, but it is worth talking about separately because it is important. Generally speaking, we are drawn to people who are "just like us" and wary of people who are not.

It follows, therefore, that for a reader to care about a character in a novel, at least initially, it helps if they are an ordinary, regular person - a kind of James Stewart or Tom Hanks "everyman" figure (or the female equivalent, of course).

That is only half of the story. As readers, we will soon grow bored of such a character if there isn't something about them that is unusual and exotic and mysterious.

The ideal fictional character, then, will be both...

- Familiar... and unfamiliar.
- Just like us... and not like us at all.
- Ordinary... and extraordinary.

In short, creating fictional characters is a kind of balancing act. It is a character's ordinariness that will make the novel's readers warm to them initially. And it is whatever is extraordinary about them that will prick the audience's curiosity and make them want to stick around for more.

Another way of putting it is that ordinary characters are **realistic** (because they are just like us), while extraordinary characters are **romantic**.

I don't mean romantic in the "love" sense - although that can be part of it. I mean it in the "not the way the world really is" sense. The difference between romance and realism is the difference between the way we would like life to be and the way it more often is...

- Life would be wonderful if it were all wine and roses.
- More often, though, it is hangovers and pricked fingers.

Romance exists, of course, but tends to be fleeting; for the rest of the time we are stuck with the way things actually are.

How does that apply to creating characters in a novel? We would like to believe that characters like James Bond or Superman or Sherlock Holmes could actually exist, but in reality they are too remote, too godlike for us to truly believe in them.
Don't get me wrong - romantic characters are good. But only to an extent.

On the one hand, we need our heroes to be heroic. When we read a novel or watch a movie, we are not looking for a realistic representation of the way things actually are. If we wanted that, we could save ourselves some cash and look out of our windows instead. It makes us feel good to be in awe of heroic characters in a novel. They represent the way we would like to be but know we never can be (except, of course, in our wildest daydreams). It does us good to step into their shoes for a couple of hours.

On the other hand, too much romanticism in a protagonist is ultimately tedious. If a leading character is too perfect, it is difficult to feel any connection with them. We might admire their romantic qualities, but without any recognizable realistic qualities it is difficult to imagine ourselves inside their skin.

Now for "realistic" fictional characters...

Realistic characters in fiction are just like us. We can recognize ourselves in them, and we therefore find them easy to like. We can imagine them living next door to us, inviting us round for a beer. Here are some examples:

- Lieutenant Columbo.
- Doctor Watson (compared to the romantic Sherlock Holmes).
- George Smiley.

Like I said above, though, realism by itself is not enough. Just as pure romanticism in a character can soon become boring (because they are too remote for us to empathize with them), so pure realism is equally boring (because ordinariness is dull). That is why ostensibly realistic characters are never as realistic as they first appear.

Take Lieutenant Columbo (I'm sure you have seen him on TV portrayed by Peter Falk).

- What makes Columbo realistic (and therefore endearing) is his unique brand of bumbling ineptitude. He is always forgetting things. He never appears to be making much progress on the case. You want to give him some cash to buy himself a decent coat.

- What makes him romantic (and therefore interesting) is that he always solves the case in the end. He might come across as a hopeless detective but he is actually anything but. You think he is stupid but his mind his razor sharp. You

wish you could be as good as him, but you know you never can be.

Romantic realism... realistic romanticism...

I said above that one way to make readers care about your fictional characters is to make them both ordinary *and* extraordinary. And that is what you must do. Give the characters in your work - particularly the leading character - the perfect mix of ordinary realism and extraordinary romanticism...

• The **realism** will make readers like them, perhaps even love them.
• The **romanticism** will make readers be a little in awe of them.

Whether you make the character predominantly realistic, or predominantly romantic, is down to you. Generally speaking, characters from genre fiction tend to be essentially romantic, while characters in literary novels tend to be essentially realistic. Although as we have just seen with Columbo, this is only a rule of thumb and is frequently not the case.

Depending on the decision you make, you then have to do one of two things...

• If you have created a romantic character, you need to decide what is *ordinary* about them.

• If you have created a realistic character, you need to decide what is *extraordinary* about them.

5. Make the Characters Well-Motivated

Which of the following characters in a novel do you think a reader will care most about...

• Rita, who takes a second job as a waitress to help put her teenage son through college?
• Or Mary, who takes a second job as a waitress to pay for cosmetic surgery?

    It's got to be Rita, right? But what if I tell you that...

• Rita only needs the money because she blew her son's college fund feeding her drug habit.
• And Mary needs the cosmetic surgery because her ex-husband pressed a hot iron into her face.

Every character in fiction wants something.

If we, as readers, can support their goal - and more importantly, the motivation behind it - we won't only care about them, we'll be cheering from the sidelines the whole way through.

6. Make the Characters Dynamic

Life is full of troubles, and characters in novels face more troubles than most of us. The writer John Irving once said that he doesn't create characters for a novel so much as victims. In the real world, we can get away with sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves. But fictional characters can't, at least not for long - not if they want the readers to care about them.

Whatever problems a character in a novel faces - and they will face plenty - too much self-pity or stoical suffering just isn't an option for them. Readers expect them to do something, to act, to take some concrete action designed to make the situation right - and they expect them to do it sooner rather than later.

7. Make the Characters Good At What They Do

It doesn't matter what a character does in a novel, but they must be good at it. For example, if your hero is a short-order cook, make him a great short-order cook - the best one in town. The same thing applies if they are a cop, a circus clown, an assassin, or a city trader. Alternatively - and particularly if you are writing a comic novel - you can make them truly terrible at what they do...

• Make your hero a stand-up comic who bungles every punchline.
• Make them a teacher who can't stand children.
• Make them a sports coach who has never won a game.

Make them very good (or very bad) at what they do, and the reader will sit up and notice them. They will admire them for being good or else sympathize with them for

being inept. Either way, they will *care*.

8. Make the Characters A Little Unhappy

Make a character lonely, bereaved, broken-hearted etc and the readers will be sure to sympathise. Just don't go over the top with it. Give a fictional character a small shard of ice in their hearts and the readers will be sure to sympathise.

Be Selective

Don't give *every single one* of the characters in your novel *every single one* of these traits...

• Your leading man or woman should certainly have two or three of them, in varying degrees, because they are the ones the readers will spend the most time with.
• Other characters might have only one of the traits.

You will have to use your judgement and trust your instincts on this. You want readers to care about all of your characters, even the humble minor with just one scene and a couple of lines of dialogue. But your protagonist should always hold the number one spot in their hearts.

Never create a plain, dull, ordinary character - because the readers simply won't care about them. But if you have to create a character whose defining characteristic is dullness, make them *extraordinarily* dull!

P.S. Charlie Brown

We know convincing characters make fiction great and we now appreciate that plot is secondary to character. Having some doubts? Think about the plot for Goldfinger. Problem? Now think about James Bond. Exactly.

If you build a compelling well-rounded character you'll find they'll write their own stories, but they need your help initially to get them off the ground. Detail is important. Here's a good example of a convincing character, in case you're wondering it's the Peanuts cartoon strip character Charlie Brown.

He is a lovable loser

He possesses endless determination and stubbornness, but is ultimately dominated by his anxieties and shortcomings

He is often taken advantage of by his peers

He is nervous and can be awkward in company

He is an avid kite flyer

His little sister calls him Big Brother

Initially he doted on his little sister, though eventually she became a thorn in his side as she would pester him for help with her homework

He is in love with a little red-haired girl

He has a tendency to say the wrong thing, at the wrong time

Although his parents are invisible his father is a barber

Some people think he is bald but his hair is so light it's hard to see

A female friend calls him Chuck

He almost always wears a yellow T-shirt and baggy jeans

His catchphrase is "Good grief!"

He is an enthusiastic team player, but not as accomplished at sport as his famous dog.

He is short and has a very round head