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Living & Breathing: How to Make Your Characters Come Alive

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Living & Breathing

How to Make Your Characters Come Alive

Over the past thirty years or so, I have edited at least one hundred novels, most of them written by first-time authors. In addition to noting all their grammatical errors, I always gave authors a list of things they could do to improve their manuscripts. At the top of most lists was a suggestion that they “flesh out” their characters and make them “real.”

Every novel deserves to have characters who are living and breathing people, people who can illicit a response from the reader, whether that emotion is hate, anger, fear, empathy, love, or awe. But when a character isn’t “real” and doesn’t evoke an image the reader can identify as that of a human being, a novel can fall flat on its face despite the most compelling story lines. In most cases, when the principal character has not been fully developed, I personally tend to get bored and put the book down after a couple chapters, usually permanently. Unfortunately, I can’t do the same when I’m editing, but there are many times when I wish I could.

*When writing a novel a writer should
create living people; people, not characters.
A character is a caricature.*

– Ernest Hemingway

I usually recommend that writers learn to develop their characters by reading the works of authors who are adept at developing theirs. There are many, but two always spring to mind: Charles Dickens and Stephen King. Both create numerous memorable characters within each book they write, and they often do so within the space of just a few carefully written paragraphs.

Since I write a lot of short stories and novels myself, I decided to write some guidelines for authors that might help them create living

and breathing characters. For several years, those guidelines were just a little three-page handout that I gave to authors after I had finished editing their manuscripts. But there was a little more that I wanted to say, and after awhile, it grew into the little booklet you now hold in your hands. I hope the brief character sketches, family trees, maps, suggestions, and examples that follow will help trigger your imagination so that you can go on to discover many new and exciting ways to make your characters come alive.

What's in a Name?

When parents name a child, they are bestowing an important part of that child's personality. Like it or not, names have personalities of their own, and some come with a family ancestor or ancestry attached, perhaps something a child may be urged to live up to along the way.

Names are terribly important. I spend forever coming up with names. Sometimes a character doesn't work until I change his name. In "Bandits," Frank Matusi didn't work. I changed him to Jack Delaney and suddenly he opened up.

– Elmore Leonard

You can name a character to suit your own knowledge of that person you are creating, or what you know about how they will fit into the story. Not every character will be lucky enough to be dubbed "Indiana Jones," but some care should still be exercised in selecting a suitable name.

Pick up a dictionary of baby names and think about how your hero will be perceived if you name him "Max" versus "Henry"? "Duncan" versus "Arnie"? "Rick" versus "Gabriel"? Same goes for your heroine – "Katherine" versus "Kitty"? "Maggie" versus "Bobbi"? "Lydia" versus "Heather"? And what about your villains; they need suitable names too. Most would probably agree that "Larry" has less potential to be evil than does "Drake," and "Robert" sounds like he

would be less mentally psychotic than might a “Marvin.” Of course, you may know a Drake who is an absolute teddy bear, and you may know a Marvin who is the most well-adjusted man in town. This is not an exact science! Just take your time.

Psychology 101

If you never took a course in psychology, now would be a good time to do so. If you can take one on abnormal psychology, all the better. But, if school is not an option for you, at least invest in a very good book or two on human psychology. If that doesn’t help you develop your characters, I don’t know what will. I have 72 units in psychology, and I have read a ton of books on the subject, so I have an endless supply of character studies that I have done while creating my char-

CHARACTER SKETCH

Robine Bergeron

Robine is a member of the wealthy de Bergeron family. She lives on the family estate at Maison Falaise with her brother Claude and his children and grandchildren. Robine has the bird-like facial features that her name implies. She is olive-skinned and petite, and she wears her gray-streaked chestnut hair pulled back in a severe bun at the base of her neck. Her clothing is of a style that her niece is sure belonged to their ancestors, and she suspects that her aunt probably rummages through the trunks in the attic when she needs something new to wear. It is 1948, and Robine’s regular garb consists of long, black, wool or crepe dresses, many with obvious small holes which she has neatly patched. Motivated by her obsession with her brother’s health and by her jealousy of his children, Robine has not endeared herself to anyone. She and her niece fight constantly, mainly over the management of Claude’s estate, which he cannot handle himself. Robine does, however, manage the household, much to the dismay of Juanita, the family’s long-time housekeeper, another person who butts heads with Robine on a daily basis. Despite her cold and often cruel treatment of everyone, Robine is a truly sad and unfulfilled woman. She has no children and no interests outside of the de Bergeron estate. Many times when walking past Robine’s bedroom at night, India has heard her aunt sobbing.

acters. All of them are based on real psychological traits and some are based on things I have read in case studies as well as in newspaper and magazine articles about real people. And who hasn't come across some interesting people during the course of their own life? I certainly have, and I make good use of those personalities when I write.

While most people in the world appear to be reasonably well adjusted in life, the truth is that we all wear masks that cover up the true nature of our personalities. When you write about your character, you have to be the one who looks behind the mask and seeks to understand your character's behavior, the reason for it, and how it will affect their daily life and the part of their life that you plan to write about in your story.

Barring reading books on psychology, you can simply take a person you know very well and build your character around that individual's personality. Keep in mind, however, that your model may not appreciate being impersonated in that way. That's where creative writing comes in. Just take the traits you want or need for your character and leave the rest to your imagination.

On the other hand, if you need a character to display certain psychological traits that are part of a psychological disorder, you will need to read quite a bit more and you will probably need to interview a clinical or criminal psychologist who can point you in the direction you need to go. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to understand human behavior when you are developing any character, but it becomes even more critical when you are writing about someone who is living on the dark side psychologically. Do your homework on this and you won't regret it.

Heroes and Villains

Heroes and villains are two sides of the same coin. For all the good that a hero does and all the evil that a villain perpetrates, they are both victims of the psychological issues – the unresolved issues – that they carry with them in life. The difference between them is the way

they act them out in the “real” world you create for them on paper. The hero often wants to make up for what he feels guilty about not having done when he should have (or when he thinks he should have). The villain wants to get even and show the world that he has overcome whatever happened to him (or what he thinks happened to him). They both have something to prove, but their approach is different.

For example, let’s take the case of two women who are sexually abused as children. One grows up to be a police officer and rape victim advocate (the heroine); the other grows up to be a prostitute and vigilante who kills men she suspects are rapists (the villain). Somewhere in their lives, these two individuals made choices, they made decisions about how they were going to live their adult lives, whether they made the decisions consciously or subconsciously. Those decisions were likely influenced by someone or some people who entered into their lives along the way. The police officer could have had a positive mentor at some point, a role model who encouraged her to fight the crime to which she was a victim by working within the criminal justice system. The villain, on the other hand, could have grown up thinking she was always going to be a victim unless she fought back – with a vengeance – and personally rid the world of rapists and child abusers. Thus are born this particular hero and villain.

Motivation

All forms of trauma can create interesting characters, as do fears and phobias. Pent up anger and frustration can paint an ugly picture,

Put on a few pounds? So now you think I’m fat? Is that it? No, you didn’t say it, but that’s what you were thinking. I can see it in your eyes. You’re embarrassed to be seen with me. You’d rather be out with that slinky, skinny, Diane person, wouldn’t you? You’d just love to show off some cute little hottie in front of your big important friends. Anything but your old, fat wife. You know, the one who put you through law school

and gave birth to your three kids and kept everything going for you when you were nobody! Nobody! That's who you were when I met you. You were just a poor farm boy from Potato Junction. I put my life on hold to give you everything you ever wanted, and now you turn on me because I'm no longer the cute little hottie. No, I'm just Bradford Hawley's fat 40 year old wife!

like a time bomb ticking away in a character until finally it can be retained no more and all hell breaks loose. All of this emotion, expressed or not, is the key motivator behind any character. It's just a matter of degree. In the worst case scenario, it's the finger that is poised on the trigger at all times, ready to be directed at whatever convenient target is at hand, the deep-seated insecurity, always waiting for the slightest innuendo to set it all off:

I think you get the picture.

Every character, good or bad or indifferent, needs to have motivation. You can make them take that motivation and run with it in a positive or a negative direction. You can make them feel conflicted and allow them to bend the rules along the way. But they must have reasons that back up their actions or the reader will be left to wonder why they do what they do. I recently edited a book in which the principal character was so undeveloped that when this 500-page manuscript ended with him committing suicide, I was left wondering what lead him to do it. I hadn't the slightest clue.

You don't have to tell a character's entire psychological history all at once. But you should at least give the reader some pretty straightforward ideas about your character. Let it all unfold gradually in the form of a subplot to your main story line. That is always the best device, and it is a more compelling one that keeps the reader's interest to the end, when all is revealed and neatly wrapped up.

Philosophy 101

People's actions are most often the result of the basic underlying philosophies of their lives. If your character is deeply religious, their religion will likely dictate the choices they make and their reactions to the events in their lives. They could be judgmental or very forgiving. They might shrug off worry and say, "It's in the hands of God." Their moral character is shaped by what they believe, and if they have at some point crossed the line and done things that create moral bankruptcy in their life, you can be sure that somewhere in their psyche they are feeling guilty. Do they show that guilt? Are they remorseful? Do they go to confession? Do they pray for forgiveness and expect it and accept it from their god?

Religious philosophies vary greatly, but most have very similar guidelines for determining right from wrong. So when a person who

CHARACTER SKETCH

Scott Truman

Scott is 54 years old, 6 feet tall, seriously overweight, balding, and a self-proclaimed chain-smoking slob. He owns Cove Antiques, which is really just a glorified second-hand store that caters to a young and somewhat penniless crowd of people who need furnishings for their first apartments. Occasionally a collector finds something of interest in the shop, but mostly Scott is a fence for stolen merchandise and items of questionable origin. When he isn't sitting behind the counter eating double cheese burgers from the fast food place across the street, he is at home with his elderly, diabetic mother. Her house is a much run-down Victorian that sits on a piece of property worth over \$1 million. She calls Scott several times a day, much to his irritation, always asking him to do something for her. He wishes she were dead, and he's willing to wait. He knows it's just a matter of time before she's gone and he can sell the house and have the life he imagines for himself. Scott's life is mostly pie-in-the-sky imaginings. He does a lot of daydreaming about what his life could be. He lusts after Donna Ciesla, the woman who owns the dress shop next to his store. He knows that she loathes him, but he still spends a fair amount of time fantasizing about her.

has been raised in a religious family breaks the law, you can be sure they will have difficulties reconciling their actions with their conscience. On the other hand, you can have someone who does not set out to be a criminal or a bad person in any way, but they have somehow misconstrued the tenets of their beliefs to such an extent that they think – they believe – that they are doing the right thing by doing something others would consider wrong. And, beyond that, we have the moral crusaders, the ones who are going to stand behind their religious beliefs as they try to right the world's wrongs. They want the world to be black and white, not shades of gray. Any wrong must be eliminated. Actually, anything that is not clearly good is clearly bad to a person with such a rigid belief system.

Then we have people whose beliefs extend outside of traditional organized religions. They follow New Age philosophies or follow their own heart when it comes to how they think and believe. Your character may believe in “a god” but not “God.” He or she may be an atheist (no belief in a higher being) or an agnostic (god is something mere humans cannot truly comprehend by simple religious practices). Is someone who does not follow a traditional religion more likely to behave in a certain way? Not likely. In fact, you will find a lot more fodder for your character's development if he or she has had a very traditional religious upbringing.

The New Age world has opened the door to many interesting beliefs and practices, some of which have been in existence since ancient times. Astrology, I Ching, palmistry, graphology, phrenology, Wicca, feng shui, acupuncture, herbology, and homeopathy come to mind. Add to these those beliefs that extend just a little further into the unknown, such as spiritualism, ESP, UFO-ology, channeling, past-lives, near-death experience, out-of-body experience, and astral travel. Surely you can find something in one of these on which to build a character.

Another possibility is for your character to be a leader of a religious group, a cult, a church, a temple, a convent, a monastery, a coven, etc. Such a status will bring with it a greater strength in a belief system,

and one that must be constantly challenged. These are where we find characters who are always asking themselves and others, “Did I do the right thing?” They may trust in their god but not in their own ability to interpret their god’s will. Or, they may be a cult leader who envies himself as a god and takes the lives of his followers into his own hands. And, of course, we have the leaders who are persecuted by others for their beliefs, similar to a Joan d’Arc.

Study carefully the spiritual belief system you wish to portray for your character before you interpret it in your manuscript. Churches and cults are basically the same thing in terms of how they approach their membership and beliefs. The primary difference between them is that some churches are socially sanctioned and accepted while others, the so-called cults, are generally not.

And to go back to religion for just a moment, please don’t get caught up in thinking that Christianity or Judaism are the only game in town when it comes to picking a belief system for your character. Christianity (approx. 2 billion adherents – half of whom are Catholic) only accounts for about 33% of all world religions, and there are only about 14 million Jews. If you want your character to be a Christian but you want to add some greater interest, you may want to select one of the smaller Christian sects, such as Quakers, Amish, Latter Day Saints, or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

But there are so many other religions to pick from. There are about 1.4 billion Muslims; 1 billion Hindus; 350 million Buddhists; and about 225 million adherents to the traditional Chinese religions. On a lesser scale, there are numerous religions and other assorted belief systems such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Baha’i, Scientology, and Eckankar. Add to those the many religions and philosophies of indigenous peoples all over the world, including those of the Maoris of New Zealand, Aborigines of Australia, Native Americans, and Africans and African-Americans – just to name a very few. Study world religions in general and dig deeper if you find something that triggers your imagination.

Genetics and Genealogy

Every person on this planet has a story to tell from the minute they take their first breath, long before they are influenced by the world around them. We all come into this life hard-wired with a genetic code we inherit from our parents. We also inherit their lifestyle, which they inherited from their parents, and their parents before them. How we develop as humans is largely based on that genetic history.

When I create a character, I start out with their parents and their families. I do this by creating a genealogical “family tree” for my

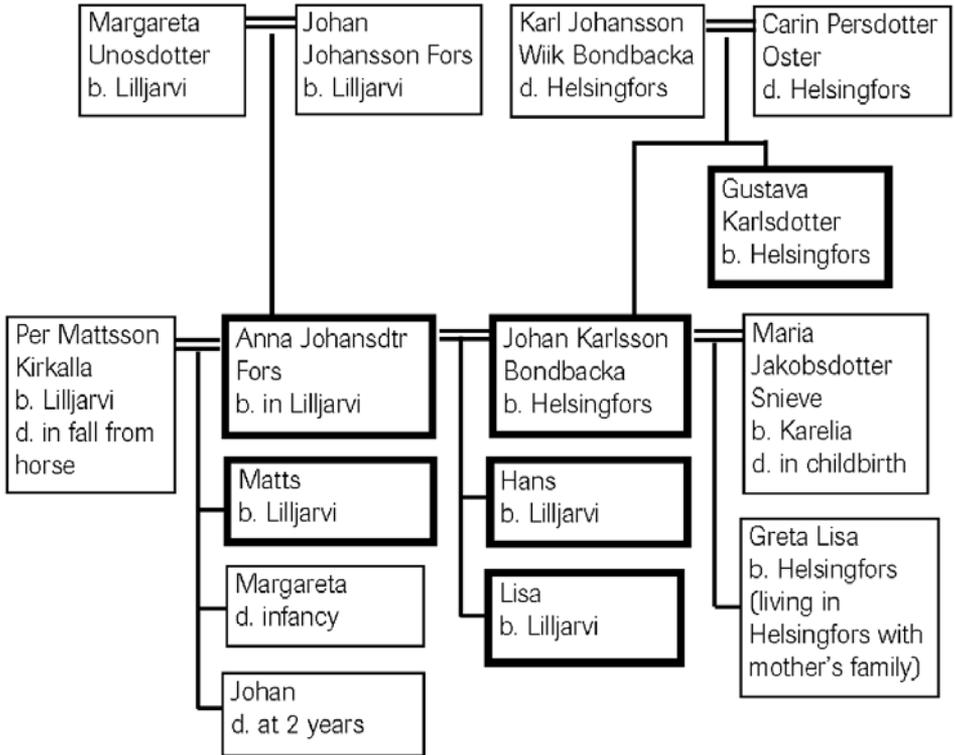
CHARACTER SKETCH

Myrtle Sweets

Myrtle is half Chinese and half African-American and English/Irish. She was born in San Francisco just before the start of the Great Depression, the only child of a sailor, Victor Sweets, and his wife, Mai Chan, a laundress. Myrtle spent her childhood in a drafty apartment on the outskirts of Chinatown, within easy walking distance of her mother's family home. She is neither ugly nor beautiful. She is reasonably attractive and dresses well owing to her ability to sew. In fact, she sews for her family and friends, and began her own tailoring business when she was 35. Her African heritage is the most evident in her appearance, although on close examination one can easily see that she is part Chinese as well. When she was 21 years old, she had a brief affair with an African-American soldier and became pregnant with a daughter, Claire. Myrtle was always independent and self-sufficient, and she moved to Oakland, where she raised Claire in a small rental house down the street from her sister's family, while she worked nights as a maid in a hotel. When she was 37 years old, Myrtle took her teenage daughter Claire and traveled to Selma, Alabama where they both took part in the March 21, 1965 march to Montgomery for voting rights. Now, at the age of 70, Myrtle and her daughter have been investigating their ancestry. They have uncovered their slave ancestors, Semiramis Montgomery and Albert Washington, but can find no further leads on that side of the family. So Myrtle wants to now trace the ancestors of her mother, and she wants to do so in China.

character. I give the parents names, cities and countries of origin, occupations, etc. I may even plant a skeleton somewhere in the tree if I think it will suit my story at some point in time. I usually accompany the tree chart with a description of what the lives of the parents were before they were married and how their marriage unfolded, where they grew up and where they got married, and where they were in life when my character was born.

The Bondbacka Family Tree



I made this little family tree for writing a short story,

I consider these family trees to be the building blocks for my characters, and they are so important that I do not even write the simplest little short story without doing at least a little tree. In this book, I have included examples of four family trees that I created for some of my characters. When I'm working on a story, I always under-

line or highlight the names of the characters who are alive and active in the story so that I don't get confused. Sometimes I use the story of an ancestor to draw a parallel with a living character's personality, as in "she gets that from her Great Aunt Millie." In general, when I'm actually working with the tree, I scribble a lot of notes all over it. I cleaned up all the trees before I put them in this book, because you would not be able to read them otherwise!

Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, all have an effect on a person. One or more may impart some family secret or a piece of time-worn advice. Some people are raised by an aunt or a grandparent and feel they have missed out on not having a mother or father there for them. Perhaps they have never gotten over it. Then there are adopted children, some of whom grow up to find their birth parents. As you can probably imagine, the possibilities for a family background are limitless, and they are fertile ground for a wide variety of emotional baggage that your character can haplessly drag around with them or wield like a badge of courage. An Achilles heel is as often born as made – you make that choice when you give birth to your character.

Siblings are also important factors in developing your character. Twins and multiple births bring with them a set of experiences that are truly unique, as do a favored child who outshines your character. Or perhaps it is your character who outshines them all and feels isolated as a result. A sibling can die when your character is young or can be a best friend to your character. Siblings can be in unhealthy codependent relationships. Think of your own family or families of your friends for inspiration in creating your character's family relationships. And don't overlook cousins and distant cousins, half-siblings, step-siblings, adopted siblings, and each and every aspect of blended families. And by the way, don't ever assume that blended families are a 20th and 21st century phenomena; they have been around for centuries. In the old days, women regularly died of complications from childbirth, and men didn't and couldn't raise their kids without a mother. They had to remarry quickly. Widows and widowers

often married, creating large families to which they added when they began having more children together. In my own family tree, I have seen instances of a man having as many as 20 children and losing three wives to childbirth in the process.

Culture and Economics

The culture into which a character is born provides ample fodder for pretty much any character you can imagine. Your character can be born to English missionaries in China, Chinese immigrants from San Francisco, Native Americans from New Mexico, Mexican-Americans from Texas, Jews from Israel, Israeli non-Jews, Roman Catholic Irish from Boston, Russians from Turkey, Japanese in interment camps during World War II, Swedes from Minnesota, Germans from South Dakota, African-Americans from Nigeria, Creoles from New Orleans, Scots from the Appalachian region, and any other possible cultural background you can think of.

Add to all of this the economic background of the family. There are as many definitions of “poor” as there are poor people. Your character could have grown up in a public dump in Brazil, on a dirt farm in Oklahoma, on the streets of Mexico City, in the backwoods of Tennessee, with nomads in the Sahara, or in the projects of Chicago. Your “rich” character could have grown up in a Hollywood mansion, in a Manhattan townhouse, on a sprawling ranch in Dallas, overlooking the golf course in Pebble Beach, in a palace in Saudi Arabia, or a luxurious log home in Aspen. Your character’s parents could have been farmers/ranchers, self-employed business owners, restaurateurs, self-made millionaires, transients/homeless, hopeless alcoholics, born-again Christians, escaped Nazi war criminals, plumbers, office administrators, factory workers, film directors, escaped convicts, scientists, politicians, artists, dictators, stock brokers, zookeepers, welfare recipients, or third generation “old money.”

Just think of the possibilities. Even by playing “mix and match” with a variety of possible cultures, parents, and economic backgrounds, you are bound to come up with a plausible scenario from

which your character was born that illustrates how they came to be the person they are today. And if the scenario doesn't somehow fit your story line, so what? After all, you are playing God when you create a character, and you can change that character with just a few simple keystrokes!

Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue

How someone looks is the easiest way to create an image in the mind of your reader. Physical appearance is usually pretty simple and straightforward: height, weight, body shape, hair and eye color, and skin color. Your character can possess any combination of these characteristics that you envision, as long as they do not in any way contradict other aspects of the character or story.

For example, I recently read a manuscript in which one of the central characters is a woman who is described in two places as being "overly tall at 5'10'" and having "a generous waistline." She is then put into two improbable situations: 1) She wears an antique

CHARACTER SKETCH

Alex Teagarden

Alex is a slightly built man, 40ish, impeccably groomed. He buys all his clothes from the L.L. Bean and Lands' End catalogs. He is a strict vegetarian and practices yoga faithfully. He is a member of the Unitarian Church, but has recently stopped attending services since the new minister took over. He doesn't work, per se, since he has all the money he needs from his investments. But he used to be an attorney and retired five years ago. People still ask him for legal advice, and he is more than willing to give it, within reason. He really doesn't have much else to do with his time, other than volunteering it for local charities, which he has been doing since he retired. Alex is gay and he is buried deep in the closet. In fact, he has no intention of ever coming out. But he has fallen in love with Stephen Horton, a young man who directs one of the non-profit organizations with whom he volunteers. Stephen has been out for all of his adult life, and he wants Alex to join him.

gown, “with its original exquisite lace as fresh as it was when it was first attached to the dress in 1872.” Since I am six feet tall and also possessing of a generous waistline, I can tell you that there is no way I could even begin to fit into any gown that was made in 1872. On the whole, women were much smaller in those days, and much shorter. 2) To escape from a pursuer she shimmies up a filing cabinet and squeezes through a transom over a door. Sorry, I don’t think so. Trying to maneuver long legs through any small space is no picnic, but through a transom? Not likely.

If you are writing about a person whose characteristics are foreign to you, spend some time thinking about what they might look like after you have put them into certain situations. You can always go back and change the original description to match the circumstances.

No two people who are 5’8” tall with blue eyes and sandy brown hair will look alike. Many other characteristics distinguish them, such as the texture of their skin, the shape of their face, whether they are muscular or flabby, skinny or obese, and any distinguishing features such as scars, moles, unusual earlobes, a hooked nose, acne, one eye slightly lower than the other, freckles, long fingers, short toes, long-waisted, long-legged, skinny legs, fat ankles, big knuckles, a weak chin, a big head, slouched shoulders, military posture, a limp, a withered arm, a missing limb, an artificial limb, a fast gait, a slow and deliberate walk, a clumsy manner, graceful movement of a dancer, the agility of an acrobat, chin thrust forward, a facial tic, a disgusting drool, and the list goes on and on and on. Just take a walk down the street and look around you for inspiration.

And appearances can change and alter the personality of a character. A fat little boy can grow up to be an award-winning body builder. The class geek can grow up to own Microsoft. The promiscuous teenage girl can grow up to be a devoted wife and mother. A deformed child can grown up to have plastic surgery and become an entirely new person. The prettiest girl in school can grow up to marry the town drunk. The smartest kid in school could end up working the graveyard shift at a factory.

And adults can change too. A mousy woman may decide to get a makeover, an overweight man may take up a vigorous exercise program, and a prematurely aging person may get a facelift and a dye job. A person who was always very attractive could become hideously deformed in an accident. No one stays the same forever, but for some characters the changes could be dramatic and have an effect on their personalities as well. Do they become more confident, more self-assured? Or do they become frightened and insecure, afraid to leave the house?

How important is hair, or the lack thereof? If you watch any Hollywood movie, it is always important and it always looks great, but you might want your character's hair to reflect something about their personality. What if a woman never cut her hair. Would it look like Crystal Gayle's? Or might it turn out looking very ratty and uneven with frizzy split ends? What about a woman with very short hair. Does it make her less feminine? Could she look kind of mischievous or elf-

CHARACTER SKETCH

Jalousie Harp

Jalousie is the surviving twin daughter of Josiah and Juliette Harp of 1844 New Orleans. Her twin, Jubilante, died when he was 4. A beautiful child grown into a striking adult, Jalousie is well-educated, but spoiled and willful, unmarried, and in love with her neighbor's son, Charles Trent, who is married to Jalousie's older half-sister, Celeste, with whom Jalousie does not get along. Charles was once interested in Jalousie, but found her unsuitable wife material, and has told her that he would never be unfaithful to Celeste. Jalousie has continuously tried to lure him away from Celeste, but to no avail. Jalousie's many suitors find her fascinating at first, but they don't stay with her. Her father, Josiah, has wearied of trying to find a suitable husband for her. His other six children and step-children are married, and he is instead turning his attention to his grandchildren. Jalousie thinks her father "hung the moon," and she is hurt by his lack of attention to her. She spends her days reading and doing crewelwork, when she is not having her hair done or having a new dress fitted. Her Mother dotes on Jalousie and gives her anything she wants, and Jalousie responds by simply wanting more.

like with such a cut? How about men who are bald or who deliberately shave their heads? Some believe men without hair are more virile. Is a man who takes really good care of his very long and beautiful locks somehow less masculine? Or would he just appear to be kind of artsy or Bohemian? And what about blondes – do they really have more fun? Your blonde might, or she might be trouble waiting to happen. Then again, she could very well be the woman on whom all those “dumb blonde” jokes are based. And don’t forget all those poor pitiful men who wear their hair like Donald Trump!

Eyes, the windows to the soul. I have a friend whose oldest daughter has eyes unlike anything I have ever seen. They are golden with tiny black flecks in them. A woman who used to do my photocopying for me had lavender eyes. Golden and lavender eyes are extremely rare. Unless you have a really compelling reason to make your character’s eyes such an unusual color, I would stick to the usual shades and instead focus on the shape of the eyes or the way the person looks at things or people. For example, the intensity of their gaze, the way they dart back and forth between items in a crowded room, the way they well up slightly when a certain song comes on the radio, the red rims of the eyes when the ragweed is filling the air, the

Helen’s lips were thin and painted with a deep crimson shade that made them look like a narrow red slit between her pixie nose and her softly pointed chin. I had first imagined her to be cool and practical, aloof and insensitive, or possibly just fragile. I don’t know why I felt that way. I guess it was because she was so different from Sophia – Sophia with the luscious full lips bathed in coral lip rouge that tasted of mangoes. As I touched Helen’s lips with mine, I tasted sweet strawberries. But it wasn’t her lipstick. She was simply the most delicious woman I had ever met.

long dark lashes that hint of something hidden beneath them, the sleepy, droopy look that they have when the person is confused or bored, or the eyes hidden behind a pair of prescription glasses that hide their beauty or magnify the eyes until the person looks like a giant bug.

Lips are most often described as being full or thin. One exudes warmth and sensuality while the other gives only the impression of cold austerity. Is that an accurate assumption? Of course not. But only you can make it otherwise:

Dressing for Success

Wardrobe can be important if it defines the character or serves a purpose in the story. What the character wears may dictate where they got their clothing or the kinds of places you might find them wearing it or shopping for it.

Clothes definitely make the man – and the woman. If your character wears only the finest Italian shoes and designer suits, this will probably say a lot about what he does for a living. If your character lives in sweats and likes to garden, that may speak volumes about her as well. Some people wear clothing that is always somehow stiff and formal, and you would expect them to act accordingly unless, of course, they are the superspy, 007 type, suave and sophisticated but ready for action. Maybe a character designs or makes their own clothes. A character might prefer vintage clothing from a particular era or they may wear whatever togs represent the latest fad. They could shop at Good Will or Bloomingdale's to acquire the clothes that make them who they are. And their wardrobe may invite situations for them, such as in the case of a woman wearing a too short skirt or overly plunging neckline, a man wearing a sport coat to a Black Tie affair, or a man wearing a Hawaiian shirt to a business meeting.

Your character could just have one eccentric wardrobe trait. Perhaps they always wear unusual shoes. Maybe they only wear beige. Or purple. What about a person who is always just a little bit

overdressed, no matter what the occasion – are they trying too hard? Your character might wear very flashy jewelry or may never wear any jewelry at all. Perhaps he wears only the same style of tie. Or perhaps she wears a tie. What about hats? There's a lot of room for personality as expressed by a particular style of hat. A man might wear a hat to conceal his baldness or may only do so to keep his head warm. Maybe your character never wears socks. Or maybe the only stockings a woman wears are ones with patterns in them.

The way a person wears his or her clothing can also be noteworthy. We've all met someone whose attention to their appearance makes them look perfectly coordinated, regardless of what they are wearing. They look equally put-together whether they are lounging poolside, hiking in a state park, shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue, or going out on a date. Their sloppy counterparts are as equally disheveled under much the same circumstances. Some people always wear their clothing a little too tight; others look like they're wearing clothes that are three sizes too big. And the attention they pay to the condition of their clothing could be significant. A character could wear clothing that is stained or has holes in it, or there could be obvious signs of wear and mending.

A Matter of Habit

Personal habits are part of the physical appearance. Some people fidget a lot when nervous or do so just as a general habit. Some bite their nails while others doodle or drum their fingers on the table. They may crack their knuckles or twist the rings on their fingers. Others may tap their foot impatiently or squirm in their chair. Maybe they have a bad back and are always straightening their neck and back. Maybe they have an annoying itch? Where you put the itch is your problem! Some characters might fiddle with their hair. Some may even chew their hair. Some people have a habit of adjusting their clothing or inappropriately grooming themselves in public. Smokers have a whole set of movements and behaviors that go along with their habit, as do substance abusers of all kinds. Your character might

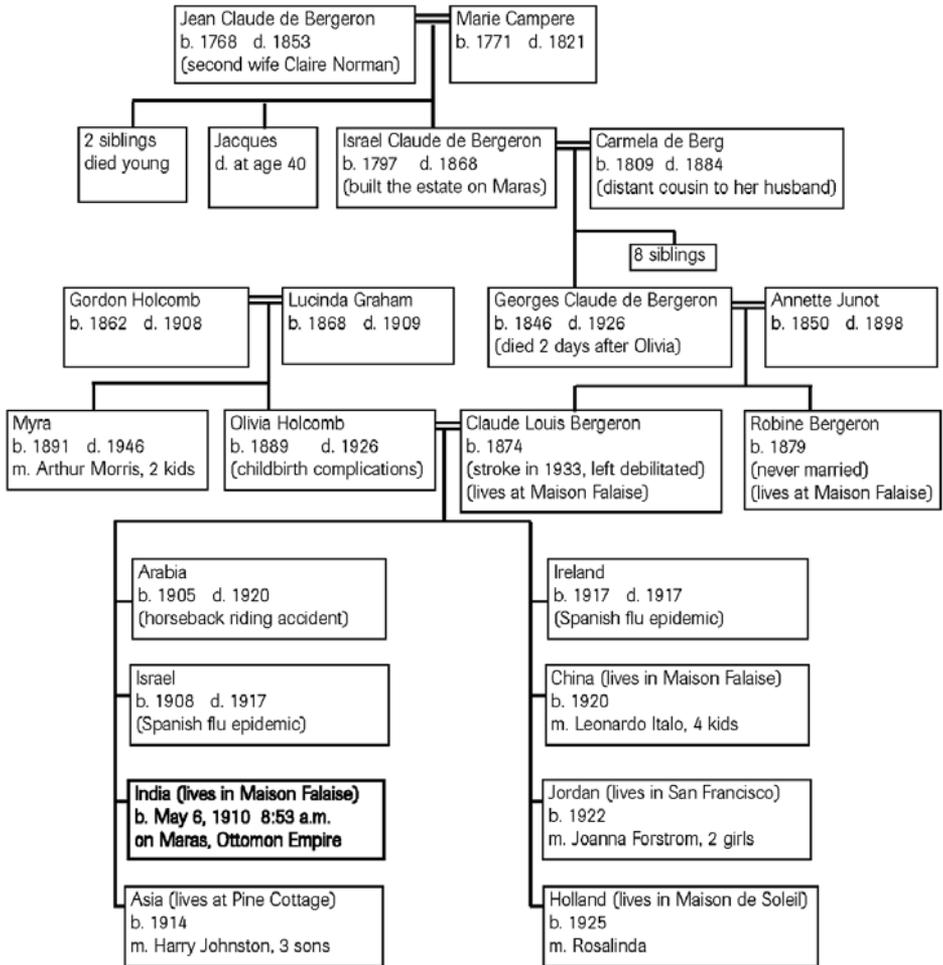
chew gum incessantly, perhaps a particular brand or flavor. Do they snap the gum when they chew it? Blow bubbles? Do they smell like the flavor of their favorite gum? Why do they chew it? Did they give up smoking and need something new to do with their mouth?

People have eating habits as well. What does your character like to eat for breakfast? Or do they always skip breakfast? What about lunch? Is it always on the run? Dinner? Snacks? Does your character seem to get by on the scent of a meal alone or does he or she need to revel in the calories? A junk food junkie may not end up leaping tall buildings in a single bound. A health fanatic may be interesting, but you may need to study up on the world of organic food and nutritional supplements. Someone from Greece may eat from a very different menu than does someone from Ireland. Is your character a picky eater? Or do they eat whatever is put in front of them? Do they eat the items from the plate individually – vegetable first, then potatoes, then the steak – or do they take a little of each throughout the meal? Do they never order dessert? Or do they go for the chocolate mousse every time?

And what about table manners? Your character may be the epitome of slobbery or may put Emily Post to shame. Inserting table manners into the dialogue at a restaurant can be entertaining or revealing. Does your character enjoy wine? Perhaps they have a personal wine cellar at home. Do they go through the motions of a professional wine tester when they are dining out – an affectation, perhaps? Is your character a gourmet cook or a gourmand who would eat the very flowers off the plate if he could only figure out how to do it? Perhaps your character is a fine food aficionado who frequents all of the best restaurants in town and is on a first name basis with the chefs.

People are creatures of habit, and your character will likely have a routine each day. Breaking that routine would be an indicator that something was wrong or that something had changed in his/her life. Does your character get up at the crack of dawn and go jogging, possibly with a canine companion? Or maybe they head for a workout at the gym? Maybe the routine involves getting up early so that they

The de Bergeron Family Tree



This is the family tree from one of my old works. The tree, and the character studies that accompanied it, needed to be very detailed. I had to tell the story of each generation, because they all set the stage for everything that is happening in the late 1940s, when the main or “modern day” part of the story is set.

can read the newspaper and work the crossword puzzle. Or maybe they like to spend a lot of time in the shower and take a long time fixing their hair and putting on makeup. When they go to work, do they take the same bus, drive the same route, or walk past the same street vendor where they buy a muffin and a cup of coffee? When they get to work do they always stop by the office of one of their favorite co-workers to say hello before getting down to business? When it's time to take a morning coffee break, do they have a snack at their desk and keep working, or do they join the masses at the water cooler to listen in on the latest gossip? When they come home from work at night, do they pick up a pizza on the way home, nuke a frozen dinner, or whip up an omelet for dinner? Do they turn on the TV and turn into a couch potato/tomato? Or do they come home to their significant other and engage in far more enjoyable activities? Think of your own life and the lives of those you know, and I'm sure you'll see that a person's habits say quite a lot about their personalities.

Speak Up

When your character speaks, make sure that they speak the way a real person would. I have read an awful lot of very stilted and contrived dialogue that could have been avoided altogether had the author simply read the dialogue aloud and actually listened to how it sounds when spoken. I have found this to be a sure cure for most first-time authors, who are often the worst when it comes to writing realistic dialogue. Sometimes dialogue needs to sound formal or overly complex to suit the historical context, but when you're writing 21st century dialogue, it pays to make it conversational:

Don't: "Did you not wonder how it happened that she knew?"

Do: "Didn't you wonder how she knew?"

Don't: "Would that it were only so simple."

Do: "If only it were that easy."

In some cases, your character may not say much. They may, instead, play off the dialogue of other characters, allowing those individuals to give voice to whatever it is that must be said to carry the

story to its conclusion. On the other hand, you may have a character who likes to chatter incessantly about nothing in particular, annoying the hell out of everyone else. Your character could be domineering, outspoken, or may entirely ignore what others say and just talk right past them or right over them.

And never underestimate the power of a good liar in a work of fiction. Does your character lie convincingly, are they pathological in their capacity to lie? Or do they lie reluctantly, trying to cover up something they did or trying to protect someone they love? The hesitant liar will probably falter or say something they regret later.

When some characters speak their words are important. They may not say much, but they manage to sum up a person or a situation in just a few words – words that speak volumes.

Even though the reader can't actually "hear" the words, you can still give your character a real voice. Dialect is, of course, one way to do that, but you must be careful not to overdo it, because written dialect can be very hard to read. Any sign of an accent should be

CHARACTER SKETCH

Julius Jacob Brackman

"Jules" is 49 and the owner of a bookstore with an antiquarian division. Prior to owning the bookstore, he was a curator of printed works for a museum in New York City. He came to California to find a slower-paced life. He is handsome, looks far younger than his years, is well-educated and well-read. He has never been married, but he lived for seven years with a woman who left him for another man. He hasn't dated since, and neither does his best friend, a woman and college professor who is his intellectual equal. Jules is on the shy side, mostly because he lost his left leg in Vietnam, and he feels incomplete without it. He is always trying to find a better prosthetic limb that will make him walk more normally, and he is sure that if he finds the right limb, he will also find his Ms. Right. He loves Chinese and Mexican foods, and he loves to both cook and eat out. He drives an 8 year old Honda sedan, but his dream is to make enough money to restore the vintage 1930s English taxicab that he bought at an auction and stores in his garage.

described and then only slightly alluded to in the dialogue. Do your reader a favor and pick the most obvious words that can be written for dialectic effect, and leave the rest alone.

If your character comes from a particular part of the world, you will probably need to learn about the local jargon as you build dialogue for that character. Also, there are many non-words that appear in a variety of languages. For example, where my Mom's family comes from in the state of Washington, there are many Swedes and Swedish-Finns, and it is not unusual to hear their speech peppered with "Oy oy oy" and something I can't spell that sounds like "oofah."

DON'T: *Don' got me no'n. Got me a daddy only he tro't me out when I was fift'n.* ... *"Had me a wife wunst, 'cept she jes' one day upt and dawed o' cancer.*

DO: *Don' got no one,"* he drawled in his finest Yazoo City accent. *Got me a daddy only he trow'd me out when I was fifteen. ... Had me a wife, 'cept she jes' one day up and died o' cancer.*

DON'T: *I vood luff to have you veeseet my gallery und zee hees verk.* ... *Vee luff any of Meyer's friends to veeseet. You come soon, yah?*

DO: *I vould luff to have you visit my gallery and see his verk.* cooed Marta, the tall blonde German woman. *Ve luff any of Meyer's friends to visit. You come soon, yah?*

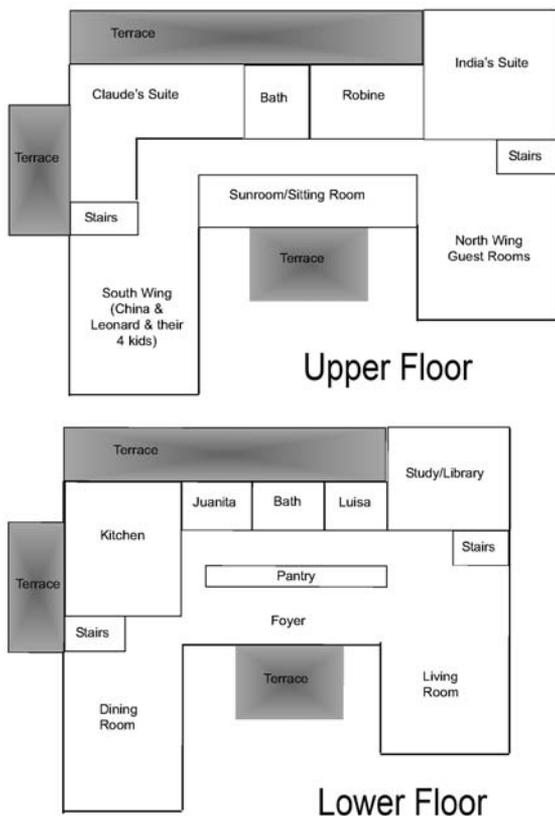
If a person is described as having a very soft voice, a very loud voice, a melodic voice, or a raspy voice, you can remind the reader of this every couple chapters where appropriate. If they have a bad stutter or if they stammer frequently, don't make them hesitate on every single word. Try not to overdo it. Some characters may have a phrase that punctuates their speech at the beginning or end of everything they say, such as "you know" or "per se" or "whatever."

Whatever you do, don't waste dialogue. If your character has something to say, by all means let him/her say it. But don't trivialize your character or waste your reader's time by adding in a lot of meaningless "throw-away" dialogue such as: "You bet," "Yeah, see you," "If you say so," "Okay," or "Bye." If it's pertinent, use it; if not, throw it away.

Home Sweet Home

How a person lives is as important as their genetic make-up and their circle of friends. Everyone has a story to tell that explains why they live the way they live. Briefly describing where a character lives and how they got there can help create a past for the character, a background against which they can act out the rest of their life.

Why does your character live in a tiny, cramped apartment or a run-down antebellum mansion? What attracts your character to the trendy loft in Soho or the cabin in Telluride or the trailer out in the hills? Do they decorate their home or is it merely a place to hang their hat? Is their 1950s ranch-style home a transitional space – the house they rented with a roommate after the ex-wife got everything – or is it a warm and cozy nest? Is the space filled with antiques and collectibles or spartanly furnished with a high tech or retro look? Are the walls bare or covered



The above sketch was necessary because eavesdropping was a theme in the story and I needed to see where people were when they were eavesdropping.

with original artwork or other decorations? Do they live in a security building or a house with an elaborate security gate? Or do they live in a small town where they never lock the doors or windows? Does the action always seem to take place in their kitchen, their bedroom, the den? If so, you might want to describe those rooms more thoroughly.

Wheels

How your character gets around their world can also be significant, or not, depending on what the story is about. Your character can drive a Jaguar or ride the subway – maybe both! Your character may pilot a plane or bicycle in a local race. Or your character may like to walk a lot and may live in either a downtown area or a small town where walking is a way of life. If your character jogs to work and changes clothes in a locker room, that could offer opportunities for yet another aspect of the character's life.

Try to avoid stereotyping your character into a particular type of vehicle. It is tempting to want to put a farmer into an old pick-up truck, but a wealthy farmer might as easily be driving a Mercedes. I have a farmer client who drives both. It is also interesting to look at the kinds of cars that some famous detective characters drive. If you are writing a realistic story about a detective, one of the first things you will learn is that real detectives drive very plain, nondescript cars, at least when they are on the job. I have three private investigator clients and they all drive old white sedans. It's a necessity, because they don't want to be identified as detectives; it would inhibit their work. And, if your character is a pizza delivery person, it is unlikely that he will be driving anything fancier than a beat-up 1984 Toyota.

You will probably want to match your character's vehicle to their home and their wardrobe. For example, a 35 year-old who wears vintage 1950s clothing might well be living in a trendy loft apartment and driving a 1958 Chevy. A successful real estate broker who looks like she stepped out of an old issue of *Town and Country* magazine may drive an antique Jaguar or even one of those new little vintage-look cars that have become so popular.

Vintage vehicles require a fair amount of research, particularly if they figure prominently in a story. You don't want to say that a particular vehicle had a pocket on the door if it didn't. Also, don't limit your character to driving a vintage auto that every other character created drives. There are other options. Many people may not have seen a Dusenbergs, Cord, Studebaker, or Hudson but recognize those names. But there are also the two cars my grandfather owned: the Paige-Detroit "Jewett" (1922-1926) and the Velie Motor Cars "Velie" (1902-1928). I'm sure there have been many other such limited edition automobiles over the years.

If you decide to put your character in a non-traditional vehicle, and the vehicle is important to the character or the story line, make sure you do your research. A bicycle is not a bicycle; it's a Schwinn or it's a Bianchi or a Commencal. A motor scooter is a Moped, a Yamaha, or a Piaggio Vespa. Even a horse-drawn vehicle needs to be defined properly. It's a buckboard or a carriage or a fiacre or a surrey or a dray or whatever fits the rider and the time frame of the story. And even within those categories there's room for variation. For example, the word "chariot" applies to both the two-wheeled cart used in ancient times and an 18th century four-wheeled carriage.

Whether you are writing a period piece or one set in the 21st century, if your character rides a horse, there will be a special relationship between him/her and the horse, and there will likely be a lot of past experiences with horses, some training in the care of horses and, of course, the horses themselves. Like the non-traditional vehicles above, it is important to do your homework, because there are a lot of different kinds of horses, and a lot of equestrian terms that may be necessary to flesh out this part of your character's life.

Spare Time

What does your character do in his or her spare time? Needlepoint? Watch televised sports? Soccer on Saturday mornings? Garden? Is he or she an artist, painter? Does your character go horseback riding on the weekends? Camp with the kids whenever

possible? Play the guitar or piano or flute? Risk life and limb going bungee jumping? Skydive? Explore caves? Ski? Sunbathe on the beach? Swim laps at the sports center? Square dance at the senior center? Collect antique pottery, jewelry, furniture, etc.? Sit in front of the computer writing the next great American novel? Take classes in weaving or small business management? Work the Sunday crossword puzzle? Read a romance novel? Go to garage sales? Play computer games? Or does your character sleep until noon, mope around the house all day, and basically do nothing until evening comes and he or she goes out to the local bar, shoots a few rounds of pool, and gets rip-roaring drunk?

Make sure that whatever your character does is in keeping with the rest of their personality. For instance, don't make your skydiving enthusiast a fidgeting wreck, unless you really intend for him/her to be leading a double-life.

Also, when you are exploring the possible pastimes of your character, be sure you do your research. If your character loves opera, it helps to have heard the works he or she enjoys, because no two operas and no two opera composers are alike. There's Puccini, Britten, Verdi, Mascagni, Wagner, Flotow, Massenet, Berlioz, Rossini, Haydn, Bizet, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Mozart, and the list goes on and on. Many composers specialized in opera and others dabbled in it. To the trained ear, the styles of each composer are as unmistakable as are the individual operas themselves. The same is true for a character who enjoys the music of the 1940s. If you are not familiar with Benny Goodman, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Les Brown, Carmen Cavallaro, Harry James, the Andrews Sisters, Bing Crosby, Kay Kyser, Glen Miller, Dinah Shore, Spike Jones, Perry Como, Tommy Dorsey, and all the other great acts that characterized the music of the World War II era, study up! You'll enjoy hearing music from other eras while you create reality in the life of your character.

The Ladder to Success and the Road to Ruin

The educational level of your character will dictate how they speak and communicate and the type of work they are likely to engage in for a career. This is another area where the sky is the limit. Your character can be a high school dropout or even an elementary school dropout. Maybe your character went to a trade school or pursued a series of dead-end jobs that they later abandoned when they went back to school as an adult to get the degree that lead to the dream job they always wanted. What your character studied could indicate if they are creative or structured in their thinking, if they are going to be working a desk job or hopping on a jet every few days to go to some remote corner of the globe to negotiate a deal.

Education also dictates the job your character works. What does your character do for those 40 or so work hours each week? If your character is a detective in a crime novel – or the criminal! – then most people will understand enough of their “work” that you don’t have to define it that carefully. But if your main character is a county medical examiner who performs autopsies and investigates causes of death, you will have to investigate that career in detail and provide your reader with the results. Most readers will not know how an autopsy is performed or what the findings mean. You will need to illustrate that for them. Likewise, if your character is an 18th century sea captain, a trip to the library and the port out of which he sails will be a necessity, to capture both the flavor of his life and the supporting historical facts. If your character is a high school dropout, an alcoholic, and living on the street, describing his daily life may be a bit of a challenge. He will likely be spending his time sleeping during the day and looking for ways to score booze when he’s awake. But somewhere along the way, he is going to do something that makes him the dynamic character your story demands.

Understanding what your character does for a living is important, because while the character of Indiana Jones may lead a double life as a college professor and adventurer, this is certainly not the norm,

and that is why it works. We all like to think that the plain, quiet, frumpy librarian could be a hot, sexy, nymphomaniac away from the stacks, or that the pencil-pushing, numbers-crunching, prematurely balding accountant could be the guy who saves the gorgeous girl from the mob. After all, we all believed that Clark Kent was Superman, didn't we?

But if you want your character to be very real and not just a larger-than-life caricature, you may need to do some research to fully understand what is involved in their day-to-day activities that would affect your story line. This can go very poorly if, like another editing client of mine, you don't really grasp the work of your character or have not incorporated some part of his personality into the story line. My client wrote a manuscript about a man who, in three days time, went from being an admittedly sedentary computer programmer to being lost in the Fly River area of Papua New Guinea, where he demonstrated remarkable survival skills. My client had his character practically swinging from vines and scaling cliffs, with no explanation whatsoever for how the guy acquired this life-saving know-how and sudden physical agility.

In general, if you are striving for realism, jobs fall into three fairly basic categories: working with people, working with ideas, and working with things. As you can imagine, someone who is most comfortable working with ideas, might not be as successful working with people or things. And a "people person" might be bored working with inanimate objects or spending a lot of time living in his/her head. And the one who works with things may like the control over his creations and may not enjoy the messiness of ideas and people. This does not mean that we don't all cross over from one category into another at times, but these general rules of thumb make it a little easier to at least begin to define a character's work personality.

You've Got to Have Friends

Family members may create the basic structure of your character, but that basic personality will be additionally molded by others. Your characters will be influenced greatly by the company they keep, their friends, co-workers, acquaintances, significant others, spouses, and even the pets that enter into their lives. In most cases, your character will have friends who know each other and those friends will have their own relationships with each other, secondary to the ones they have with your main character. The circle of friends will in all likelihood be built on a lot of common interests, workplaces, careers, and educational backgrounds, among other things.

Childhood friendships can last into adulthood and throughout life. Military kids may move around so much that they find it hard to form attachments throughout life. And what about someone who is non-military but grows up in a military town, with their friends changing every year as the military parent is stationed elsewhere? Codependent relationships exist with friends, co-workers, spouses – you name it. People can be role models to your character or they can be passive-aggressive adversaries. A co-worker can become a good friend and mentor or stab your character in the back while climbing the ladder of success. Maybe the former becomes the latter? A casual acquaintance can turn into a great love or a savior. They can also turn into a mortal enemy. Relationships can turn on a dime, and you can use that fact to your advantage.

Romantic entanglements are at the heart of every great character. Every person experiences love at some level: love found, love lost, love gone wrong, lust masquerading as love, loving the wrong person, loving for the wrong reasons, the fine line between love and hate, cheating that damages or destroys love, passionate love, platonic love, love for the moment, love for eternity, love in a cheap motel, love in an elegant palace, ordinary love, extraordinary love, waiting for love to come, unrequited love, love without trust, love built on lies, unconditional love, love with rules, violent love, in love with love,

suffocating love, liberating love, and every other kind of love you can possible dream up. You just can't have too much love in a story line. Love is all you need, as the song goes.

Never underestimate man's best friend as a character influence. If your character loves animals, they may do so because they grew up with pets, had a favorite cat, hamster, or parakeet. Your character may confide in their dog or cat when they can't talk to anyone else. They may meet people while walking their dog or searching for their lost cat. A character may have a lot of pets and take in a lot of strays because they never had children but love to nurture. They could also just be a rescuer personality. Some authors have even used their animal characters to help human characters solve crimes! The opportunities here are endless.

Summary

Hopefully, I have covered most of the basics in character development. If I haven't, I'm sure I'll hear from someone! Meanwhile, you might want to take a look through the Q&A section that follows. Perhaps you'll find an answer there to something that wasn't in the pages you just read.

Q & A

The following are some of the most commonly asked questions I receive when I speak to writers about character development:

Q. I have read a lot of books in which the main character's personality is secondary to those around him and to the plot. Is this done for a particular reason? And when should you use this device?

A. Even if a main character plays second fiddle to the other characters, that doesn't mean that his personality should be left completely undefined. After all, he is interacting with other people, and therefore we have to know enough about him to know how he will respond in certain conversations or situations. I don't ever like to see any character undeveloped, but if you do decide to leave him less fleshed out, then I would develop him the way I do a minor character, by at least putting together a very brief Character Sketch for him.

Q. In a story I'm developing, I want my protagonist to be "edgy." I want the reader to see him as being primarily good, but with the potential for evil kind of lurking there. How can I build that kind of dichotomy in a character?

A. One way would be to show him living his life in a positive way, while showing that in his past he has experienced some negative things that could have warped him into an evil person or into someone who maybe can't easily distinguish between right and wrong. Another way is to leave things hanging from time to time that make him look guilty of something, whether he is or is not. If you want to really give him more of an edge, you can associate him with some known criminal or you can give him a past as a former criminal, maybe one who never got caught and is keeping his crime, whatever it is, a big secret.

Q. How can you make a character seem tortured, without going overboard dramatically?

A. By that, I assume you mean you don't want him to be crying and wringing his hands all the time. If so, you should not have too much trouble achieving this. Most tortured people keep to themselves, don't get anywhere in life, drink or drug excessively, and dwell on the past. His self-esteem will probably be low, so he won't expect much out of life. If you can create a situation

in the past over which he can feel guilty or victimized, that will give you a starting point.

Q. I read once that your friends are mirrors of your own personality, and that you can judge a person by the company they keep. If this is the case, why is it that so many fictional characters have best friends who are so opposite to them in personality?

A. Well, opposites do attract, so that is one reason. But you have to remember that these are, after all, not real people, and authors have to create characters who seem like real individuals, but who can also fill a need for a particular personality type that can play off the main character, possibly to help in the plot development. That secondary character may provide nothing more than comic relief, or they could be the insightful type who sees the problem so clearly and offers meaningful advice, or they can be the one who always sees the worst in people and can always tell who the real criminal is – or at the worst can provide a red herring or two along the way.

Q. In the historical fiction manuscript that I'm working on, I don't have just one main character, I've got eight. I also have a lot of characters who are significant to one degree or another, and then I have a lot of very minor ones. How much effort should I put into developing each character?

A. I think that it is obvious that you should put the majority of development into the eight main characters. They should be as fully fleshed out as you can possibly make them. From that point on, you will probably need to take each character on an individual basis and determine how much the reader needs to know about that character as they relate to the story line. In many ways, I like to know as much about every character as I can, because it makes the entire story more animated, more alive. And I think that's the determining factor in how much time to put into a character. If the story can stand without them, then they are very minor indeed and you can insert as much or as little personality into them as you want.

Q. I have difficulty creating my female characters. They always turn out being very stereotypical and they kind of fall flat as a result. When I try to make them more interesting, they don't seem to fit with my male characters or with the plot. Any ideas?

A. All the characters in a story must have realistic relationships with each other. If your male character is maybe not as interesting as you think he is,

then it will be hard to find a multi-dimensional female character to play opposite him. Any additional interest you give to her will dominate him if he is not really as fully developed as he could be. The other thing that comes to mind is that in some story lines, particularly ones in which the male is a very strong rescuer, the personality of the woman is not as critical because the story is about the rescuer and the rescue and she may even be absent from the pages for long periods of time. She may also be way up on a pedestal in his mind, just based on her appearance alone. People on pedestals don't normally have personalities because the very fact that they are on a pedestal makes them unreal.

Q. When writing a historic novel that contains characters who are real people who are no longer living, how much can I leave to my own imagination in bringing them to life?

A. Before your imagination enters into it, you need to do a significant amount of research on the individuals so that you understand them and their motivations. I suggest reading their letters and that you study whatever has been written about them that details their historic role. Read about their family members and their relationships to other key personalities who were around during their lifetime. This is part and parcel to writing a historic work, whether it is fiction or non-fiction. Once you have done this exhaustive homework, you will find that your imagination will just fill in at times and be a mere extension of the real person. You will have to create dialogue, etc., but you will have a sense of how this person communicates from having read so much about them.

Q. I wrote a manuscript and gave it to an editor, and he sent it back to me saying that my characters needed work. But he didn't say what kind of work they needed. How can I best evaluate them to determine how to go back and fix them?

A. You can start by writing down everything you know about each character. If you can't come up with a healthy list of at least 50 items for your main character alone, then you need to go back and flesh that character out. For your lesser characters, the secondary characters, you should be able to come up with a list of about 20 items minimum. For minor characters, a list of 5-10 items is adequate. It might also help if you break down the items

further into people, ideas, things, and relationships. You should have a fairly even spread of items that fit into those categories to ensure that you have a fully formed personality for your character.

Q. I don't have children of my own yet, and one of my important characters is a child. I want her to be real, but I'm not sure how to do it. Can you recommend where I should start?

A. I find it interesting that people have such a hard time understanding children. After all, you should be an expert on being a child, since you were once one yourself. So start there, with your own childhood. If you still have problems, you might want to talk to a school teacher who teaches children of that age, or if you have a friend or family member with a child that age, pick their brain.

Q. I have an idea for a story about twins, one good and one very bad, and I want this to be as authentic as possible. Do you have any suggestions for the kinds of things that would make one twin go bad, when genetically they are the same?

A. Twins may be genetically the same, but that doesn't mean that something can't happen to one and not to the other. For example, your evil twin could have sustained a head injury as a child, could have been sexually molested, could have witnessed something horrible, could have been born with a birth defect – any of which traumas could have damaged him/her psychologically. And what if they suppressed the incident(s) and never dealt with it when they were still children? You could have a child who lives in fear or anger that they can't fully express, and when they become an adult, watch out! I always advise writers to do a lot of research whenever they are dealing with twins or with psychological trauma. If your evil twin is going to be a criminal, then you might want to read up on the childhoods of known criminals to ensure authenticity.

Q. When it comes to describing the physical appearance of my characters, I always seem to resort to their statistics: height, weight, eye color, etc. When I try to add in something like a limp or a tic, it seems so phony, but what can I say that will create an image in the mind of the reader?

A. Limps and tics are not for every character. If a limp and tic is not necessary to understanding the character or developing the story line, then your

character does not need such an affectation. When you want to describe the way a character looks, look around you at your friends, your neighbors, the grocery check out clerk, the mail carrier, the bus driver, your co-workers – the world is filled with people. As an exercise, you might want to try writing physical descriptions of the people you meet every day. You may be surprised at how much there is to their appearance that you didn't notice before, and that's where you'll find the descriptions for your characters.

Q. You mentioned not revealing everything about a character all at once, but how can I gradually dole out that information to the reader?

A. One of the devices for acquainting a reader with a character is to let their personality unfold as the reader gets to know them better. That means that you let them know a little more in each chapter, and hopefully as that part of their personality relates to the story. When I write a story, I always do a detailed outline first, and in that outline I indicate by chapter what it is that I want the reader to know about the character and I look for ways to weave it in with the events that are happening in the story line. For example, if I need my character to meet someone for lunch to discuss something, and I want my reader to know that my character once dreamed of becoming a master chef, then I will find a way to include that information about him as he enters his favorite eatery.