



Creating Belivable Characters



As an author and editor, I have been asked numerous times, “How do I create believable characters my readers will care about?”

Let’s start with understanding what readers want from a character before discussing how to create them. Readers want to read about the exceptional rather than the mundane. S/he wants the character to be more ugly or handsome than the norm, more ruthless or noble, et cetera. You must also understand that there are two sub-species of fictional characters.

The first is the flat, cardboard type reserved for walk-ons. They say a line or two and that’s it. These characters tend to be bartenders, bellhops or waiters. “Cardboards” can be colorful or nondescript, have a high emotional pitch or completely placid. However, they are always peripheral. They have no depth as the author does not explore their doubts or joys. The reader’s interest in them is fleeting. “Cardboards” work in a novel, however, when kept in their place. If an author tries to fit this character into a major role, such as the principal villain, the writing becomes melodramatic.

The second subspecies is the well-rounded, three-dimensional character, and these are the ones whose creation we are discussing. All major characters, including villains, should fall into this subspecies. Each should have complex motives with conflicting desires, each should be full of passion and ambition. The reader should have a strong sense that each character existed before the novel began. Your reader will want intimacy with this character, because he is worth knowing. “So, how do I do that?” you ask. Well, here’s how I learned to do it.

The first step is to create a character sketch for each major character, including name, age, physical description, hobbies, pet peeves, et cetera. The order of details doesn’t matter so don’t get caught up in that; it only leads to Writer’s Block. You just want a complete biography, including any life-changing events that may or may not have bearing on the story, to refer to as you write the story. Why, you ask? Your character, let’s call him Charlie, may be forty-five years old and react very strongly to drunk drivers in the story because his little brother was hit by one when Charlie was thirteen. Does the event have a direct influence on the story? Probably not, but it did have a direct influence on Charlie and when you, as the author, remember that, Charlie’s actions/reactions become more real. Having a character sketch also helps you keep the characters “in character” as the story progresses.

Don’t have a character to create a sketch for? That is no problem. Pick someone, anyone, famous or just off the street, and wonder. What would have Marilyn Monroe been like if she’d been overweight instead? How about the man in the suit walking quickly toward a skyscraper? Where could he be going and why? Where would Stephen King be today if he hadn’t resubmitted *Carrie* at the right time to the right publisher? Society shapes our character based on looks, gender, allergies, nervous ticks, gestures, et cetera. High society may not accept a woman simply because her breath isn’t sweet enough, for example. How do these things, these acceptances and rejections affect you? Once you answer that, you can answer how they affect your characters. After all, every

character you create has some aspect of you, the author, in them. Okay, so you've created a character complete with a biography. Now what? Well, assuming you have an outline of the plot, decide how you want Charlie to be perceived. At the very least he has to be sympathetic, that is to say, the reader must be able to identify with him. There are a few ways to accomplish this.

The first method is pain, physical or emotional. Pain is a double-edged sword. The character who suffers from it and the character who inflicts are automatically the most memorable characters. When one character willingly inflicts pain on another, the torturer becomes just as important in your reader's loathing as the victim does in the reader's sympathy.

However, you must realize that not all pain is alike. A paper cut does not compare with a lost limb. Of the types of pain, physical is the easiest to inflict. If Charlie is tortured, the reader will wince in agony with him, even if s/he has never seen Charlie before. Physical pain automatically creates a sympathetic character.

Emotional pain is a little harder to come by because there has to be some set up. You must be willing to devote several pages to setting up a relationship before ripping it apart somehow, and the damage to this relationship should come at a vital point. For example, in Stephen King's, *The Dead Zone*, the character suffers through a major traffic accident which leaves him in a coma. When he awakens, he finds the woman he loves has already married someone else. Because the relationship was set up before the accident, readers know how much he loved her. His emotional pain far outweighs any physical, but it wouldn't if the author hadn't set up the relationship first.

Describing the injury in greater detail can also increase the power of pain to create Charlie as sympathetic by showing its cause and effect. Within certain genres, a description of the blood and gore is allowed, but for the most part, it just makes your reader gag. Permitting the reader to watch Charlie try and cope with his pain can heighten the reader's ability to identify with him.

You can also increase the power of pain through your choice as an author. Let's suppose Charlie and his girlfriend Sylvia are riding horses through the woods, and Charlie falls off and breaks his leg. The scene will certainly magnify the importance of both Charlie and Sylvia as characters because Sylvia must set his leg. One character is forced to cause pain while the other must suffer it. However, the scene would be even more powerful if Charlie is forced to set his own leg.

There is a pitfall to the pain method of creating sympathetic characters, however, and that is pain loses its punch with repetition. The first time Charlie is hit in the head with a crowbar, his importance is raised above that of other characters. By the third or fourth time however, Charlie becomes comic, his pain a joke.

A second method of raising Charlie's importance and believability is to put him in jeopardy. Jeopardy is anticipated pain, and is often more potent than the real thing. The more helpless Charlie is, and the more terrible the danger, the more importance the audience will attach to Charlie, as long as he struggles against the odds.

A third method is to make Charlie larger than life. How? Charlie has to become extraordinary, unique or special in some way. How is that established? Well, that depends on the style your story is written in. In William Goldman's, *The Princess Bride*, he merely tells us, but that method can only happen in a novel where the narrator's voice is purposely intrusive. William Goldman also uses the reactions of surrounding characters to establish Princess Buttercup as the most beautiful woman in the world by the end of the novel. If it weren't for the reactions of the others populating this fictional world, the reader could be told a hundred times and still not believe Princess Buttercup's beauty with the same conviction. Showing is much more effective than telling when trying to **make a character larger than life.**

Understand, that Charlie must not be a static character however. That is to say, he must be able to act in the face of adversity, as previously stated. A character who runs away or suffers without struggling is of no use to you. These are static characters and should be killed before reaching the pages of your story. Dramatic novels require characters who are emotional firestorms. Charlie must be alive with passion, vengeance, love, hate, ambition, lust, envy, greed, et cetera. By giving him these human feelings, Charlie will become less cardboard and more three-dimensional.

Now that you have been introduced to the big three, pain, jeopardy and heroic proportion, we come to realism. Realism is learning how to use these three methods with enough restraint that Charlie becomes a real person, someone your reader wants to shake hands with. Be aware, however, that these three tools are easy to overuse and as a result, will become steadily less effective.

Additionally, there are two more tools to add to your writing toolbox: the character's past and the character's motive process.

To fully realize Charlie, he must have a past. This is where the character sketch comes in again. Charlie must have a whole life from the start of the novel, even if some information doesn't find its way into the story. So, you ask, how do I get Charlie's past into the story?

The most obvious way is to begin with his birth and go from there. Boring. Regardless of what genre you are writing in, the best place to begin the story is at the point where Charlie becomes interesting. If you start at birth, then Charlie must be bigger than life from the cradle on. John Irving did it with *The World According to Garp*, but let's face it, there just aren't that many stories whose protagonist is so interestingly conceived. Most of us have to find another way.

The most obvious and overused technique to give a sense of past is the flashback. In this technique, the present action stops for a time while the character, or worse yet, the narrator, remembers some key event from days gone by. The problem with this technique is that the action stops. Stories beginning with a flashback are even less effective because the present hasn't yet been established. There can be no sense of past when there is no sense of present. The flashback is not providing any additional information about Charlie; rather it is providing the reader's only information. If you find yourself needing to go into a flashback on the first or second page of your story, take it as a sign that your work needs to begin with the events told in the flashback. This is not to say flashbacks should not be used, after all real people have memories and so should fictional ones, but a flashback needs to be quick. After all the longer a flashback takes, the harder it is for the audience to remember the present action.

Using expectation to create a past is usually much more effective than flashbacks or beginning at birth because it creates a realistic past by giving an implied past without stopping the action. Charlie's reaction to an immediate event can tell the reader what has happened in the past. For example, a dog growls and cringes every time someone comes near it. The reader knows immediately the dog has been mistreated and now it expects to be mistreated. The dog's reaction implies a past without stopping the action.

You can also use networks to create a past, again without stopping the action. Charlie has been alive long enough to create friendships and other types of connections with people. Use them. You can reveal a lot about Charlie through the reactions of other characters. Sometimes these relationships will be important to the story and sometimes they will only be used to create the illusion of Charlie having a full life. Either way, Charlie will be seen, not as a puppet existing to only act out the plot, but rather as a real person who lives among others, working with them, living with them, et cetera. And don't think you have to explore Charlie's entire network of relationships. Only a small part needs to be revealed. The reader will sense the rest of the network is there.

Now we come to the last tool used to create realistic characters. Motive. Charlie's purpose he has in mind when he takes action is not something you can add to a character. The motive is there, whether you like it or not, because your reader will supply one if it is not obvious. There are times when you do not have to explain the motive. For example, Charlie's mother could have been killed when he little and he spends the rest of his life searching for the murderer. It isn't too hard for the reader to figure out he is looking for revenge. But Charlie needs to be more complex than this, since the simple idea of revenge is not really enough to carry a realistic novel. Use your imagination to add to it. What could Charlie's trauma have done to him as he grew up? Could it have been transformed in some way to become justifiable?

Motive is the heart of the story. The discovery of Charlie's motive always requires examination of his thoughts, either through dialogue with others, through direct telling of his thoughts by allowing the reader to get into Charlie's head, or by implications as new facts are revealed. However, this examination cannot be done by Charlie alone. The character who endlessly seeks to understand his own motives, with no outside help or influence, will become a bore.

A warning though. Just as pain, jeopardy and heroic proportion can be overused, so can the tools of realism. Badly done realism feels pretentious and boring.

Revealing Charlie's past takes time, as does revealing his motivation. The reader expects that anything having a lot of time devoted to it is important. There are only so many things about Charlie's past that are truly important to the present story. If you keep going into Charlie's past, you will find you are only repeating yourself or are recalling events that don't matter. Either way, you will cause your reader to feel confused, disappointed or frustrated; and you may have just turned your reader off to any future works of yours.

To be a good realistic writer, and to create good, realistic characters, you must use all these tools in moderation. Tell Charlie's story of heroic proportions by having him suffer real pain and experience genuine jeopardy; show his character through his past and his motivations. In the end, you will have a very real character of which you can be proud.



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