



Characterization—making fascinating people

Writers of literary fiction usually begin by imagining a character. The characters engage us first and are remembered more than plots. Plots are merely chapters in the lives of memorable characters.

Writers of commercial fiction occasionally begin with the character but more often those who write category books e.g., adventure, spy, western, science-fiction, and romance novels start with the plot, then populate it with characters. That method often results in work with stories that seem *artificial* or *contrived*.

Some writers can't help starting out with a theme that obsesses them. They work out a plot first, then imagine characters whose lives might involve the theme. Only if their allegiance is to the character, is their theme-originated story likely to survive.

Master editor Sol Stein says, "What I hope for when I picked up a manuscript, is to fall in love, to be quickly swept up into the life of a character so interesting that I can't bear to shut the manuscript in a desk drawer overnight. I want to take it home with me so that I can continue reading it."

We know what love is, we think of the other person at odd times, we wonder where they are, what they're doing, we seem a bit crazy to the rest of the world. That's exactly the feeling Stein has about characters he falls in love with.

Readers need to know the people in the car before they see the car crash. The events of the story do not affect our emotions in any important way unless we know the characters. Some books center on catastrophic events that don't move us at all. The characters in those books come across as stereotypes with names. If they are not alive, why should the reader care if their wellbeing is threatened?

Let's look at proof that characters come first:

Harry jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.

The typical reaction is *so what?* Who's Harry? What if we add just one word, a second name of someone readers may remember. With that addition, does the reader's reaction to the sentence change?

Harry Belafonte jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.

Suddenly the sentence means something. If you remember the singer Harry Belafonte, you can visualize the character. Why did he jump? Is he okay? Although there was no characterization beyond his name, we care because it is someone we know about.

When neighbors report gossip to us about people we know, we can be titillated or sometimes even moved. A writer cannot depend upon sometimes. His characterizations must elicit emotion from a wide variety of readers without fail. How does he do it? He learns the art of characterization, adding details and depth until he has created a character whom we may know better than our closest friends.

How does a writer characterize in simple ways?

What we do in life is lazy. We say the first thing that comes into our heads. Think of the ticket taker at a movie house. He sees people passing in a stream. He can only make quick generalizations. The man is tall, the woman is skinny. How does the writer deal with similar facts?

Frank is so tall, he entered the room as if he expected a lintel to hit him, conveying the image of a man with a perpetually stiff neck.

The man is not just tall he is being characterized through an action. What about the skinny woman? How does a writer deal with that fact?

She always stands sideways so people can see how thin she is.

Again the writer is not just describing; he is characterizing by action. We individualize by seeing characters doing things and saying things, and not by the author telling us about them. Don't ever stop telling your story to characterize. Avoid telling the reader what your character is like. Let the reader see your character talking and doing things.

Here's an example from the novel "Crossing Blood":

Once we looked in Patricia's window and saw her in her half-slip.... First she curled her eyelashes, holding a mirror in her hand. Then out of the blue she picked up a lipstick, smeared on and kissed the mirror. Kissed it. She made little kiss marks and looked them over real close, studying them. She was dead serious about it. Jimmy got mad and made us get down off the trash cans and stop looking. He swatted Donald to make the rest of the of us stop laughing at Patricia.

The same author will now introduce a character called Skippy. The author doesn't tell us Skippy was brave; but lets the readers experience Skippy's bravery through an action:

Skippy will pick up a snake as quick as he will a cat. He will let one crawl on his neck and down his arm, a black snake, until me and Roy go crazy watching them. More than once he let me and Roy hold one, which we did, but we had to practically quit breathing to do it.

Exaggeration is another technique for characterizing:

Laverne weighed two tons naked.

No one believes Laverne weighed 4000 pounds. In speech we hear it said about an object that "it weighed a ton." We exaggerate constantly. It's a way of communicating quickly, and often effectively.

Comparison to a known quantity or quality is sometimes a useful form of exaggeration.

Archie was Wilt Chamberlain tall.

Bruce waltzed me around the dance floor. If I'd shut my eyes, he could've been Fred Astaire.

Reproving someone who is late a layman my write, “I’ve been waiting a long time for you.” That doesn’t characterize the speaker or the latecomer. “I’ve been waiting forever for you” is an exaggeration—and it’s also a cliché. It doesn’t characterize. Here’s how an experienced writer did it:

“Girl, my fingernails could have grown an inch waiting for you.”

When an author needed to introduce a character who would prove to be influential, a tough lawyer who is short and bald, he wrote:

“This distributor has a lawyer so short you wouldn’t be able to see him if he Sat behind the desk. And he’s Yul Brynner bald. But when he shakes your hand you know this dude could squeeze an apple into apple juice. Every time Dino opens his mouth, this lawyer pees in it.”

It’s not the author talking, it’s a character talking, and therefore an acceptable exaggeration. It also characterizes the speaker.

You can characterize more than one person at a time. You can characterize the person speaking as well as the one being spoken about.

If there’s a common error among inexperienced writers, it’s that they say too much, they try to characterize with an excess of detail instead of finding the word or phrase that characterizes best.

The word you select depends upon the circumstances under which you introduced the character. For instance, when you first see a character at any distance, physical size makes an instant impression. If you are seeing a character at a closer range, we often notice the eyes first. What inexperienced writers often do is give us the color or shape of the eyes. That’s not as effective as conveying how the character uses his eyes. If on meeting a person he averts his eyes, it usually implies something negative. Good eye contact is perceived as positive. Unrelenting eye contact can be negative to the shy or withdrawn character:

I couldn’t make eye contact with her. She was looking for invisible spots on the wall.

She said, “I don’t love you anymore,” but her eyes belied her words.

She didn’t answer me. She just continued to glare as if her eyes said it all.

Look over some of your past writings and see if you can use the information here to better characterize your characters. Think about how characterization techniques might improve your reader’s experience.