CHARACTERIZATION

The famous dictum is: Character is plot, plot is character. Amen. You can't have one without the other and the reason is simple: Plot is the action of the story and the action is what the characters do. What the hero does to resolve conflicts determines the course of the tale you're telling. And who is the hero? That seems like a reasonable segue to a new section, which we will cleverly call . . .

The Hero

First, a truism:

A hero must be the agent of the story's resolution. That means that a) he must act, rather than be acted on, and b) he must be directly involved in the main plot.

He can be what modernist literati call the "anti-hero"—that is, he can behave badly—but if he is the character whose actions determine the course of the plot, he serves the narrative function of the "hero."

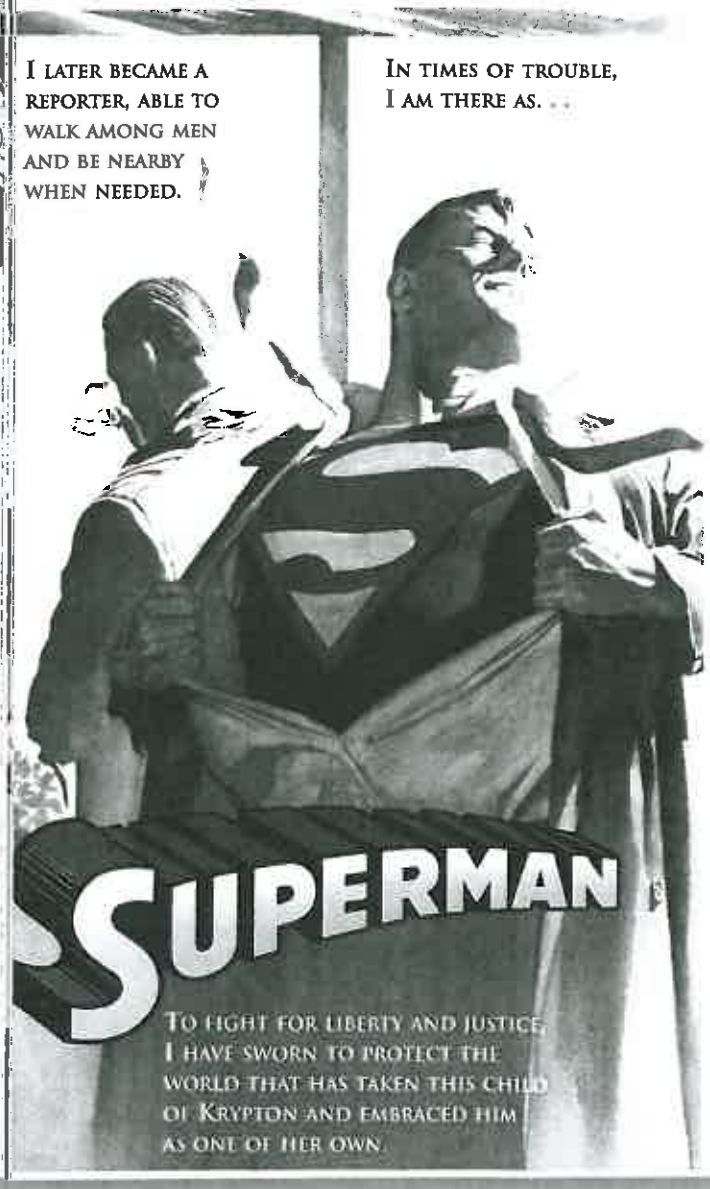
Most heroes also do something else: They represent values the audience will find admirable. The ancient Greeks, who gave us the basics of most of our heroic fiction, defined "hero" as one who "protects and serves." Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey,* says that in mythological terms, the hero is "someone willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others." So super heroes are powerful figures who represent a culture's notion of what is best in it and who are devoted to protecting and serving those values. For years, comic book characterization didn't go much deeper than that, and in some television versions of the super heroic it still doesn't. But comics writers have gotten sophisticated and learned that they have a much more interesting character if their superdoer does more than put on the fancy threads and dash out to smite anyone who menaces the common good.

In the eighties, some comic book writers "deconstructed" heroism by showing the good guys to be unpleasant, greedy, lascivious—traits many readers found titillating, especially when they were grafted onto heroes from earlier eras. Those stories had some immediate shock value—they certainly got the audience's attention—but, over time, deconstruction is a very limiting narrative strategy. Where do you go, once you've shown your hero to be a creep? You've given readers no one to admire, to root for, no one to identify with (unless they're the kind of readers you don't want to meet); eventually, they'll tire of someone who, in real life, they'd cross the street to avoid.

None of this means your hero should not be flawed. On the contrary, paragons of unrelieved virtue are often, alas, more admired than liked. But a character doesn't need to be perfect to not be a jerk. Part of Stan Lee's genius, when he was creating the Marvel Universe in the early sixties, lay in

Azrael, who has temporarily assumed Batman's identity, may be behaving badly, but because he drives the action, he is the story's "hero." From *Batman: Knightfall.* Script by Chuck Dixon and art by Graham Nolan and Dick Giordano.

Guy Gardner misbehaves in *Justice League: A New Beginning.* Written by Keith Giffen and J. M. DeMatteis. Art by Kevin Maguire and Al Gordon.



his realizing that a cookie-cutter nobility could be pretty boring. So he invested his heroes with a lot of foibles. They were cantankerous, quarrelsome, demanding, insecure, and sometimes petty. But they got the job done, regardless of personal cost, and the job was always worth doing.

Here's the question to ask yourself when determining what negative qualities to impart to your hero: Do his flaws add to or distract from the story?

Nothing should ever distract from the story.

Superman's ideals are summed up in *Superman: Peace on Earth.* Script by Paul Dini and illustrated by Alex Ross.

(opposite) What's a super heroine afraid of? This Wonder Woman sequence from *Wonder Woman Secret Files #1* gives us the answer. Script by Joanna Sandsmark and art by Dick Giordano and Sal Buscema.

Other Characters

Either before you begin, or in the process of writing your story, you'll have to learn some things about all your fictional people, heroic and non-heroic alike. The basic question to be answered in creating character is, Why does my fictional person act this way? To answer that, it might be helpful to answer these other questions:

1 What does my person always want?

Superman wants to uphold the values he inherited from his foster parents, the saintly Mr. and Mrs. Kent, and to integrate himself into the culture of his adopted home. Batman wants to avenge his parents' murders. James Bond wants to live a life of high adventure seasoned with hedonism and, incidentally, to serve Her Majesty. Odysseus wants to go home. Sylvester wants to have Tweety Bird for dinner.

2 Who or what does he love?

His country, his family, himself, the cute blonde who sits next to him in geometry class—what? The answer to this need not be deep or complicated; Superman's "truth, justice, and the American way" is perfectly satisfactory.

3 What is he afraid of?

This is the question that screenwriter and director Robert Towne insists must be asked. In his superb screenplay for *Chinatown,* Towne's hero is Jake Gittes, a cynical private eye who seems to be fearless. But he isn't. Towne says that Gittes is afraid of looking foolish. Probably not one person in 10,000 will be conscious that this is what Gittes dreads, but if you look at *Chinatown* carefully, you'll see that it motivates much of his action. (Don't take my word for it; go rent the movie, and enjoy.)

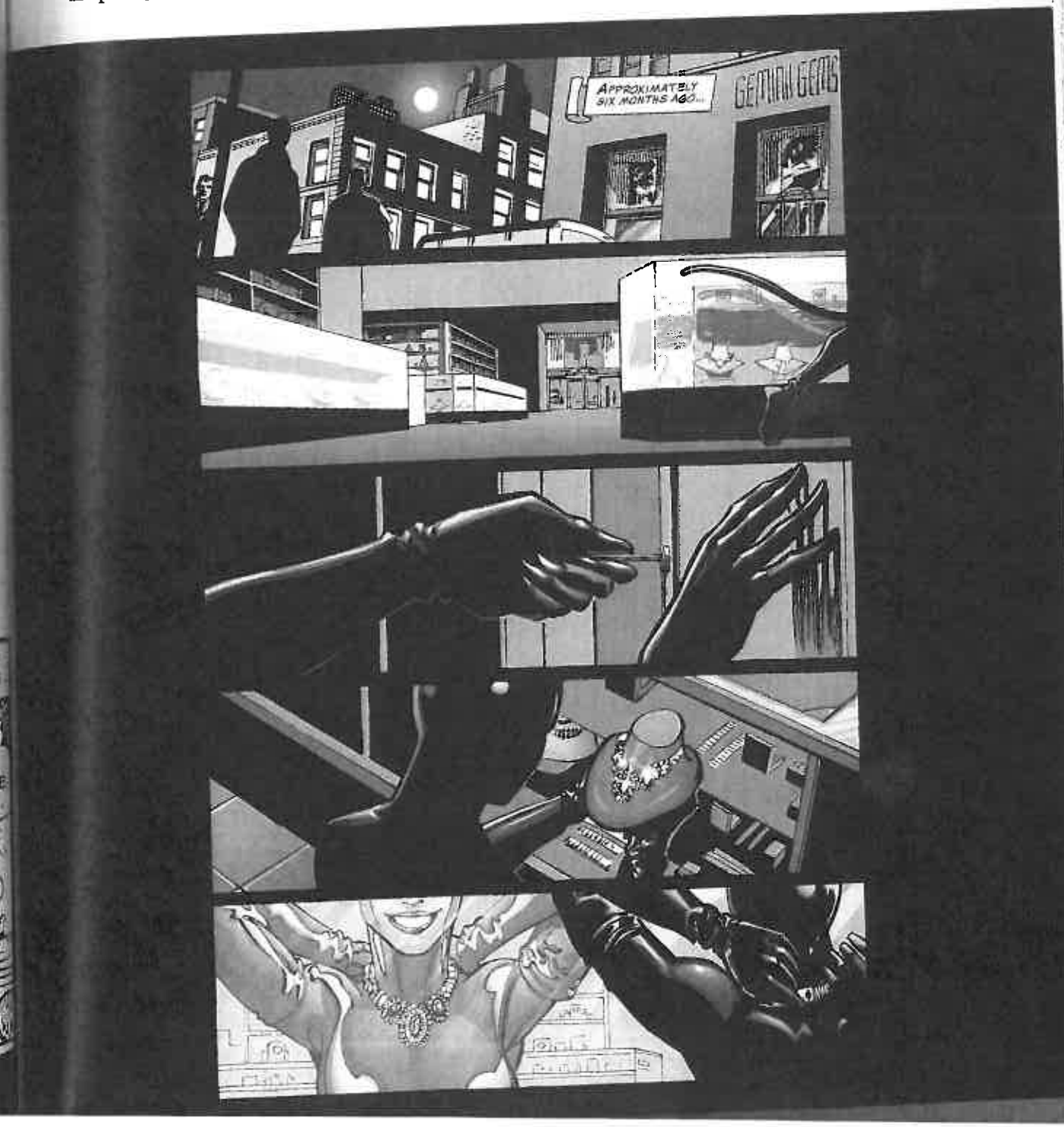
4 Why does he involve himself in extreme situations?

If you're writing a single story, not part of a series, this question will be answered when you establish the conflict. But if you're working in a serial form, you must give your hero a logical reason to continually put himself in peril. Television folk call this the hero's "franchise." It explains why the tube is rife with cops, pri-

Dialogue

I've been ignoring dialogue and that's a pretty serious omission, no? The uninitiated think that dialogue is how writers reveal character. That's what writers do, isn't it? Create dialogue? Well, no. Not entirely. Character is revealed by action, not talk. In fiction as in life, words can be used to hide the truth, from the speaker as well as the spoken-to. A well-told comic book story can be understood even when written in Swahili. (I'm assuming the reader doesn't happen to be a Bantu.) But . . .

Dialogue is important. It lends color, depth, wit, and meaning to the narrative. It explains. It clarifies. It helps create the illusion that what's on the page is a person, and not just some ink. Shakespeare told good stories, but what we remember, what makes Hamlet more than just a kid with problems is the poetry, rendered as dialogue.



Here's the first thing I'd ask you to remember about dialogue: Use it early and often. There's been a tendency, recently, for writers to load pages with captions, often omitting speech balloons for several pages running. That's dangerous. One very good writer-editor I've worked with believes that many readers don't read captions at all, and he may be right. Even if he isn't, it's almost certainly true that captions don't have dialogue's power to engage readers. We're all interested in people and we have a tendency to want to "hear" them talk. So when writing comics (or short stories or magazine features) it's a good idea to get your people speaking as soon as possible. Tom Wolfe, a superb reporter and novelist, wrote that his peers "learned by trial and error something that has since been demonstrated in academic studies; namely, that realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device."

William Moulton Marston used dialogue to lend color, depth, wit, and meaning to his Wonder Woman stories. Art by Harry Peter.

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1. CAPTION: The Queen explains the Magic Lasso to Diana.
(The Queen is seated in her throne chair explaining. Diana stands before her holding the lasso and examining it closely as her mother points to its links.)
Queen: It is made of tiny golden links which are unbreakable. They were taken, at Aphrodite's command, from the Magic Girdle itself!
Diana: This chain is so fine - it is like silk!
2. (Diana is twirling the lasso as the Queen leans forward earnestly.)
Queen: The Magic Lasso carries Aphrodite's power to make men and women submit to your will! Whomever you bind with that lasso must obey you!
Diana: Obey me - but Mother! - what -
3. CAPTION: Doctor Althea interrupts the conference.
(The doctor woman is entering. She stops a little distance from the Queen as the Queen holds up her hand.)
Queen: Sorry, Doctor, I'm busy!
Diana (thinking): I'll try this Magic Lasso on the Doc! (aloud) Wait, Doctor! Stand on your head!
Althea: S-stand on my head! Certainly not! Not even for you, Princess!
4. (Diana has thrown the lasso which is whirling over Althea's head. The doctor looks up at it and squeaks)
Diana: I thought you would refuse to stand on your head. But we'll see -
Althea: Ee-ek! Are you crazy, Diana?

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PAGE 12

5. (Althea is standing on her head, the Magic Lasso is pulled tight about her skirts, holding them in place with Diana holding the lasso.)
Diana: Now stand on your head!
Althea: N-n- yes, Princess!! I wouldn't do it but something compels me!
Queen: Stop your silly tricks, Diana! Think of the Doctor's dignity!
6. (Althea, all injured dignity, is smoothing her hair and skirt, as Diana is starting for the door.)
Althea: I come to report that Captain Trevor is better. I removed his eye bandages and -
Queen: Bind his eyes again immediately! He must not see Holly or Paradise Island!
Diana: Nothing except me! I'll blind him again - if I can!
7. (Steve lies on his cot holding one of Diana's hands in both his own)
Steve: My eyes must be bad again! You're the scientist who saved my life. But you look to me like the most beautiful girl in the world!
Diana: If you eyes are bad, I hope they stay this way!
8. (Diana is seated beside Trevor's bed. She holds a map on which he is pointing out a spot with his finger.)
Diana: Tell me your story.
Steve: My job in America is catching spies. I followed an important enemy agent to an island - see! There on the map. Machine guns opened up on me and I crashed - must have drifted unconscious, for days!

PAGE 13

1. CAPTION: Too soon the day arrives when Princess Diana must leave Paradise Island - perhaps forever!


E QUEEN EXPLAINS THE MAGIC SSO TO DIANA.
IS MADE OF TINY GOLDEN LINKS HICH ARE UNBREAKABLE. THEY ERE TAKEN, AT APHRODITE'S OMMAND, FROM THE MAGIC IRDLE ITSELF!
THIS CHAIN IS SO FINE — IT IS LIKE SILK!
THE MAGIC LASSO CARRIES APHRODITE'S POWER TO MAKE MEN AND WOMEN SUBMIT TO YOUR WILL! WHOEVER YOU BIND WITH THAT LASSO MUST OBEY YOU!
OBEY ME — BUT, MOTHER! — WHAT—
DOCTOR ALTHEA INTERRUPTS THE CONFERENCE.
SORRY, DOCTOR, I'M BUSY!
I'LL TRY THIS MAGIC LASSO ON THE DOC!
DOCTOR! STAND ON YOUR HEAD!
S-STAND ON MY HEAD! CERTAINLY NOT! NOT EVEN FOR YOU, PRINCESS!
THOUGHT YOU WOULD REFUSE O STAND ON YOUR HEAD. BUT WE'LL SEE —
EE-EK! ARE YOU CRAZY, DIANA?
NOW, STAND ON YOUR HEAD!
N-N-YES, PRINCESS! I WOULDN'T DO IT, BUT SOMETHING COMPELS ME!
STOP YOUR SILLY TRICKS, DIANA! THINK OF THE DOCTOR'S DIGNITY!
I CAME TO REPORT THAT CAPTAIN TREVOR IS BETTER. I REMOVED HIS EYE BANDAGES AND —
BIND HIS EYES AGAIN IMMEDIATELY! HE MUST SEE NOTHING ON PARADISE ISLAND!
NOTHING EXCEPT ME! I'LL BIND HIM AGAIN — MYSELF!
MY EYES MUST BE BAD AGAIN! YOU'RE THE SCIENTIST WHO SAVED MY LIFE. BUT YOU LOOK TO ME LIKE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN THE WORLD!
HM — IF YOUR EYES ARE BAD, I HOPE THEY STAY THIS WAY!
TELL ME YOUR STORY.
MY JOB IN AMERICA IS CATCHING SPIES. I FOLLOWED AN IMPORTANT ENEMY AGENT TO AN ISLAND — SEE ⊃ THERE ON THE MAP. MACHINE GUNS OPENED UP ON ME AND I CRASHED — MUST HAVE DRIFTED, UNCONSCIOUS, FOR DAYS — UNTIL YOU FOUND ME!
12A

So, then, my task is to teach you how to fill those word balloons with scintillating speech?

Sorry. I can't. I've never met anyone who claims to have been taught how to write dialogue. But it can't do any harm to offer a few suggestions:

1 Listen. Not only to the meaning of words, but to the cadences and rhythms of speech. Listen to the music of the human voice as well as to what it says.

2 Cultivate awareness of the difference between written and spoken language. You want to convince your readers that they're "hearing" people talk. You won't reproduce speech exactly—no fiction writer does and I suspect not many journalists do, either. In real life, and in the movies, on stage and on television, much is communicated by gradations of tone and inflection and changes of

little things.

Give me a good ending any time. You know where you are with an ending.

PAGE 2 PANEL 1

SAME GRID, SAME PLACE, SAME SCENE. IT'S ALL VERY DOMESTIC, MARC. ALL VERY SWEET AND REASSURING. THREE LADIES IN A LITTLE COTTAGE, HAVING A DISCUSSION THAT COULD, QUITE POSSIBLY, BE ABOUT MAKING WOOLLY GARMENTS FOR PEOPLE. THE MOTHER, SITTING IN HER CHAIR. SHE'S GOT ABOUT AN INCH OF KNITTING ON HER NEEDLES NOW. BALL OF YARN IN HER LAP (AND THE END OF THAT YARN STILL GOING OFF-PANEL). A HUGE BLACK CAT WITH GREEN EYES IS TWINING BETWEEN HER LEGS.

Mother: Now then, you mustn't say things like that. You know you don't mean them.

purl one, plain one, purl two together...

Mother: Why, that's what I like about making things for people. You can start off in Birmingham and finish in, well, Tangyanika or somewhere.

PAGE 2 PANEL 2

IN THE KITCHEN. THE OLD HAG (WELL, LET'S NOT MINCE WORDS, THAT'S WHAT SHE IS). SHE HAS AN ENORMOUS TEA POT, AND IS SPOONING TEA LEAVES INTO IT. THE KETTLE IS STEAMING.

Mother (off): That's not messy, my cherub. That's exciting.

Crone: Exciting my aunt banana!

What's so exciting about it?

Mother (off): Well, every one we make's unique. Never seen before. Never seen again.

PAGE 2 PANEL 3

THE CRONE, BUT IN CLOSE-UP. SHE'S POURING BOILING WATER FROM THE KETTLE INTO THE TEA-POT. LOTS OF STEAM. WE'RE LOOKING AT THE WATER AND THE KETTLE AND THE POT, MAINLY.

CRONE: HMMPH. I DON'T KNOW WHY THAT'S EXCITING. IT'S NOT LIKE ANYONE NOTICES WHAT WE DO. NOT LIKE ANYONE CARES.

Crone: And they're always complaining: they don't like the fit of it; too loose -- too tight -- too different -- too much like everyone else's.

PAGE 2 PANEL 4

THE CRONE. SHE'S RAISED HER ARMS HIGH, IS WIGGLING HER FINGERS AROUND, PRETENDING TO BE SOMEONE COMPLAINING. HER RAGGEDY SKIRTS ARE FLAPPING. SHE'S TALKING, WHITE HAIR BLOWING AROUND HER HEAD.

Crone: It's never what they want, and if we give them what they think they want they like it less than ever.

Crone: "I never thought it would be like this." "Why can't it be like the one I had before?"

I don't know why we bother.

This page from *Sandman: The Kindly Ones* shows how writer Neil Gaiman handles the dialogue-image juxtaposition. Art by Marc Hempel and D'Israeli.

A couple of cautions:

• Don't have your people speak or act out of character just to get a laugh. Hamlet says several funny lines in the course of his five-act life, but they're all as dark as the rest of his dialogue. Let Will be your master here.

• If you haven't developed a knack for writing humor, don't try to use it. Ever sit in an audience while someone in the spotlight told jokes that weren't funny? Painful, wasn't it? Be kind. Spare your audience the misery.

Before we finally leave this long, long section, I'll suggest a couple of other things to keep in mind: Your characters must be "true" to themselves—that is, they must behave/act consistently. A few paragraphs back, I said that you'll have to learn about your fictional people. You might be able to do this as you're writing. For many writers, that's an option. If you're the kind of writer who needs that information before you begin, you might want to do what playwright Arthur Miller does: write, for your eyes only, a biographical sketch for your main characters. Miller puts thousands of words about his people on paper before he even starts Act One. If you're a little less industrious, or caught in a deadline crunch, you might at least want to answer the four basic questions outlined above about your main characters.

I've saved one of the most important points for last. It is so important that it deserves large, black type:

Everything that's true about creating heroes is equally true about creating villains.

If you're going to be a slacker, be lazy about your hero and save your industriousness for your villain. He or she is in some ways the most important character in your story. The reason is simple: A hero is only as good as his antagonist. That's why some kung fu movies are dull—the excellent martial arts master spends much of his screen time mowing down cardboard baddies who are obviously no match for him—and why characters like Superman can be hard to write: An ordinary bank robber is not likely to cause a guy who can flit to the ends of the universe, withstand nuclear blasts and marry Lois Lane a whole lot of worry. And if you use hundreds of words explaining why this particular bank robber is fretting the Man of Steel, you're in danger of bringing your story to a screeching halt. (Remember: you're writing melodrama and effective melodrama has to move.)

So: Your villain must be at least your hero's equal and it's often desirable if he's superior, in strength, resources, and intelligence, if not morals. Give the bad guy an edge and you give the good guy problems and the reader an underdog to root for. Provide your antagonist with motivation. Intelligent comics readers won't happily accept a nasty fellow who announces, "I'm going to unleash the herd of killer robots on downtown Metropolis because . . . I'm a supervillain!" That's really not much of a reason. And make him colorful, even if he has no extraordinary powers. (The best-known villain in comics is, arguably, Batman's arch foe, the Joker, who is physically pretty wimpy, but, with that green hair, purple suit, and white skin, he certainly is vivid.)

In *Forever People,* Jack Kirby created a villain who could match wits with even Superman in the character of Darkseid.