

Writing Backstory

Someone asked how do you handle backstory of characters? How much do you show? How much can you just hint at?

One writing book I read long ago -- long enough to forget it's name -- talked about the importance of making the characters seem real by having them exist prior to the beginning of the book. This is done by giving them histories.

Certainly I feel like you create more depth in characters by not explaining everything. If you leave shadows -- areas not fully explained -- then what you hinted at seems deeper and richer than if you fully explore it.

One anime I'm watching now is called *Haibane Renmei*. It's a story about a young girl finding herself reborn with wings in a mysterious town. She doesn't remember who she is, and she's named Rakka which means "falling" because her only memory is of a dream about falling. Somethings about the world are explained but most of it is left up to the imagination. In an interview on the DVD, the creator talks about the fact that he never makes clear what exactly is going on. This could be an afterlife where the girls need to 'learn' something before gaining heaven. This could be aliens, trying to control and understand humans. Who knows. But it's cool, and the story is about the girls, not the world.

Sometimes backstory can be fully explored in back flashes, a mystery of the past can provide the key to the mystery of the present. "Stir of Echoes" is a movie about a man whose psychic abilities are unlocked to see a ghost in his house. We're then given back flashes of the past to discover how a girl was killed in the house. The backstory is important to the present as her killer still lurks nearby, ready to kill to keep his secret.

Other times, we don't really need to know the past, just hints of "we share a past, he hates me, I hate him, end of story" is enough.

In my own writing I use both. In *ALIEN TASTE*, Max is introduced to be a widower and still grieving over his dead wife. I make a few allusions to it. Max gets drunks and talks about his disappointment of how his life turned out -- nearly 40, alone, and no kids. Later Indigo mentions that Max was investigated for his wife's death only to be cleared because he was on the opposite coast when she disappeared. Lastly, Ukiah shows photographs of her crashed car and grave of the wife to Indigo. Nothing else is mentioned. It gave the illusion of a huge backstory, giving depth to Max, but without the bulk of more of story that might distract from the story of now. Certainly, nothing about the death of Max's wife could add to the current story since it was an open and close case that has nothing to do with what they are doing now.

On the other hand, in *Tainted Trail*, Ukiah and Max go to Oregon to find their friend, Alicia. Originally I wrote the novel with no backflashes. The character motivations, however, were lacking. The reader needed to see how Ukiah and Alicia

interacted to understand 1) that Alicia would dig into Ukiah's past and thus bring trouble down on her head and 2) Ukiah would move heaven and earth to get Alicia back. Thus I went back and added several scenes of Ukiah and Alicia together that explored their relationship prior to Alicia disappearing.

I would recommend that you go ahead and allude to common history between characters, but only adding backflashes to explorer deep if the history is important to *future* actions of the characters.

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Posted by wen at November 8, 2003 11:36 PM