You and Your Characters

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Once I admitted to myself that I had the raging hunger to write, I gobbled up every book on the subject I could find. I still have most of them; I've just gathered fourteen and stacked them beside my computer monitor for inspiration. Each has a chapter on characterization. If you're looking for technical jargon, have I got some used books for you!

It seems that there are all kinds of characters: developing characters, static characters, round characters, fiat characters, cardboard characters (oh, are there cardboard characters!), viewpoint characters, sympathetic characters, unsympathetic characters, stock characters, confidantes, foils, spear carriers, narrators, protagonists, antagonists. But that's not all; characters can play many roles. There are fiat, sympathetic, static confidantes, like the unnamed first-person narrator in H. G. Wells's "The Time Machine." Or developing, fiat, unsympathetic antagonists, like HAL in 2001, A Space Odyssey. Still with me?

Recently I've been teaching my daughter Maura to ski, a skill described by a language every bit as arcane as that of characterization. To execute the stem turn, for example, you must learn to unweight, side slip, and reset the edges of your uphill and downhill skis. Suppose I were to ski alongside of you as you write your next story, shrieking instructions. "Okay now, drop a little description here, shoulders downhill, unweight the uphill ski.., now use your foil to keep your spear carriers nice Tell, don't show!" You'd get so that you'd end up face down how to ski--or write—until set your edges, side slip, that's it, and flat.., no, no! Slow down! flustered trying to follow directions in the snow. No one can tell you you've already tried it and taken some falls. You should open a how-to book like this only after a hard day of doing, when you're sitting with your feet propped in front of a crackling fire and figuring out what went wrong, how to make it better tomorrow.

Although the vocabulary of characterization is important, it also can get in your way. In fact, even if you were to memorize all of the definitions, your next move would be to forget them as soon as possible. I don't worry about who's round and who's fiat when I'm working on a story; I'm too busy trying not to slam into the trees. The way to master technique is by writing, not by reading. You need to load the fundamental concepts of the craft into your intuition, where they can do the most good, rather than into your consciousness, where they can only distract you. Internalize, internalize!

Having said that, there's one suggestion I can offer before you launch yourself onto fiction's slippery slopes. Nothing startling, nothing abstruse--just a little trick that works for me. Why don't you try it before we sort through the nomenclature? In my opinion, the best way to write believable stories is to pretend that each character is you.

The operative word here is pretend. You couldn't possibly be your characters, since you exist in different worlds. There are no wizards or vampires in your neighborhood and you'll probably never get into orbit, more's the pity. The life histories you create for these imaginary people will necessarily be different from your own. You'll have to pretend to be both male and female, young and old, good and evil. Yet no matter how far a story leads away from your own experience, or even from the familiar precincts of reality, you must strive to put yourself in your character's place.

Imagining you are your characters can help keep you from reproducing the cast of plot-driven robots that traditionally has clunked through our genre. Take, for example, the bore. Chances are you wouldn't dream of lecturing people in a casual conversation and you look for the exits when some bore does start to pontificate. Yet characters in badly written SF are always dumping information on each other in order to advance the story. Or consider the plot convert, who spends most of the story thwarting the hero until a moment of blinding revelation. A conversion follows that makes St. Paul's on the road to Damascus seem halfhearted, so that the writer can present us with an ending as tidy as a military school bunkroom. In my experience, people admit they're wrong grudgingly, if at all. Yet another example is the damn fool. Why is it that when some bloodthirsty creature clearly threatens the planetary exploration team, some damn fool always wanders off and gets himself killed? Would you leave the safety of the spaceship? Of course not! However, the damn fools do every time; otherwise there'd be no story.

All right, you know better than to make such basic mistakes. So then why does every character have to be you? Can't you draw from your circle of friends and acquaintances? Your Aunt Mary? George Bush?

Yes, by all means. Many writers base characters on real people who are not themselves. I know I have. However, I do not fool myself into imagining that I've captured my real life models in words. Maybe I can make my characters act just like people I've met or read about. If I'm lucky, I might even have the benefit of having heard my models explain why they did what they did. But most people live the unexamined life that Plato warned us of; their insight into their own motivations is limited. Besides, human behavior is over determined. We have more than one reason for doing just about everything we do. When the real-life murderer confesses, "I killed him because of this," he's oversimplifying. What he should say is, "I killed him because of this and this and this and especially that, which I had no way of knowing." Journalists report confessions; when readers want simple truth, they buy a newspaper. But readers also crave more complex truth. When they seek a literary experience that maps the often bewildering convolutions of their own inner lives, they buy Asimov's. As a fiction writer, your job is to sift through an array of possible motivations--some logical, many not--and present only the ones that make the most story sense to you. The way to do that is not to ask "What would make one man kill another?" Unless you're a telepath, the answer to that question will always be unknowable. Better to ask "What would make me kill someone?"

While I believe that this unblinking self-examination is absolutely necessary, I realize that it can be very disturbing. You want to be liked and would much prefer to present your best side to the world. However, fiction is not public relations. We all have dark impulses that we've been taught to hide, perhaps even to deny; to be a writer you must unlearn some of the lessons of civilization. Nobody takes seriously a story in which the good guys are all saints and the bad guys are the spawn of hell. Saints can have their bad days and even monsters love their moms. Increasing the level of moral ambiguity usually enhances a character's believability. Only psychopaths do wrong for the fun of it. Most of the evil in the world is perpetrated by people like you and me--the very people you want to characterize. Sometimes we do it out of malice; sometimes we're merely selfish or lazy; often as not we think we're doing the right thing. In any event, you have to be brave enough to portray your own ugliness in order to create memorable characters.

I know that some will resist this advice. Why go to all the trouble of putting yourself into stories, stretching your moral imagination to the breaking point, perhaps scaring the hell out of yourself in the process? In the May 1985 issue of Asimov's, the great Isaac Asimov himself stirred up a controversy when he published a polemical essay called "The Little Tin God of Characterization." Isaac's thesis was that because of the unique nature of science fiction, characterization is not as important as getting the ideas right. "I do what I can, but I've got my limits, and if I have to settle for less than 100 percent, I just make sure that I remember where the science fictional bottom line is. Not characterization, not style, not poetic metaphor--but idea. Anything else I will skimp on if I have to. Not idea." Throughout the history of the genre, others have made similar arguments for the supremacy of idea over characterization. In fact, if there ever was a war between the humanists and the cyberpunks of my generation (a dubious proposition), it was fought over this very issue. You'll find any number of published, award-winning writers who will "skimp" at times on characterization while they dazzle us with the brilliance of their ideas. In fact, some writers, myself among them, actually have been taken to task for attempting to write the science fiction novel of character--an oxymoron, to some sensibilities. So whom should you believe?

First of all, as Isaac and others were quick to point out, character and idea are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, few are gifted with the extrapolative genius of an Asimov. The rest of us, beginners especially, must work as hard at characterization as we do on our ideas in order to maintain the suspension of disbelief that readers demand. When a wonky idea, a wooden character, or even an incoherent sentence cause readers to realize they're reading fiction, the writer has lost the game. And there are certain standards of characterization below which even the hardest of hard science fiction writers dare not descend. There is, however, an even-more-telling objection to those who maintain that brilliant ideas can carry mundane characters.

The quality, of speculation is directly related to the .quality of characterization. Readers presented with a new reality, whether it is a generation starship, an alien planet, or a magic kingdom, apply certain tests of credibility. How long could a dosed system in outer space be self-supporting? Could a world without metals support a technological civilization? What would keep the wizards from taking over everything? Although questions about infrastructure, of political and social organization, may be the first to occur, readers eventually will ask another, equally crucial question before disbelief is completely suspended. Does the fictive world support the diversity of human life that we see in the real world? It makes no difference that the shiny mag-lev trains run on time if the riders are all middle-aged white American males in three-piece suits. A richly imagined world inhabited by manikins is inherently less believable than the same world would be if it teemed with well-drawn characters who are truly citizens of their alternate reality. In

my opinion, this is one reason why some of the classic writers of science fiction are now so painful to read. E. E. "Doc" Smith's work is still chock-full of intricate speculation, but who can take his characters--especially his women--seriously? It's not only bad art, it's bad extrapolation. The science fiction character is the reader's guide to the ideas of the story. If she doesn't belong, nobody will trust her; if she isn't real, no one will believe her. Even the writer who aspires to write idea stories skimps on characterization at her peril.

The problem with this whole debate is that it makes the questionable assumption that we can yank characters out of their natural environment of plot and setting to analyze them. It's like expecting to learn something about the ethology of rainbow trout by watching the one you've just caught as it flops and gasps on the hot deck of your fishing boat, Or as Henry James said, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" Character, plot, setting, theme, idea, and style are inextricably bound; all must stand or fall together.

So yes, it's necessary to work at characterization, no matter what your ambitions in the genre are. And since your technique will be better if it's intuitive rather than self-conscious, it may help to try to imagine that you are your characters. However, as we have seen, writers and critics have developed a common language over the years so that they could talk to one another about this subject. Time now for some vocabulary drill. Don't worry; there's no pop quiz at the end of this chapter. You don't have to memorize the list in order to write well. However, whether or not you can define these terms, eventually you must come to understand them.

Antagonist: a.k.a. "the bad guy," but better thought of as the opponent of the protagonist or central character. The action of a story arises from conflict between the antagonist and protagonist, as in Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, with its struggle between the Wicked Witch of the West and Dorothy. The antagonist need not be a person at all but may be an animal, an inanimate object, or even nature itself. For example, the antagonist in Tom Godwin's story "The Cold Equations" is outer space.

Cardboard character: a stereotype, manikin, drone, or otherwise uninteresting simulacrum passing for a real character. Cardboard is what you use when--for whatever reason--you fail to put yourself into your characters. It is the only pejorative I've included in this list. The utopia of Edward Bellamy's didactic "idea" novel Looking Backward is entirely populated with rightthinking men and women of cardboard.

Confidante: someone in whom the central character confides, thus revealing her personality. Once again, that someone need not be a person. In Robert Heinlein's The Door into Summer the central character, Dan Davis, continually confides his plans and feelings to his cat Pete.

Developing character: a character who changes over the course of the story. The central character is often, but not always, a developing character. However, it's crucial that the action of the story causes some character to change. When I attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop, Damon Knight used to write "Who cares?" at the end of stories in which no one develops - a characteristically terse criticism that I found devastating. A tour de force of developing characterization is Louis Sacchetti, the protagonist of Thomas Disch's Camp Concentration, who is infected with a disease that makes him a genius.

Flat character: someone who is characterized by one or two traits. "Flat" and "round" were terms first proposed by E. M. Forster in his Aspects of the Novel, and they often are misapplied by modern critics. Flat is especially corrupted when used as a synonym for cardboard; in Forster's usage, flat is not a derogatory term. Rather, it describes a character who can be summed up in a sentence. Gollum from The Lord of the Rings is a wonderful character who is absolutely flat in that his character is determined by his obsession with the recovery of the ring, "his precious." Every story needs some flat characters, and many successful stories, for instance, Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, have nothing but flat characters.

Foil: someone whose character contrasts to that of the protagonist, thus throwing it into sharp relief. In Connie Willis's "The Last of the Winnebagos," Katie Powell serves as a foil to the protagonist David McCombe. Katie chases after David to expiate her guilt over killing one of the last surviving dogs on Earth, while David runs away from Katie and from admitting to himself that he, too, is responsible for the dog's death.

Narrator: the fictional storyteller. When the narrator is involved in the action of the story, she's called a first-person narrator. The sentence "I watched the triceratops eat my purse" is narrated in first person. When the narrator stands outside the story, she is usually taken to be the implied author. "Persephone watched as the triceratops ate her purse" is narrated in third person, presumably by the writer. Narrators can either be reliable or unreliable. For example, in Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver narrates his own story: "I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table, and to answer (but with the utmost brevity) the few questions I ask her." However, he is so credulous at the start and misanthropic at the end that we know enough not to take everything he tells us seriously. Since he is unreliable, we must read between his lines to discover Jonathan Swift's intent. On the other hand, we have every reason to trust the third-person narration in "Nightfall,"the implied storyteller, Isaac Asimov, means exactly what he says. The vast majority of author-as-narrator stories are told reliably. Indeed, a story in which the implied writer appears to be unreliable usually is scorned as a "reader cheater." However, there have been interesting experiments in unreliable third-person narration. The implied Bruce Sterling in "Doff Bangs" makes clear that he is unreliable in pursuit of higher truth. This is all very complicated, 1 know. We'll talk more about narrators when we get to viewpoint characters.

Protagonist: the central character, or the one whose name comes to mind when you ask the question "Whose story is this?" A story ought to have just one protagonist but a novel can have several, as in Kate Wilhelm's multigenerational novel of the Sumner family, Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang.

Round character: one who is complex and perhaps even contradictory. E. M. Forster (see fiat character) put it succinctly, "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way." If a fiat character can be summed up in a sentence or two, a round character probably would take an essay. For example, Genly Ai in The Left Hand of Darkness is one of Ursula Le Guin's many round characters.

Spear carriers: minor characters who provide verisimilitude. They must necessarily be flat, since they rarely are named or described in any detail. They tend to run in crowds; in movies these are the folks who make up the "cast of thousands." The dim-witted population of Earth in C. M. Kornbluth "The Marching Morons" are spear carriers.

Static character: a character who does not develop. Most characters in a story should be static, so as not to distract from the significant changes you will be depicting in the central character. Static, however, most certainly does not mean boring. In Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," all of the characters except for the scapegoat, Tessie Hutchinson, are static.

Stock character: a.k.a, stereotype, but actually a special kind of flat character who is instantly recognizable to most readers, as in the brave starship captain or the troubled teen or the ruthless businessperson. In the hands of a clumsy writer, the stock character never rises above the cardboard stereotype, which is unfortunate. Even as cliches encapsulate a kernel of truth, so do stock characters reflect aspects of real people. Courage is required of military personnel; people in business act ruthlessly at times in order to survive in that Darwinian world. In his collection of short stories, Fancies and Goodnights, John Collier demonstrates how to bring stock characters to life--he's particularly good with devils.

Sympathetic character: one whose motivations readers can understand and whose feelings they can comfortably share. This is the kind of character of whom naive readers will say "I could identify with her." The protagonist is often, but not always, sympathetic. Note that a sympathetic character need not be a good person. In George Orwell's 1984, despite the fact that he betrays Julia and his own values by embracing Big Brother, Winston Smith remains a sympathetic character.

Unsympathetic character: one whose motivations are suspect and whose feelings make us uncomfortable. The boundary between sympathetic and unsympathetic characterization is necessarily ill defined. The protagonist of Lucius Shepard's "Black Coral," an ugly American named Prince, is definitely not sympathetic, nor is he intended to be. However, once he brings destruction down on himself, we feel sorry for him. The central irony of this story is that the punishment Prince receives is to become a sympathetic character.

Viewpoint character: the focus of narration, the person or persons through whom we experience the story. One kind of viewpoint character is the first-person narrator. Here's Mitchell Courtenay, the first-person viewpoint character of Pohl and Kornbluth's The Space Merchants: "As I dressed that morning I ran over in my mind the long list of statistics, evasions and exaggerations that they would expect in my report." When author herself acts as narrator, she usually chooses to tell the story in the third person, limiting herself to the perspective of one character. While she is in his point of view, she has access to his thoughts and memories but not to those of anyone else, as in "The View from Venus," by Karen Joy Fowler: "Linda knows, of course, that the gorgeous male waiting for her, holding the elevator door open with his left hand, cannot be moving into apartment 201." A well-written third-person viewpoint can be so seductive that it appears that the viewpoint character is, in fact, the narrator; the implied author seems to disappear. However, the invisible author must continue to be reliable even if the viewpoint character is an unreliable focus on the action of the story. John Kessel's Good News from Outer Space has several limited third-person viewpoint characters--some fairly reliable, some less so. Kessel maintains consistency of point of view by switching only at the chapter breaks. It's also possible to have no viewpoint character at all, as when an omniscient author sees through everyone's eyes. In "Day Million" Frederik Pohl not only tells us what all of his characters think but also what his imaginary readers are thinking as they read his story!

There is one bit of advice that I most certainly will not give you. It says in some of the how-to-write books here in my collection that when you create characters, you must "Show, don't tell." This pernicious commandment charges you always to dramatize the personalities of your characters rather than to explain or comment on them. So instead of simply informing us that "Balthazsar was a reckless man," you must send him over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Don't believe it!

A short story is not a play. The playwright can enter the consciousness of his characters only with great difficulty, through awkward devices like the soliloquy or the aside. Almost all fiction, however, starts inside someone's head; readers expect to have complete access to the thoughts and feelings of at least one character. Although our inner life is not inherently dramatic, it is the stuff of superior fiction. Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" for example, is told almost entirely in the form of journal entries; there are relatively few scenes. Yet Charlie Gordon is one of the more memorable characters of science fiction. This is because, happily, telling can be showing. A character like Charlie dramatizes himself when he describes what he thinks and feels or when he interprets the actions of other people.

There is also the problem of limited resources. You would be squandering precious story time were you to allow each and every member of the crew of the starship to act out his reasons for choosing space service. Showing should be reserved only for very important persons. Feel free to tell readers exactly why your spear carriers are restless.

Finally, as a science fiction writer, you usually have the dual challenge of creating both character and context. In order to place your imaginary people in their imaginary world, it may at times be necessary to come right out and explain that your heroine is a girly girl, an under person, "cat-derived, though human in outward shape," and that this has everything to do with the fact that she falls hopelessly in love with a human lord of the Instrumentality and then never tells him. Or at least Cordwainer Smith thought so when he wrote "The Ballad of Lost C'MelI."

This is not to say that such tools of dramatic characterization as dialogue, action, and reaction are not essential. Rather it is to warn that "Show, don't tell" ought not be carved on the foundation stone of your house of fiction. Before you turn the page to the next chapter, one last tip on characterization: remember that when you make a new world, the people in it must necessarily be the crown of your creation.