

Creating Memorable Characters

By John Hewitt

When writing fiction, one of the greatest challenges is to come up with compelling characters that both interest the reader and fit the story. On the surface, fitting the story might seem like the lesser of the two considerations, but it really isn't. Beyond being interesting, the character must also be the type of person who will respond to your plot. Whatever the action of your story is, it needs to matter to your characters. You have to care about why these things are happening to this character, and take great interest in what the character will do, or will fail to do, about it.

Most people's ideas for a character begin with some spark. That spark can come from anywhere: A voice, a look, a profession, a line of dialog, or a plot you want that character involved in. Whatever that original aspect is, that is what you need to explore first. Expand upon that dialog; describe that voice. Whatever the first spark of life is, explore it until it begins to take shape.

Once you have moved beyond the first spark, you need to create a picture of that character in your mind. This starts out very simply. Are they male or female? Does he have a bald spot? Does she wear glasses? What kind of clothes do they wear? How old are they? These are all very basic questions, but it is surprising how often they are ignored.

Next, explore the character's background. What is their profession? Does the person even have a job? Where do they live? What is their family like? What kind of friends do they have? What kind of things do they own? This last question can be very telling. You can approach it from several angles. What is in their home? What is in their office at work? What do they carry in their pockets? How many keys do they have?

Once you reach that point, it's time to dig a little deeper. Ask yourself, what makes this character interesting, compelling, different? Try to come up with a single-sentence description that will vividly show a reader what kind of person this is. This isn't necessarily the way you will describe them when you sit down to write out your story, but it's important to have a clear image in your mind.

Some people would consider putting this earlier, but really, until you have all these details, I would not get too anxious to name the character. If a name has already come to mind, great, but until now the character doesn't absolutely need a name. At this point though, it becomes important. You know who they are, you know what they're like, now give them a name. Names should match the character, but without being cliché. A boxer named "Punch" is a little silly. Sure, a nickname may spring up that mirrors the character's personality, but the name itself should only suit the character, not pigeonhole them. Whole volumes can be written on naming characters alone, but suffice to say that buying a book of baby names and going through it until you find one that feels good will work.

Now you can try all sorts of ways to get further into your character's head. Interviewing the character is a good step. Ask them questions as if you're a reporter for Rolling Stone, People, or a magazine appropriate to your character's background. Ask them about themselves. Let them speak. If you have other characters in the story, ask them about your character. What do they think about this person? Do they see him or her differently?

Another way to explore your characters can be to visualize them in the midst of their everyday activities. How do they wash their clothes? What route do they take to work? What stations do they pick out on the radio? How do they act at a

party? How do they respond to their boss? What kind of expression is on their face? Do they smile often, or rarely? Picture the character five or ten years ago, and five or ten years in the future. Where will they be, and how will the circumstances of this story effect that?

After you've created your character, it's important to remember that they need to be treated as individuals with their own needs and agendas. Don't make a character violate their basic nature just to suit the plot. If this character's actions would change your plot too much, you need to either re-examine the plot, or create a more suitable character. Allow your characters to have quirks and contradictions though. Most people have a thousand little contradictions.

The most important advice I can give is to respect your characters. Treat them as important people, whether you like the individual character's personality or not. Remember that their feelings matter to them. What happens to them is important to them. If you don't find your character compelling and worthy of exploration, how can you expect a reader to?

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