

09. Characters

This lesson is about creating characters.

I want to stress again – I can't stress this enough – that character is story and story is character. We have to resist the idea that one comes first or is more important than the other. Most writers will tell you character is more important, but they're wrong. It's just that character is what stands out to them most. Especially in series. In series, you think about James Bond or Batman or Wonder Woman, but what really creates those characters – what defines them and brings them to life – is what they go through.

So instead of focusing on character, I'm asking you to focus on plot to *create* character.

Take Batman. When Batman was a child, the villain who we later find out is the Joker shot and killed Batman's parents in front of him. Is that character or plot? It's both.

Take Spider-Man. After he gets his superpower, and because of his own ego, he lets a criminal go by him and that criminal ends up killing his uncle Ben. That's character-plus-plot at its best, because not only do we have the story of what happened, but we also know that – unlike Batman – Spider-Man could have prevented it. Spider-Man had the chance to save Uncle Ben and the guilt of not doing so is what fuels him.

When I'm starting a book, I come up with the idea first and then ask myself who will tell the story.

In *Tell No One*, a man lost his wife and couldn't go on, then discovered she might still be alive. Who was going to tell that story? I invented an inner-city paediatrician named David Beck. The story for *Fool Me Once* was prompted by all my friends getting nanny cams. What if your husband had been murdered, and you go home and check out the nanny cam and see him playing with your daughter? Who's going to tell that story?

This is where fiction overlaps with memoir. I was at a UK military base on a United Services Organisation trip, entertaining the troops. In the old days, they got Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe; now they get me. I met a woman who was one of the first helicopter pilots to fly combat missions in the Middle East. She was great. So I thought: what if I make this story happen to her? How would she react, and how would that differ from a lawyer or doctor or television presenter? As an added bonus we'd learn about her life and her experience overseas. This chance encounter offered me a completely new character in completely new circumstances.

For the most part, I try to write about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Maya, from *Fool Me Once*, is a little different and so too is Myron Bolitar, from the Myron Bolitar series, but mostly I write about people who are trying to live life as best they can and wrong still seems to find them. I love the American Dream: getting married, having 2.4 kids, a picket fence and a couple of cars in the garage – now life is perfect, right? It's certainly perfect for the writer. Because where life is made perfect, that's where the dream can darken into nightmare. That joy is very fragile. It's a bubble. When you prick it with a pin, that's when your characters will emerge from the shadows.

I like to make characters a mosaic of people I've met: the way this person wears their hair; the way that person walks; what makes that person's dialogue tick. I don't plan them out that much in advance, because I like to learn about them as you do – as the reader does.

But I start from a base. In *Fool Me Once*, that base was the woman pilot I met in the UK. I called her Maya and put her in the situation that I'd already devised and observed her reactions. That's what I mean about plot being character and character plot. When Maya returns from overseas duty to find her dead husband playing with her child on the nanny cam, then what she does next informs me of who she is. If I'd decided in advance that she was stoic, so wouldn't react at all, or hysterical, so would go nuts, it would take away a bit of the juice for me.

The truth is that I probably do know almost everything about my characters before I start. But what I don't do is dwell on it, or consult that knowledge at every turn. It's like the iceberg effect. There's a whole world that exists under the water that I sense, but the character is going to reveal it to me in the same way she reveals it to you.

Writing in general is about empathy'. One of my favourite things is to give characters viewpoints I don't agree with. In trying to make such characters empathetic, you learn more about them and better understand where they're coming from. Most probably you still won't agree with them. But you can't have every character consistently match your own philosophies. It doesn't matter whether it's a good guy or a bad guy. Each guy needs a philosophy of his own.

I will often give the villain a philosophy that I personally subscribe to. I find that more interesting. After all, every character is a part of you. Every villain has a bit of me in them. So too does every hero.

Seeing things from the perspective of a character is different from sympathising with them. Sympathy is feeling sorry for the person. Empathy is putting the reader (or viewer) in the character's shoes. Empathy, for better or worse, is feeling what the character is feeling.

As I said earlier, fiction is a variant of memoir. This is what surprised me most as I prepared this course: how much of my real life is in my stories. For example, I wrote a young adult book called *Shelter*, which is also a TV series on Amazon Prime.

When I was a little kid, we used to go to the Little League field. There we heard stories about the Bat Lady who lived on Hobart Gap Road. If you stayed out too late at night or cut through her yard, the Bat Lady captured and ate you – my guess is you probably had an urban legend like that in your town as well. There really was a bat lady who lived on Hobart Gap Road, but I don't think she ever ate anyone. But as I grew up, I started to empathise. Later, when I adopted the writer's mind-frame, I began to think: 'What's it like for her? She's in this house alone and everybody's terrified of her. She's an old woman. What could I make her be that would surprise people and make them think again?' Then one day the idea occurred to me: 'Suppose she's Anne Frank. Suppose Anne Frank had survived World War II and was living in this house and using this persona to hide her identity.' That was the creation of Bat Lady and eventually, *Shelter*.

A great example of creating characters from urban legend derives from Richie 'The Boot' Boiardo, a famous mobster. *The Sopranos*, and in part *The Godfather*, are allegedly based on his house, and growing up listening to the stories that swirled around him and all the consequent questions: who really lives there, and who lives there now?

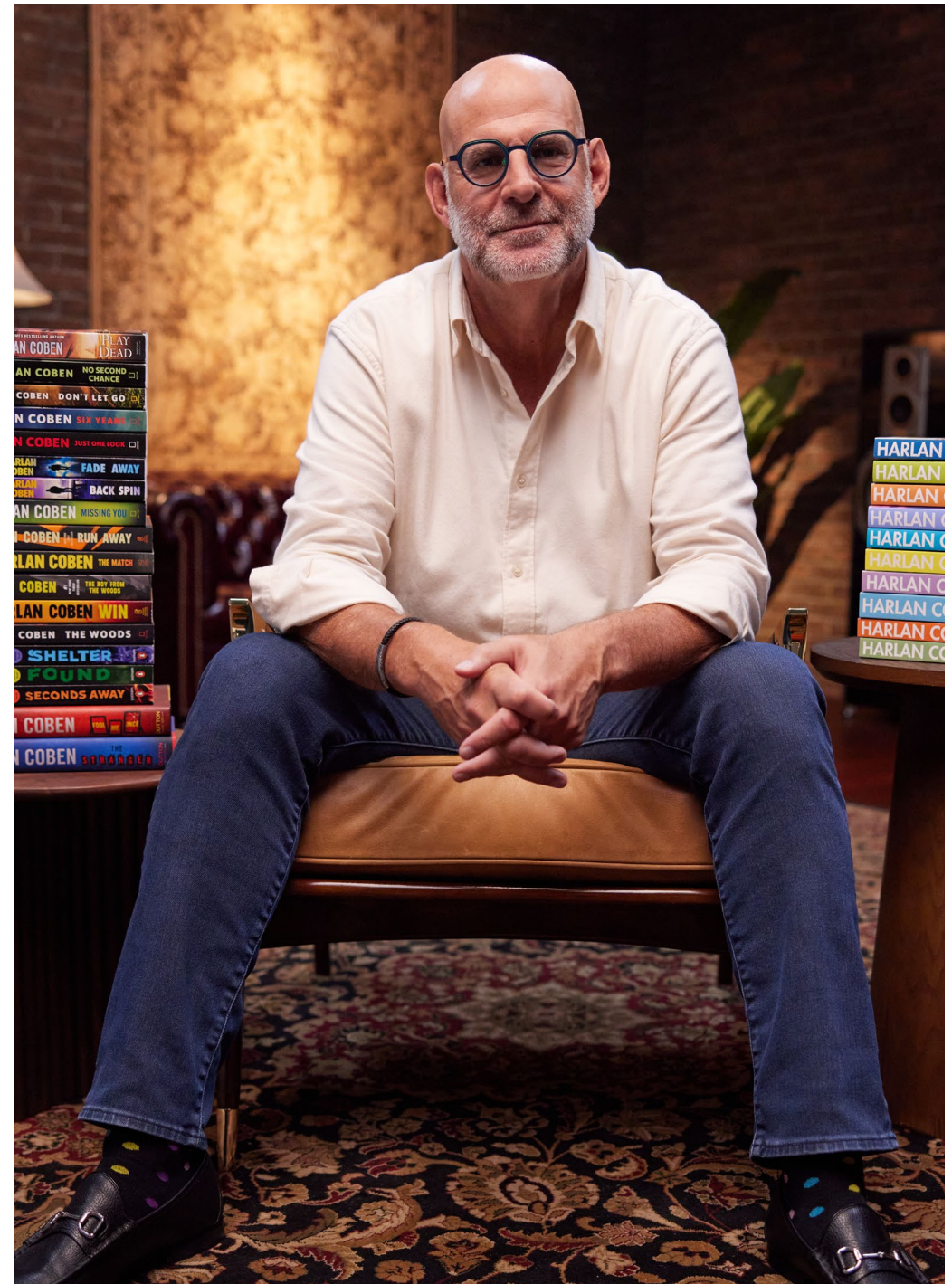
“ Focus on plot to create character.”

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Stories my kids told me also come into play. My son came home the first day at a new school and told me how he was in line for lunch and some other kid walks up to him and says, 'You want my spoon?' 'Are there no spoons up there?' my son asks, and the kid says: 'No spoons up there, but I thought you could use mine.' There's stuff on the spoon, and my son says: 'Yeah, no, I'm good.' As he's telling me this my mind is racing, and if you read *Shelter* or watch the TV show, you'll see there's a character named Spoon that I created from this kid my son met at school.

Here's another example. The Goth character in *Shelter* is a large girl. My daughter was a large girl at the time and was put into these team-building exercises at school where they would carry each other across water. She was mortified, and coming home in tears. I channelled the anger that aroused in me into creating this character and the situations she finds herself in.

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Another way of creating character is to defy expectations. The serial killer, for example, might play with dolls. I was doing a TV series recently and the cop was getting married and the writer had his fiancée working on the flowers and all the arrangements for the wedding. I said, 'Let's make it the opposite. Let's make the tough-guy cop the one who cares about the decorations.' It's a detail, but makes the whole thing more interesting. Similarly, I used to get complaints from people who didn't like Myron Bolitar's girlfriend. In every other series they had read, the lead detective has this wonderful girlfriend! That, of course, was the point. I don't want you to like his girlfriend. I want you to think she's bad for him.

I also gave Myron loving – and beloved – parents. I lost my parents when I was young, and through Myron I imagine what my relationship with them might have been had they survived. Myron has a close bond with his parents even as they get older, something my parents never got to do. Yet what makes this work is not simply the fact that it's written from the heart, but rather that in so many other books you've read, the father was abusive and the mother abandoned. Wouldn't it be interesting, I thought, if we finally saw a detective who had a really great home life?

Sometimes plot takes me months to work out. It isn't the same for character. For character, I start with the basic story idea and build from there, seeing how things play out.

One thing you'll hear constantly is that your character is going on a journey and must change; he's going to become an entirely new person. I want you to ignore that. Did you watch *Succession*? Were those people different at the end to the beginning? No. They went through a journey, sure, but they stayed pretty

much the same. People don't really change that much. Of course, it's fine if your character does change, for a good reason. Luke Skywalker, for example, evolves into something very different from the character he was at the start of the first Star Wars movie. That makes complete sense: he was a boy; he grows up. My point is you don't have to force it.

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Another thing: people are always saying that if two characters are in a room, there must be conflict. Not so. Sometimes the greatest moments in a story are when you think there's going to be conflict and there isn't.

Never think, 'Oh, I haven't done a violent act in seventy-five pages. I need action.' Yes, your characters are going to need some bounce back-and-forth; yes, you're going to need balance – but don't force it. Never think that you have to have three acts, or thirty plot twists, or seven. That's all nonsense. Forget all that stuff. Just write your story. Just tell me the best story you can. Let the rest just fall into place.

TAKEAWAYS

- Character is story and story is character. Story creates character.
- Fiction is a form of memoir. Mine your own life for the details of character.
- How will your character take cliché and stand it on its head?
- The more you try to force things to fit a formula, the less authentic your book is going to sound.

EXERCISE

You have your notebook of story ideas. Choose one idea, and think about who is going to tell that story. Then tell me, what is the one thing – you can only pick one – about this character that brings them all the way to life? Write a variety of scenes to test out this defining feature.

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