

The Key to Making your Characters Believable

by

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Imagine you're walking down the street one lovely spring day, and come face to face with the protagonist of your current writing project. Your character sees you and knows immediately that you are the person who created him/her and who is responsible for his/her current situation (i.e., in the middle of the story). Both of you stop dead and regard each other searchingly.

If you're doing your job as a storyteller properly, what happens next? What reaction does your character have to you? I don't know about you, but any of my characters would unhesitatingly attack me — either verbally or physically, depending on their natures. In most cases, they'd punch my lights out — which is the way it should be.

How would your character react?

The "meet your character on the street" scenario is one that I pose to my fiction writing classes, and only rarely does anyone come up with the correct response right off the bat. It's not really a trick question, either...the answer seems fairly obvious to me. Your character should react to you, the creator, with hostility and anger because you, the creator, are responsible for giving him or her so many problems.

Giving your characters problems is the key to making them believable and compelling to a reader. A protagonist with no problems is unrealistic, and thus unbelievable. Never forget that as a writer your job is to create the illusion of reality. You want your reader to believe in your story, to "see" it unfolding before his/her eyes as he/she reads. You want your reader to care about your protagonist, to identify with him/her...so, before you do anything else in creating a protagonist, before you describe how wavy his hair is, or how voluptuous she is, you should spend time deciding what problems the character has.

After all, everyone has problems. I have them. You have them. Even rich people have problems — different problems from those of us who lie awake nights wondering where the rent money is going to come from, but nonetheless real and worrisome to them.

One time shortly after I began writing fiction, I wrote a story where a character was marooned on an uninhabited planet in a survival test. But my character was well-prepared for his test, having lived his life on a harsh, ice-age planet with only stone-age tools at his disposal. I handed the first five pages of the story to a friend of mine, Sam, a former journalist, who had critiqued my work before. He read the pages, nodded, then handed them back to me in silence. "So, what do you think of it?" I asked, puzzled by his uncharacteristic reticence. (Sam had been enthusiastic about my other fledgling projects.) He hesitated, then said, "Your writing style is real smooth...flows right along."

My storytelling instincts began sounding a silent alarm. "I'll probably finish it tonight," I said. "Would you like to read the rest of it?" "Not particularly," Sam said. "Why not?" I demanded, stung. "Because I know it'll come out okay. I don't have to read it to find that out," he replied. "Your character's going to do just fine at surviving on that world. He's an expert at surviving...he'll have no problem making it through."

I stared at him, and it was just like one of those light bulbs going on over a character's head in a comic strip. At that moment, I realized that the key to keeping a reader interested in a character was to give that character problems.

People without problems, are, frankly, boring. And the First Commandment of writing is: "Thou shalt not bore thy reader...ever." Stories and books require some effort on the part of the reader, unlike television or listening to music. If the reader is not involved in your story, is not worried about how your protagonist is going to solve his/her problems, then your reader is likely to become distracted, put the story down, and wander away to go wash the dog, or take out the garbage — or sprawl in front of the television with a bag of Cheetos. Or — and this is the most hideous scenario of all — the reader will put the book down and pick up another and begin reading a story where the characters do have problems.

Okay, so we've agreed: protagonists need problem to make them live in the mind and vision of the reader. What kind of problem should you give your protagonist?

First and foremost, a character should have problems that seem real to the reader. Artificially imposing a problem on a character as the story first opens is as obvious and artificial as grafting on an extra arm. So, as you first begin developing a character, search inside yourself for what problems that character has. What characteristics was he or she born with, or developed as a child? Physical traits, personality traits or failings...what problems does this person have in life that he/she wishes would go away? Mistreatment as a child that leads to a cruel, abusive nature? Abandonment or bereavement leading to an inability to trust and love? Sometimes the problems can seem almost mundane or trivial — but in the hands of a master, they can create unforgettable characters. Edmond Rostand got a lot of mileage out of a big nose. Emma Bovary's entire story sprang from the fact that she was bored with her life.

Problems in a story can be either internal or external — or both. An internal problem is one that the character already has when he/she enters upon the action of the story. Internal problems can be character flaws: your protagonist is a man with a hair-trigger temper and a violent streak that has just caused him to lose his job. Or an internal problem can be a situation that the protagonist finds himself/herself dealing with: your protagonist has a child with a serious medical condition that requires an expensive operation — and she doesn't have two nickels to rub together.

External problems, on the other hand, are thrust upon the protagonist by the exigencies of your plot. Your gentleman with the nasty temper is walking along the street, fuming about his lost job and how much he hates the boss who fired him when he stumbles over a weapon from the future that is capable of wiping out the entire city. What does he do with it? Your protagonist with the sick child is offered a deal with the devil — her soul in return for the millions necessary to finance her child's treatment. Does she sign the contract in blood?

Your character's external problems should be the kind of problems that will cause him/her the maximum amount of personal challenge to solve. A successful character in a story evolves...that is, he/she grows and changes during the course of your tale. That growth and change can be either positive or negative. The exigencies of the plot cause the character to become a better or worse person. Either kind of growth and change can be intriguing, compelling — it's up to you, the writer, to decide which kind of growth and change is best-suited to your character and your plot.

So which should you develop first: the character's internal or external problems? Frankly, that's like the old saw about the chicken and the egg — there is no single, cut and dried answer.

In developing my own stories, I generally start with a character's internal problems, then figure out what kind of story will challenge this protagonist to the max — but there have been times when I've come up with a plot-directed "What if?" and then developed a character who will complement and enhance the storyline.

In my years in the field, I've posed this question to a number of writers, and received varying responses from each. No two writers develop character problems and traits the same, and few of them follow exactly the same process in developing a storyline each time. Basically, you'll have to trust your writer's instinct as you develop each story — and each character's problems.

Happy writing, and...good luck!