

## Character Development

By Azalea Dabill

The subject of catching characters and their quirks and getting them faithfully on the page can be unending. Here are some pointers, with references to books with good sections on characters.

A good character is usually a conglomeration of people or other characters that we have known, including ourselves. Characters tend to grow as we go along writing their story. In fact, they must grow, or they come across as unreal.

Characters must act consistent with themselves until an influence or an action causes or challenges them to change. We readers like such information in snippets, woven into the story with skill. The threads must not be seen, but the tapestry effect of the villain, hero, commoner or mad-cap is shown by what he or she does. What characters think and say—or don't say—is even more important than the few physical details that sketches them for our minds to build on.

To be multi-dimensional, a character must have a memorable physical description that fits him or her, (paradoxically it may be memorable because it is so every-man). A character needs a predictable personality, yet showing surprising twists and changes, and a spiritual journey, or a revelation of his or her inner growth. My characters tend to start with an idea of a person with a trait/traits that attract me, and by the time I'm on my sixth draft, my characters have defined themselves and live their own lives in the dreamspace in my mind, and on my pages.

My method is: Put your idea down, and hang on for the ride. Many writers like to write an extremely detailed character casebook, so to speak, with every known detail about their characters. I did this in a small way, usually after the character told me he or she liked this or that. Do what works for you.

In all my time as a writer, I have kept bumping into the fact, stated or otherwise, that all writers do things differently. It is good to copy, to try, to test and see what works for you. Then you tweak that writing method to a perfect fit for you as a unique individual. Take the below . . .

*The Career Novelist*, by Donald Maass, has an enlightening section he calls Characters: Sympathy vs. Strength. He brings out points I have not seen elsewhere, but have often felt. He recommends Dwight V. Swain's *Techniques of the Selling Writer*.

. . . I am interested in that phrase *sympathetic protagonist*. What exactly is meant by that? Many green writers want their readers to *like* their main characters. While it is indeed pleasant to enjoy the company of the character with whom you will journey for four hundred pages, likability is not a primary reason for identification. Indeed, characters who are merely nice can quickly grow insipid.

Other writers often try to make their characters sympathetic by causing the reader to feel sorry for them. To be sure, evoking pity is effective. Characters who are down on their

luck, or who struggle with inner demons, may win my good wishes. That is sympathy in the ordinary sense, but not in the technical sense. Our type of sympathy is something different.

Sympathy in the technical sense is the identification between reader and character. It is the reason for their bonding. If I say that I sympathize with Scarlett O'Hara, it means that I see in her something of myself. She is a reflection of me. I appreciate her qualities and care about her fate since in a way she *is* me. . . .

That happens because I project myself into her. She has qualities that I would like to have: courage, willfulness, pride, ego, wit. One word that can sum up all of that is *strength*. If nothing else, you have to admit that Scarlett O'Hara is strong. Indeed, I believe it is most often the strength of protagonists that draws us to them. Not niceness, not vulnerability. Strength.

Dozens of objections doubtless leap to mind. But stop: think for a minute. Strength is not only a physical quality, but an inner quality, too; thus frail, elderly Miss Marple is strong. Strength is also not the same as goodness. . . . Neither is strength the ability to take action. . . . Having established the relationship between sympathy and strength, we can begin to catalogue the different kinds of strength and thus determine in advance the degree of sympathy that our protagonists will evoke. There is physical strength: Conan the Barbarian. There is endurance: James Bond. There is cunning: George Smiley. There is integrity: Howard Roark. There is love: Jane Eyre.

What is the greatest kind of strength? Many authors would argue that it is *principle*, a protagonist's beliefs. Indeed, holding principles dear can redeem much else that is unpleasant in a character. Case in point: Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. I would like to argue, however, that there is one quality—or perhaps call it an ability—that is even more supreme: self-sacrifice. The willingness to give of one-self, maybe even to offer one's life for another, is a strength that goes beyond muscles, brains, or heart. It is a strength of spirit.

If that sounds religious, so be it. There is a reason that the stories of Moses and Christ have inspired people of faith for centuries. Their strength came from beyond personal convictions; it came from above. Authors who look for sources of sympathy for their characters could do worse than to find examples in the protagonists of our most enduring storybook, the Bible.

Every book I have gotten by Donald Maass is a treasure, he puts things so clearly and well.

Megan Whalen Turner shows good character development in *The Thief*.

I don't know how long I had been in the king's prison. The days were all the same, except that as each one passed, I was dirtier than before. Every morning the light in the cell changed from the wavering orange of the lamp in the sconce outside my door to the dim but even glow of the sun falling into the prison's central courtyard. In the evening, as the sunlight faded, I reassured myself that I was one day closer to getting out. To pass time, I concentrated on pleasant memories, laying them out in order and examining them

carefully. I reviewed over and over the plans that had seemed so straightforward before I arrived in jail, and I swore to myself and every god I knew that if I got out alive, I would never never never take any risks that were so abysmally stupid again.

I was thinner than I had been when I was first arrested. The large iron ring around my waist had grown loose, but not loose enough to fit over the bones of my hips. Few prisoners wore chains in their cells, only those that the king particularly disliked: counts or dukes or the minister of the exchequer when he told the king there wasn't any more money to spend. I was certainly none of those things, but I suppose it's safe to say that the king disliked me. Even if he didn't remember my name or whether I was as common as dirt, he didn't want me slipping away. So I had chains on my ankles as well as the iron belt around my waist and an entirely useless set of chains locked around my wrists. At first I pulled the cuffs off my wrists, but since I sometimes had to force them back on quickly, my wrists started to be rubbed raw. After a while it was less painful just to leave the manacles on. To take my mind off my daydreams, I practiced moving around the cell without clanking.

The above character introduction shows many things about this character. See if you can find all six things I found, and maybe some I missed, or did not infer. My answers are below.

*This character is in trouble, has plans, and is already changing. The king particularly dislikes him: he is not a count or a duke or minister, but he is someone the king does not want slipping away. The chains around the prisoner's wrists are useless, since he can slip them off at will. He is wise, and so leaves them on after a time. And the last sentence, "I practiced moving around the cell without clanking," hints that he has a use and an aptitude for stealth. You can tell this character is deeper than usual, and intelligent. He is interesting.*

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*