

Tip #7. Fleshing out Characters

Characters that excite and intrigue us are, more often than not, the keystone upon which a good story hangs. And it rings true that most of us are far more likely to remember a character than to remember a plot. For example, we are far more likely to remember James Bond for his dry witticisms, quick thinking and lethal agility than for the specific missions he was embarking on at the time. Likewise we can easily recall Harry Potter, his friends and enemies long after the plot lines of his various adventures have grown fuzzy. With this in mind the writer who wants to be remembered should pay special attention to the characters he creates. Every effort should be made to create characters that linger in the readers consciousness long after the book has been put down. Memorable characters have a uniqueness that sets them apart.

Sometimes it's a certain look but most of the time this uniqueness runs far deeper than appearances. This uniqueness is the sum of all aspects of a character, from looks, to speech, to mannerisms, to prejudices, to behaviours, to their worldview and everything in between. It goes without saying then, that the more we know our characters the better we'll be able to portray them on the page in the hope that they will inspire our readers as much as they inspire us.

So how does one get to know their characters? When creating characters most of us will probably sit down and write a checklist of sorts and then try and fill in the blanks. We'll probably write something like this:

1. What's his name?
2. How old is he?
3. What does he look like?
4. Where does he live?
5. What does he want?

Then we'll probably go about constructing a paragraph from the answers we get: Something like, "Joe is an unemployed civil engineer specialising in explosives. He is 65 years old, slightly portly with a bad back and leathery skin. He lives in Docklands, London, on the Isle of Dogs and he wants revenge on the company that retrenched him."

From there we would expand until we had a rounded picture of Joe.

All well and good, but I would like to suggest a different approach. I would advocate that if you truly want to know your character, you need to hear it from them – from the horse's mouth so to speak, with all the grass-stained teeth and horsey breath that goes with it. Sit your character down at the table opposite you. With pen in hand, interrogate them. Have them answer you in their own voice; their own words; their own emotions....

1. What's your name? Name's Joe. After Joseph. Not the one in the bible. Stewth, my old man, may he rot in hell, was a commie through and through. Stalin was his god.
2. How old are you? Old enough to be more than a match for a snivelling pen pusher like you. Born in '49 and got the scars to prove it.
3. What do you look like? Like an angry Robert De Niro, my wife would've said, before she passed, before the company robbed her of medical aid, just when she needed it most.
4. Where do you live? Docklands. Not the pretty-ditty little apartments that my previous employer, Gunn & Johnson put up. I'm talking about the real docklands. Ever heard of executioner's dock, Sonnyboy?
5. What do you want, Joe? Crikey Moses, I thought you'd never ask. I want a little more "lumination." Perhaps a whole lot "lumination." I'm thinkin' maybe we need a little fire to keep the chills away this winter. I'm thinkin' Guy Fawkes on steroids if you get my meaning?