

Characters

A paper and two exercises

by Ian Bone

'For me, what happens to characters as a story progresses depends solely on what I discover about them as I go along – how they grow, in other words. Sometimes they grow a little. If they grow a lot, they begin to influence the course of the story instead of the other way around.'

Stephen King, *On Writing*

'(The writer) is required by the very nature of drama to enter into the spirit of opposing characters. He is not a judge; he is a creator – and even if his first attempts at drama concerns only two people, whatever the style he is required to live fully with them both. The job of shifting oneself totally from one character to another – a principal on which all of Shakespeare and all of Chekhov is built – is a super-human task at any time.'

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

If you consider how a reader accesses a piece of fiction – how he or she is drawn into the story, the drama, or the emotion so that they want to know what comes next – then the role of character soon emerges as a crucial one. Ask anybody about their favourite book and soon they'll be talking about the main character or characters. They might limit their discussion to what happened to the character, or they might make emotional statements about the character such as, 'I loved them' and 'He/she irritated me at times', or they might even say they saw themselves in the character.

The age-old theatre joke about sincerity being the key to all good acting, (and if you can fake that, you've got it made), is also pertinent to the writer of fiction. As a writer you are the biggest faker. You are creating people who have never existed and will never exist, then asking a total stranger to feel anger, fear, love, terror, outrage *in harmony* with that fake person.

That's gotta be a big ask in anyone's language!

The typical assumption by the non-writing public is that writers draw their characters from real-life people around them. And there have certainly been many successful novels with characters based on real people, sometimes to the detriment of the writer's relationship with the model in question. But there are just as many (if not more) writers who do not base their characters on real people. However, the common factor within the two ends of this spectrum is that all writers base their characters on the truth of being human.

As a writer you sometimes have to be a mini-psychologist and therapist and megalomaniac and meddler rolled into one. To begin this near-psychotic process, you need to build an understanding of the peculiar habits and characteristics of humans. Everything, from small details such as how someone acts and behaves when they walk into a room full of strangers, to the subtle plays that go on between two lovers trying to have a discreet fight in public, to a mother's response to losing a child, to a survivor's life after trauma. You then need to translate this observation into truth on the page, so that when your characters twitch or lie on their child's grave or laugh too loudly it strikes a chord with the reader.

So that they *get it*.

There is also a truism for writers that in some way they need to *love* their characters. This can be quite confronting if you are writing about a madman with a shotgun. Yet I'd argue that if you don't at the very least love the humanity of your character then you will not get under his or her skin, and that means you run the risk of not being accurate. Of not creating a verisimilitude.

We've already explored how we can create an emotional progression for two characters within a short piece of writing. The following exercises explore the aspects of character as exposed by Stephen King and Peter Brook above. (Now there's two ends of a spectrum for you!) In the first we'll look at how an unexpected, sudden or atypical action from a character can bring an energy or charge to a piece of writing and allow you the opportunity to learn more about that character. In the second we'll look at opposing characters, and the process of creating and *loving* an unpleasant character.

Exercise One

Take a piece of writing involving two characters that you have already created. It could be the piece you wrote for the first exercise. If you want to use another piece of writing, or create a new piece, remember to keep the transaction simple to allow for more complexity in the interaction. (Just for the purpose of this exercise, that is!) Decide which character is the main character – the character you most want the reader to empathise with. (It should be obvious from the POV!) What do you know about this character in general? What do you know about the character in this scene? Can you picture the character? Can you see how they move? Where they sit? The way they sit? What are typical actions of this character?

Now try to describe the interplay or interaction between your main character and the other character in one sentence. For example:

The main character wants to annoy the other character. Or: The other character wants to assert her authority over the main character. Or: The main character wants to belittle the other character.

See how these examples focussed on the emotional contract between the two characters, and not simply what happens? They don't say: *The main character wants the other character to eat the fish.* That is the story, and as important as it is for the reader, it is not the aspect of the fiction that you are going to fiddle with. This is your chance to play God. You're going to turn your fiction upside down and expose the wires and bolts and sticky tape underneath – the part you don't show the reader – and you're going to mess around with it.

Now that you know the interplay, or the emotional contract, that exists between your main character and the other character, think about what response you would expect from your character in this situation. Would she allow herself to be dominated? Would he remain patient in the face of persistent annoying behaviour? Would he stand up to the belittlement? You've probably worked out the response at some level, because as a writer you've probably got a reasonable idea of where the scene is heading.

Once you are certain of the response, try either or both of the following:

- Make your character do something totally unexpected, atypical or surprising for them as a character
- Make your character do the opposite to what you would expect them to do. Completely.

But here's the tricky bit in both of these parts of the exercise. ***Make it real.*** Don't change who your main character is. Don't turn them into something else in order to achieve this. Maintain their character. Have a go at making them ring *true* on the page for both you and the reader. See what comes up.

Exercise two

In this exercise I want you to change the other character. I want you to make them unpleasant, someone who's rally going to push the buttons of your character. Make them

uncomfortable for you and the reader. Push the limits. Make them a character who you, as a writer, would hate to spend more than one minute in a room with.

Whatever you do with this character, keep it real. Don't change the style of your piece dramatically to suit the change. Don't stretch into absurdism when it wasn't an absurd piece.

How does this change the way your main character acts? How does your main character respond to this jerk? Play around with the idea of opposites. How much energy does it bring to the scene? Do you find it adds fire? Does it weight the scene down? Do the two characters start like different versions of the same thing?

Another thing to watch out for when you write something like this: Is your main character starting to sound a little *like you*? Look at how you can write your main character so that he or she is independent from you. (That is, not your mouth piece.) Make him or her behave and act in ways you most certainly wouldn't. How flawed can you make your main character whilst still being loveable?

And if you've done all that and you're still up for the challenge, and this one is quite a challenge, rewrite the scene from the other character's POV, so that the other character is now the main character, and is the SYMPATHETIC character.

Have fun.