

Let's Pretend Characterization

Part 1

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Mild disclaimer--to give credit where credit is due: Much of the following is my interpretation and how I use Alice Orr's Workshop on "Writing Characters from the Inside Out." Ms. Orr has been my mentor for many years and I value her style of working with characters.

The Beginnings of a Biological Life:

During the course of the six articles on characterization for *Novel Writer* magazine, the writer **must pretend** to be the actual character of interest. This particular style of **Let's Pretend** to delve deep into characters is perfect for your main and important secondary characters, characters that have the most work to do in your novels. I truly believe that one of the most important aspects of any novel lies in the strength of its characters. Now, **let's pretend** as if you, the writer, are really the character of importance to your story.

The most basic information you'll need is biographical. It's impossible to write about a character without knowing certain facts of his/her background. Of importance is the name of character. Each name should be distinctive and fit how you want your characters portrayed. Think of how the mother and father might have named them, depending on what the parents (if there are two and if they care) are like. Also, be sure to use different letters of the alphabet for first and last names of characters. Readers tend to look at the first initials and not the whole name. Two or more characters with the same first initial might confuse. Stop right here, and name your character. Also, fix a chart with each letter of the alphabet and keep track of all the names you intend to use in your novel.

Next, the writer needs to know where and when the character was born. Different areas maintain different life styles. North and South, East and West have unlike codes of behavior. Make a beginning for your characters. Their ethnic backgrounds are important, including their socio-economic backgrounds while growing up. As we already know from the state of historical and current times, ethnicity, social and economic factors play a large part of every day life, regardless of how we might want to disguise our prejudices or our beliefs. Again, it's time to stop to figure out how your character's behavior in the rest of the plot is

dependent on the where/when, ethnic and socio-economic factors in the character's past.

The members of the characters birth family have a direct bearing on how the characters will act in your novel. The person(s) to whom the characters favor in the family hierarchy gives a clue to the characters in their adulthood—as does the person to whom the character is most distant from or totally estranged from. It's time to write up a family background for your character. Remember, you are the character and need this familial information in order to function in a consistent manner throughout the story.

How would the writer—as the character—describe his/her relationship with each parent? The description of the relationship also has a bearing on the character's behavior in the future. If there is a loving mother and an abusive father, how might a character react in the future? If the relationships were reversed, and the mother was abusive and the father kind and loving, how might that affect a character's future? We are all products of our upbringing to a certain degree. Not being a scientist, I can't go into DNA evidence, but I'm sure it plays a large part—so make it up.

Think of a memorable or significant experience in the life of a child. What might change the character's life if the childhood experiences were traumatic? How would your adult character face up to an unusual childhood? There is a major difference in a child who was dragged around the country while the parent is fleeing from the law than a child who was able to go to school in one area and was surrounded by friends and relatives. Give your character childhood feet on which to walk.

Adolescence is a time of great trauma for most teens. Those of us who have been through that traumatic period know that many of our attitudes as teen-agers have shaped the rest of our lives. Some of us never grow out of that life, others shun it. How would an adolescent experience in the life of your character help, or hurt, him/her conquer the challenges facing them in your novels? Write up an extended biographical experience for your character's adolescence. Make it significant enough to have a lasting effect on the character. You might want to include a sexual experience—good or bad—as a factor.

What is the character's educational background? As we all know, statistics tell us the college graduates make more money in their lifetime than those folks who do not finish high school. This plays into the socio-economics of the character's background. Does the character quit high school? Does s/he go on to college? Do they take the course they want, what might interest them? Do they finish with a degree that means

something to them in a status, financial or emotional way? Now is the time to figure out what is important to your characters in those learning years—preferably before they embark on their journey through your novel.

One last thing that might give you a hint to your character's character is the few mementos s/he might have saved from their childhood, their adolescence or their college-age years. Was it a picture of the father they never knew, the lace handkerchief from their deceased mother or a physical ailment that ran in the family? Each individual aspect of life, you, as the character, can remember will affect your character's actions when s/he starts out in your novel.

It is time for the writer to figure out these biological aspects for your main and secondary characters, before going on to the next section, which will include your character's physical description of himself or herself. Write on, authors!

Part 2

Last month, we worked on the “Beginnings of a Biological Life.” You have learned that the writer must pretend to be the actual character of interest. You are practicing your learning with your main (protagonists) and important secondary characters. Don't forget your villains (antagonists). They provide the conflict and tend to spur on the actions of a book.

Remember: You are to assume the character. **Let's pretend** you are that character. You will be writing your text, using the word, “I”. To illustrate, I will use the hero, Gerek, from my novel **CLAN GUNN: GEREK**, set in 1650 Scotland: It is Gerek who is speaking, using the method of Let's Pretend.

“I was an extremely large baby and caused my mother irreparable harm in delivering me, so I have no other siblings. I was born in the Highlands of Scotland, in Gunn Country, at the castle called Killearnan. My mother was not married and was frowned upon by most of the ladies of what was considered a court. I never learned who my father was, although there were many rumors.

I became the bastard heir to the chiefdom. Many in the Clan were discomfited by my lack of a father, in case he was a powerful person in the government, but it didn't bother me all that much, until my mother died. I spent much of my early childhood following my grandfather, who was then the Clan's chief. I followed that

wonderful man until he had to send me away. I was only twelve at the time.”

In Part 2 of the articles on characterization, you will explore the physicality of your main character-or the character you have chosen to use while practicing this technique. As we read novels, much of a character’s physicality is learned from the perceptions other characters have of that character. We are given hints and verbal pictures of the character. Here, you will explore and discover what characters feel about themselves, about their perceptions as to their general appearance.

We all have delightful thoughts and built-in prejudices about bodies, hair coloring, height, weight and numerous other things that affect the outward look of our bodies. We are attracted to those whose physicality is something we admire or are looking for—in ourselves or in others. It is the physical that catches our attention at the beginning of any relationship—friendship or otherwise. It takes us a while to form a complete picture of a person or to judge some of the person’s attitudes and judgments.

Often, we try to fit ourselves into what is sometimes considered society’s norm. We consider ourselves, too fat, too short, too tall, too freckled, too whatever. Those feelings, our own perceptions, shape our personalities. It is the same with our characters. Their feelings about their physical appearance and the world’s perception of them shape their personalities and their lives.

If your character had to describe what s/he looks like, what might be the first thing the character would mention? And what might be even more important is why those character traits stand out in their minds. This is an example of a character’s description of herself, as taken from my novel, **SARATOGA SUMMER: 1863**. The heroine is thinking as she did in the novel.

The overbearing humidity settled on Sinead’s head, her shoulders and clung to her narrow frame. With a deep sigh, she longed for cooler places, less-confining garments and no tension.

Moisture gathered on her brow and slithered down the side of her face. She brushed at it with one hand then pushed the unruly hair back up into the tightly coiled back loop where it belonged. A drop of wetness trickled into the valley between her breasts. She shoved a cloth between them and her too-tight corset, hoping her dress wouldn’t show a stain. It was important to keep up appearances.

Next, I would consider what the character believes other people find most striking and memorable about his/her appearance. Have the character state those beliefs, using *“I think people find my. . . Why does the character feel that way? Have others made comments in front of them? Have others hurt his/her feelings with some inappropriate remark? Have others made mention of what they think best for the character to do in order to become a more attractive person?”*

The difference between what the character thinks of him/herself and what others think of them is extremely important. Those differences create a great deal of contrast and conflict in a novel and make the character far more interesting. As an example, we'll take Sinead, the heroine in the above novel, and show thoughts or appearance through a scene:

“And you look your usual charming self, Jane,” Mrs. Dewitt said, with the emphasis on ‘usual.’

Sinead stopped. “I don’t under. . . ”

“My dear, certainly, you are not planning on going to the docks by yourself.” She paused and clucked her tongue. “It would be distasteful for you to go alone.”

“I’ve been to the docks before—before I lived here.” Sinead stared at the floor, knowing the lecture was coming next, but stammered, “As I girl, I went—”

“How often must I tell you? You are no longer that girl. As Robert’s nursemaid, you have a position to maintain, dear.”

In the first of the two scenes from the Saratoga novel, you can tell Sinead’s state of mind and her lack of confidence. She finds heat overbearing and settling on her narrow frame, her corset too-tight and her hair an unruly mess. She hopes her dress won’t stain for it’s important to keep up appearances. In the second scene from the Saratoga novel, we see some of the reason for her feelings. We realize that Mrs. Dewitt calls her ‘Jane’ as if the given name of ‘Sinead’ was too unacceptable. We can see the attitudes of both characters.

Now, let’s pretend some more. Tell me what you, as the character and using “I”, feel about what you are like as a person, such as, “I would say that I am...” Fill in the blank, as if you were the character. Then give a brief description, reasons, for why the character feels as s/he does.

How would your character describe his or her temperament? Would your specific character consider him/herself even-tempered and calm while the rest of the world considers the same person high-strung and frenetic? Can you see the contrast that would be there?

How might your character talk about his/her personal habits? Would they consider themselves neat, while their mothers think they are the sloppiest people around? Do they keep themselves clean, shower every day or like many historical character, wash often but not bathe fully in a tub until Spring.

Your character's attitude toward their religion and the religion of others is important in shaping a character's personality. Also, one look into the political leanings of the character might be. Here, you must take into consideration the time in which your novel is written. A contemporary character would have much different feeling about religion or politics than a historical one. The times were so different.

The lack of TV tends to be important in historical times, when the only way to learn what was going on was to hear it word of mouth or to read it in a paper of some kind. Generally, it was rumor. Those very differences make a character's general religious and political attitudes important. Today, we have cell phones, computers and other devices to get the news to us—that is not to say that the news is any more truthful than before.

You must match the times with the characters. If you are aware of your character's background, your novel will ring true—even though you will not use all the information you gather about a character. Just dig deep.

Now, take a step back. I want each of you to consider one important factor in any character's psyche. Remember, a character is always the hero of his/her own story, even a villain. Everyone feels that s/he knows the right way to live, the right ideas—no matter how bizarre they are—and that we are masters of our own fate. Yet, with everything you have learned in life, you must realize how truly fragile life can be and how little we control our own lives. We can only control the lives of our characters, by digging deep into what they think about themselves.

Part 3

Our last article, on Physical Description, suggested much to think about and consider when dealing with important characters, mainly our heroes, heroines and villains. If you haven't started writing your character's biography, now is the time to start. Last month, we learned to that what the character feels about her/his physicality is an important factor in a novel. As you know, characters will have certain feelings about how they look, how they appear to others and how their physical beings might rule parts of their lives.

In this article, we intend to explore some of the general traits your characters display in their lives in your novels. We will learn about the significant and important things each character discovers about him/herself—and, most important for us, the authors, we will be writing this all as if we were actually the character, using the pronoun “I”.

Now, with pencil in hand, or with fingers poised above the computer keyboard, tell us what important things your character ever discovered about him/herself. It will be of internal importance to the character and something which the characters might never reveal in your novel except through the use of hints.

General Character Traits:

Once you’ve discovered an internal feeling, describe the situation which made it real for the character, how that character discovered the feeling. It’s a good idea to dash off a scene occasionally in order to explain this more fully. Take your time. Write as the character. Use “I” to make it more personal.

If you asked your character what s/he is like as a person, how would they respond? Perhaps, like this. . .

“I am no one to fool with. I have been through enough in my life to last it to the end. So, back off. I am not interested in your mewling. . .”

Perhaps, like this. . .

“I am very shy in social situations. I cannot help it. I can barely raise my eyes to look directly at a person when I talk to them. I continually stare at my feet, hoping the person won’t notice my lack of social skills.”

The characters above are diametrically opposed. Yet either of them might be frightened of other people for one reason or another. One reacts with belligerence, the other with shyness. Nevertheless, each avoids contact with another person. It is up to the author to know why each reacts in that special way. What has happened in the character’s life to make them the way they are?

Here, a scene to explain how the character got that way would be most appropriate. A scene might make the reader see another side of the character, and as a writer, the author must be able to portray characters in the best way possible. In other words, the character might explain the behavior away by saying, “As for why I am that way, I would say that. . . *and here comes your scene.*”

In **Clan Gunn: Gerek**, the chief of the Gunn Clan gives advice to Gerek, his twelve year old grandson, immediately after the death of the child's only parent. The chief is trying to protect young Gerek from others in the clan and, at the same time, teach him how to survive in the world when he leaves the clan.

Before sending the child off to foster with another family, the grandfather says, "'Tis a warrior ye must be. Make your name on the battlefield and, bastard though ye are, ye'll be welcome everywhere in God's grand acres."

Although the character doesn't understand the advice given, the reader does. The reader knows that Gerek will have a hard life, separated from his clan, and will become a warrior of note. It's in the cards. So when Gerek refuses to allow any one to push him around as an adult, the reader knows why. Gerek's words to another character to "back off" are not in the least suspect, and the reader probably feels that the person being spoken to should do what is requested. The grandfather's words tend to haunt and to turn Gerek into a man called The Beast of Battle, to most of Scotland—a wanted man.

How might Gerek himself describe his own temperament? How might your main character describe her/his temperament? Write your scene here, with the character describing what s/he **feels** about the temperamental state of mind.

In **Lost Son of Ireland**, the hero Bruic was stolen by the Norse, from a monastery, when he was only seven years old. He has lived as a slave/warrior for the Norse since that time. Although he is with other Gaelic prisoners, nothing is like the feeling of being on his own country's soil. When he finally arrives in Ireland, he learns that he must subjugate, much the way his own was, a small clan on the coast, in order to rescue his twin sons from further treatment by the Norse. What might be the state of his temperament under those circumstances? The reader will want to know. The author must be able to guide the reader through those feelings.

How might your character describe her/his personal habits? Is the character neat, almost to obsession? Sloppy? Likes to bathe? Refuses to bathe?

How does the character take care of clothing? The author needs to know, so that the reader can be directed to the right persona.

Although, trying to put religion into a novel can get an author into serious trouble—either through incorrect facts or by an unintended slights—religion is a part of our everyday life. It colors a character’s opinions, decisions and actions. How might your character feel about religion—his own or anyone else’s in your novel? Does your character go to church? Is your character religious in nature only? How does your character feel about church-going people who don’t live up to what the church preaches? In other words, by using “I”, tell us how your characters react to religion, their own and the religion of others.

And last, but not least, give us an idea of your character’s general political attitudes. In **Clan Gunn: Gerek**, Gerek, who has become a warrior of note, fights for the Royalist cause of English King Charles I. He is in direct opposition to the Protestant Covenanters who want to kill him, yet Gerek is not, in any way, religious. He has no idea who his father is, was forced from his clan at such an early age and has lived with those who support the Royalists—therefore; he follows their cause, having no particular cause of his own. His main goal is to return to his clan and become chief.

Bruic, from **Lost Son of Ireland**, (around 852 A.D. when Druids still roamed the earth) has never succumbed to the religion of the Norse. Before his capture, he lived in a monastery and was happy there, so whatever religion he remembers is dear to him. But, he practices none of them, nor is he interested in the idea of a druid taking pains to harm a minor queen any more than he is interested in the Norse way of life.

I don’t know about the rest of you, but before I write my novel, I do extensive character work. I write scenes for the characters, scenes that never appear in the book, but have a definite bearing on the events of the novel. My plots are built on what has happened to characters during the course of their lives. I take a personal interest in their childhood’s, for that is where most of our thoughts and feeling come from. As a reader, I am most attracted to books that have strong characters that are willing to display their feeling along the way.

Next month, we’ll go more fully into outstanding character traits. Hope to see you here.

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