

Creating Three Dimensional Characters

By

Susan Williams Beckhorn

Name a few memorable characters from children's fiction. What are the attributes of that character that stand out for you—good, bad, a combination of both, physical description, actions, speech, mannerisms? Were you dying to see how an actor would portray them in a movie? How often were you satisfied with the result? I have to say that I am seldom wholly satisfied when a great character is transposed from page to film. This is the magic of language. A gifted writer can create a character so real, so three-dimensional, that only a *very* gifted actor is capable of equaling or adding to the illusion.

Here are a few of my favorite characters, and some of the reasons that I either love or am unable to forget them:

Laura Ingalls: adventurousness, sense of place, her jealousy of and loyalty to her sister

Huck Finn: honesty, innocence, his good heart despite his coarse manners

Scrouge: his deliciously wicked greed, cold heartedness, his inner broken heart and amazing change

Mrs. Coulter: charismatic charm and beauty combined with both cruelty and love . . .and the golden monkey daemon . . . Yikes!

Templeton: almost a caricature of greed, yet a member of the community who performs vital tasks (when bribed)

Toad: also a caricature, this time of obsession with speed, yet charming and generous

Stickeen: mysterious, aloof, adventurous and yet capable of love and joy

So how did these masters manage to do it? We writers have come up with lots of methods for fleshing out our characters: webs, profiles, journal entries, letters both to and from characters, some even spend time trying to speak, act, *be* the character for a time. We strive to learn far more about our characters than ever appears in the pages of the book. Often we give our characters secrets that nobody else knows about as a way of getting into their souls.

All those things work. But as in painting, a good portrait is the result of a combination of technique that can be learned and something indefinable that can only come from you. Call it inspiration, magic, talent—call it writing. You wouldn't be here if you didn't think you might have it. All of us need to work on technique—as well as learning how to tap into that mystery that makes each author unique. We need to work on these things every day of our writing lives.

So here goes.

I just returned from a tour of Alaska. Remember the first day of school when the new kids seemed so strange—big ears, red cheeks, ratty sneakers, maybe a receding chin or long, shaggy bangs? It was just like that on day one of our tour, but by the end of the 12

days, people who had looked odd now seemed perfectly normal and those I spent time with were friends. At the airport in Vancouver I saw a model of a Haida dancer's mask: Raven's head with wings that open to show the inner spirit: the Wild Man of the Woods. A multidimensional character has an inside as well as an outside and that personality is revealed in many ways. Getting to know a person and developing a character starts from the outside and, like peeling an onion, gradually works down to that very vital inside as we observe, listen, and interact. Here are some guidelines to follow in creating memorable characters:

1. For the most part, ***kids like to read about kids their own age or slightly older (or kids loosely disguised as animals)***. They aren't all that interested in adults. I can't say as I blame them! Yet an unwritten rule of writing is *there are no rules* so it's not entirely impossible for your main character to be an adult—but he/she had better be interesting to a kid! This was challenging for me in writing *Wind Rider*. I see it as a teen novel, but because horses take several years to grow to maturity and Thunder needed to be young when she is first tamed, I had to make Fern about eleven in the beginning of the story. There is also the problem of people in prehistoric times living shorter lives and probably mating as soon as they were physically able, so Fern is only somewhere between fourteen and fifteen in the end when she chooses Owl. So one reason that some people have called it "*Clan of the Cave Bear* without the sex" is that there are a lot of ten year olds reading my book!

2. A second point in characterization, especially for kids who are growing and changing themselves, is ***the main character needs to change***—otherwise, it's not a story! Because I love kids and life, I see my role in writing for kids as giving them a helping hand in understanding, coping with, and appreciating this amazing, precious, and often difficult world. My personal conviction is that **the protagonist should change for the better**. Of course this doesn't always happen in real life, but the stories that we hold dear, that help us live, may contain horror and all sorts of trials, but in the end speak to the possibility, at the very least, of triumph. What's the point of discouraging kids? I couldn't bring back Franny Morrow's father in *The Kingfisher's Gift*, or make reading any easier for Sarey in *Sarey by Lantern Light*, but it was vital to me that both gained the strength to cope and find life beautiful and satisfying once more.

3. Another rule which you should think *very* carefully before ever breaking is that ***the kid in your story should be the hero***, solve the problem, find the gold. Avoid the wise elder who does it for the kid. BORING! It's entirely possible for kids to do very amazing things and still be and act as kids. Do make sure your supporting characters, parents included, have full personalities and stories of their own. Even a kid running away across a desert alone is influenced by a host of people from her past, otherwise we don't sympathize fully with why she is running. Don't neglect your secondary characters. Give them lives, stories, and problems of their own.

4. ***Giving your characters more than one side makes them multi-dimensional.***

Remember the boring, two-dimensional, handsome prince and the cardboard cut-out, all-bad guy? Nobody is all good—and I hope that nobody is all bad. Just as this world is a

complex mix of yin and yang, so are people. The most interesting antagonists have some strengths and positive qualities—perhaps great patience and a love for toy poodles. Conversely, our favorite protagonists have weaknesses and vices—maybe fear of the dark or an irresistible habit of eavesdropping. These flaws can be very useful in playing characters against each other and creating obstacles and tension. They also make your characters far more human—scariest if the leering pirate likes little boys, or more lovable if the heroine is understandably envious of her sister’s blonde hair and blue ribbons. Make sure to use contrasting characters to create tension. I paired the cold, remote grandmother with the grieving, lonely, fantasy obsessed child, Franny, in *The Kingfisher’s Gift*. I also made Franny’s mother fairy-like in appearance, but entirely practical and realistic in nature. In *Wind Rider*, the independent-minded, Fern, loves animals, hates domestic chores, envies her brother, and secretly desires recognition. In contrast her mother, Moss, is depressed, believes in convention, sews beautifully, and is terrified of losing her children.

5. Condense, but don’t dilute your characters in shorter fiction. The simpler and briefer your text, the more challenging it is to create character. Bringing a character to life in a few hundred words is **hard**, but every bit as important as character development in a full length novel. Seize the challenge! Focus on fewer but very revealing details. Writing for very young listeners and readers requires a poet’s ability to distill language. When you don’t have much space for description, use every opportunity to reveal character through action and dialog—which leads into my next point

6. Show, don’t Tell! You’ve heard it a million times, and it’s so true. **Action, dialog, inner thoughts, similes, imagery, and detail are all superb tools for revealing personality.** If I am having trouble getting at the essence of a character, I make him/her speak and act. That’s why so many authors spend time writing letters to and from their characters. I might ask myself what animal they remind me of or how they smell or sound. I didn’t have the housekeeper, Mrs. Stark, in *The Kingfisher’s Gift* simply tell Franny to sit still. “Her voice sighed into Franny’s ear like wind off a frozen sea, “Little ladies pay attention at table and keep their left hands quietly in their laps. Afterward, when Franny put her hand to her ear, it actually felt cold.” Action, simile, dialog, detail, inner thoughts.

7. Make your readers care about your protagonist(s), and conversely hate or dislike the antagonist(s) in the story. We accomplish this with all of the above techniques and one more thing that I haven’t discussed yet and which is the single most important facet of your protagonist. This is the living green sprout in the center of the onion, the very soul of your hero, the heart of your story: **What does she/he want?** Does he want to live happily on the farm and never be made into bacon? Does she long for a home where she feels that she is an accepted, dearly loved part of the family and not an unwanted foundling? Once you uncover the protagonist’s true desire you can place obstacles and conflicts on the path to resolution. You are ready to write. This is why so many writers fell that character is key to creating plot.

But again, your readers must love your protagonist or they won't bother to finish the book. I wanted my readers to feel Fern's pain when Little Brother dies as well as her anger that he hadn't reached the age of three and been given a name. In order to do that I had to show him a lot: tugging on his big sister's hair, playing at cooking with a clay pot and stick, just as a modern little brother might do with a stainless steel pan and a plastic spoon, carrying his wolf tail around the way a baby today carries a blanket, nearly starving, and then playing "bear" with their father when he has had food again. I had to fall in love with Little Brother myself in order to show the agony of losing him to fever and Fern's determination to save the new baby, Spring. On the other hand, it would have been a mistake for Ludwig Bemelmans to make us love Madeline's dead or absent parents because we are not meant to focus on why Madeline lives with eleven other little girls at a convent. That would have very much interfered with the delight of the story.

Exercise: Peeling the Onion

1. Let's create a character, starting from the outside and moving inward. What are the things we see?

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Physical Appearance:

Clothing/props:

Manner of speaking:

Patterns of behavior, habits, etc.:

Living Space:

This is all surface stuff, but just as gnarled hands indicate a life of hard work, much of what is on the surface reveals the inner person. It's okay to describe. It's *not* okay to bore your reader or use cliché's. Feel free to paint the outside of your characters as much as you want, but only where it flows easily into the story and is necessary for realism or revelation. People express themselves in the way they dress. Living spaces—tidy, messy, collections, etc. are also extensions of personality.

2. Let's go a little deeper now. Suppose you've adopted the interview method of learning more about your character. Here are some facts to ask about:

Name/Nickname (these can be arbitrary or meaningful)

Occupation

Marital/Romantic Status

Sexual Orientation

Family/friends/pets

Birthplace, travels, present home

Education

Religion
 Socio-Economic Status
 Politics
 Favorite books, music, films,
 Favorite foods and drinks
 Hobbies

3. Great material so far. It's time to go under the skin. Let's look at some internal qualities of character:

Strengths
 Weaknesses (very important in setting up obstacles)
 Personality traits
 Ethics/morals/values
 Degree of self-awareness
 Attitude

4. Fabulous! We're learning a lot here, but there's more to know. A very revealing part of character is how we speak—properly, slangily, with dialect, slowly, quickly. More than that, the words a person chooses can reveal anger, impatience, a sour attitude, etc. So let's hear your character tell us something about his/herself a sentence or two. Can you create a few lines of dialog with another character?

A:

B:

A:

B;

5. Actions are so revealing, how we handle a paintbrush or a puppy, how we sweep a floor or climb the stairs all reflect mood, ability, like and dislikes. How might your character do any one of these things?

Paintbrush:

Puppy:

Sweeps floor:

Climbs stairs:

7. Now the biggie, the beating heart of your story, the thing without which all is failure. It has been said that who your protagonist is and what he/she wants should be made clear in

the first sentence, paragraph, or at least the very first page of the book. In the end, it might not be the gold itself, but rather the courage and spunk to seek the gold:

What does he or she want? (What is your protagonist's greatest joy? What is her/his greatest grief?) If you can answer the question of what your protagonist wants and/or doesn't want, you've unlocked the secret heart of both your hero and his/her story.

You've got a character worth writing about. So WRITE ON!