# The Lumber and The Bricks: Constructing Characters

"The Blacksmith and the Artist
Reflect it in their art
Forge their creativity
Closer to the Heart."
— *Closer to the Heart*, Rush

INTRODUCTION

> I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.
>
> —*A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving

*"It's not easy to juggle a pregnant wife and a troubled child, but somehow I managed to squeeze in 8 hours of TV a day."* _ Homer J. Simpson

Owen Meany and Homer Simpson are two distinct characters—inhabiting the worlds of two different writers. Owen Meany is a boy, and later, a man, in a novel about belief. He is a character stunted in growth, but mature in faith. Homer Simpson is a catch-phrase prone cartoon father with few redeeming qualities. He appears on a show that places entertainment first.

The idea of the these two characters sharing the same story is absurd. Each one fits the world to which they have been created, but neither would be viable in the others universe. Yet, the two characters have a depth and power that make them both memorable and appealing in their own ways. Most importantly, they fill the roles in which they have been cast.

A written piece—be it a short story, novella, novelette, novel, or whatever—is fundamentally about a "who" doing a "what." James N. Frey in his book *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* says "Characters are to a novelist what lumber is to a carpenter and what bricks are to a bricklayer. Characters are the *stuff* out of which a novel is constructed." Characters are created by the author of a work in order to fill a niche, an essential aspect of the story they are trying to tell. This act of creation is one of the fundamental processes required of an author.

How an author performs this creation has a definite impact on the quality of the story they tell.. "The difference between a good story and a great one is often the depth to which the author examines the characters who people the pages," says freelance writer Stephanie K. Bendel in her article "Creating Four-Dimensional Characters."

This creation process, though, requires many decisions. What kinds of traits should a character have? Where do I get ideas for characters? What details do I reveal, and how do I reveal them? What should a character be named? And these are just a few of the questions writers ask every time they create a new character.

In a paper of this size it would be impossible to give all of these decisions the attention they might deserve. Rather, this paper will focus on highlighting the basic choices an author has to make when developing characters, emphasizing some of most important and easily generalized aspects of the process. Wherever possible this paper will attempt to give quick tips that will help authors when they begin a story.

THE BLUEPRINTS

At this point some authors might have questions. What if a story isn't centered around the characters? What if the plot (or the idea) is the most important part of the story?

"It is a mistake to think that 'good characterization' is the same thing in every work of fiction. Different kinds of stories require different kinds of characters." Orson Scott Card states in Chapter 5 of *Characters and Viewpoint*. Card goes on to describe a "MICE" quotient that takes into account four factors that are emphasized differently in various types of stories. These factors are *milieu*, *idea, character*, and *event*. *Milieu* is the world (society, culture, and environment) surrounding the characters. *Idea* is the theme or concept that drives the story. *Character* is the lives of the people who inhabit the story. *Events* are the plot, the things that occur in the story. Which of the four factors in the quotient has the most emphasis will dictate how important characters will be to the story. Remember, though, that all four pieces are present in any one story—characters are part of the game no matter what type of story is being written. All four of these aspects are shown from the end of Orny's introductory vignette about the druid Hartley.

> He knelt before the altar, placing the Lilly blossom atop it. For several minutes he sat in silent meditation, worshipping the works of the two gods, the strong-willed man called Nature and the softness of Mitra, goddess of Love. Hartley had been taught early the worship of Nature, and knew little of Mitra save that she was the all-mother, and Nature's twin companion.
>
> After this ritual was complete, he quietly returned to his home and prepared for a trip into town.
>
> —"The Awakening" *FSFNET 4-3*, Ornoth Liscomb

"Not all characters are created equal." Card begins Chapter 6 of *Characters & Viewpoint*. Not every character who populates the pages of a story or novel has to receive the same treatment, the same exploration of their being. One of the first decisions that has to be made is how important is a character to your story. "You must know—and let your readers know—which characters are most important to the story, so they'll know which are worth following and caring about, and which will quickly disappear." Card continues.

Card discusses three kinds of characters in the hierarchy: (1) walk-ons and placeholders, (2) minor characters, and (3) major characters. *Walk-ons and placeholders* are characters who you will not develop and primarily used to emphasis the characters and environment being created. *Minor characters* are involved in the plot, but only on a cursory level, possibly giving the story a little push before moving on to their own stories. *Major characters* are the people we care about, the ones who appear throughout the story…the ones in which we have an emotional-stake.

Since this piece is largely concerned with character development, it will focus on major characters. These are the characters an author must invest the time and thought into in order for them to come alive and for the story to work.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MAJOR CHARACTER

*"When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature"* - Ernest Hemingway

Major characters come in many forms. There is the common "everyman." Fantasy is filled with stories of heroes and villains. Some stories need a comic foil. Others require a serious protagonist. How does an author create a vivid major character that readers will love, hate, laugh at, or empathize with? This is the question at the heart of writing characters.

Bendel in her article “Creating Four-Dimensional Characters” describes a process of separating the development of the character by perspectives.

1st Dimension “The Photograph” – These are the physical traits that could be directly observed in a snapshot of a character. They include the physical size of the character, scars, tattoos, hair and eye color—things that are memorable about the character. The problem with this dimension is that typically an author will have to stop-action to give this picture and is limited by the point of view being used. Also, little connection is established between the character and reader from physical attributes, the connection is typically made at a deeper level.

2nd Dimension “The Videotape” – These are the traits observed from viewing how a character does something. Does the character gently shut the door, kick it closed, or slam it mercilessly? It gives us a description of the character, not limited by viewpoint, and how he behaves under certain conditions. As a drawback, though, it gives us little description of what is going on inside the character.

3rd Dimension “The Stage Play” – “Third-dimension traits are those revealed when you watch people interacting or reacting to circumstances, as you do in a play.” We get a sense of the inner workings of a character, their habits, and tendencies. This is typically the “public persona” that other characters will perceive. Again, it is limited by viewpoint and may not coincide with the “private persona.”

4th Dimension “Participatory Theater” – These traits are very similar to the third-dimensional traits, but deal with this “private persona.” The “private persona” is the characters thoughts, feelings, and reactions, shown for the reader to see. These are the places where motives reside.

Alternately, Frey quotes Lajos Egri’s *The Art of Dramatic Writing* as having three dimensions, the *physiological*, the *sociological* and *psychological*. Physiology is akin to Kendel’s first dimension, the aspects of the character that can be seen, although Egri notes how our response is shaped by society’s view of these traits. The sociological is the background the character comes from, the environment that has shaped who they are. This could be social caste, religious background, upbringing or another situation that while allow us to see the roots of a character’s behavior. Psychological characteristics are a product of the first two dimensions. The characters phobias, manias, talents, and mania are based on the persons physiology and sociology, along with inherent aspects such as intelligence and determination.

*"The best index to a person's character is (a) how he treats people who can't do him any good, and (b) how he treats people who can't fight back."* – Abigail Van Buren

From a different genre, editor and author Ben Bova in *The Craft of Writing Science Fiction that Sells* says “…every story is essentially the description of a character struggling to solve a problem.” Bova closes his chapter on character with his seven major points.

1. In a good story the reader forgets where he is and lives in the story; the reader wants to *be* the protagonist.
2. The protagonist must be admirable, or at least likable, but he should have at least one glaring weakness that forms the underlying tension that drives the character’s behavior. Capture those conflicting traits in a simple *emotion* vs. *emotion* equation.
3. The protagonist must struggle to solve his problems. That struggle is the backbone of the story.
4. Avoid stereotypes!
5. Study the people around you; draw your characters from life.
6. Show the story from the protagonist’s point of view.
7. Use all five senses: Describe what your characters see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

There is not enough room here to elaborate on all of these points, so only a few will be highlighted.

In point # 2, Bova describes characters as a person conflicted by two opposing thoughts “Emotion A” vs. “Emotion B.”

> Over the years, the memory of that piece of ivory had meant many things to Simon. When he was young, he had hated it, for it was a symbol of his mother's attempts to keep him home, and his failure to live up to the expectations of others. During his many years at sea, he had both loved it as a symbol of his freedom and success and hated it still for the failure associated with it.
>
> — "Simon's Song" *FSFNET 4-1* Ornoth Liscomb

"The basic conflict of the story, the mainspring that drives it onward, is an emotional conflict inside the mind of the protagonist." Bova says. The conflict of the story begins with the conflicts within the characters. "Give your main character a problem that she cannot solve, and then make it as difficult as possible for her to struggle out of her dilemma." This complements Card's thoughts on suffering in his chapter "How to Raise the Emotional Stakes": "Pain is a sword with two edges. The character who suffers pain and the character who inflicts pain are both made more memorable and more important." The more suffering, jeopardy, and tension an author can create around their characters, the more likely a reader is going to identify for or against them.

In point #1, Bova emphasizes making a main character appealing. Fundamentally, characters that are like us we most identify with. Also, characters that are victims, saviors, and make sacrifices are easy to associate with. Moreover, characters with hopes, dreams, and plans are more appealing. "Once we're caught up in a character's plans and dreams, we're on her side *almost* without limit." Card continues from here to say that people also empathize with traits such as courage, fair play, dependability, cleverness, and endearing imperfections. At the same time, villains will frequently have the opposite of these characteristics, displaying self-interest, weakness, sadism, and insanity.

Popular writer Douglas Coupland, author or *Generation X,* introduces his protagonist on page 3 of his novel *microserfs* with the paragraph:

> I am danielu@microsoft.com. If my life was a game of *Jeopardy!* My seven dream categories would be:
>
> - Tandy products
> - Trash TV of the late '70s and early '80s
> - The history of Apple
> - Career anxieties
> - Tabloids
> - Plant life of the Pacific Northwest
> - Jell-O 1-2-3

Here Coupland has, without subtlety, presented a character that most of us will find appealing in some way. We see his fears and interests right away, and one of them likely will connect with the reader on some level.

In contrast, Dan Simmons in his horror tale "Carrion Comfort" sets up his villains Nina and Willi with implications of self-interest, sadism, and obvious lies.

> "I love this house," said Nina. She turned and smiled at me. "I can't tell you how much I look forward to coming back to Charleston. We should hold all of our reunions here."
>
> I knew how much she loathed this city and this house.
>
> "Willi would be hurt," I said. "You know how he likes to show off his place in Beverly Hills—and his new girlfriends."
>
> "And boyfriends," Nina said, laughing. Of all the changes and darkenings in Nina, her laugh has been least affected. It was still the husky but childish laugh that I had first

> heard so long ago. It had drawn me to her then—one lonely, adolescent girl responding to the warmth of another like a moth to a flame. Now it served only to chill me and put me even more on my guard. Enough moths had been drawn to Nina's flame over the many decades.
>
> — "Carrion Comfort" *Prayers to Broken Stones,* Dan Simmons

HAMMER AND NAIL

Writing is a dynamic process. An author does not flush out a character sketch and plop it directly into a story to represent a character. The character must be part of the action, introduced in the exposition, and be discovered in the plot. This is where the artistry and craftsmanship take over from the planning.

Card in Chapter 11 of *Characters and Viewpoint* distills the process of writing a character down to one word, "details." He goes on to explain "The more information about a character, the more the audience will believe in him." These details come in a number of forms. "Necessary details" further the plot and are an essential piece of the story. "Enhancing details" give us a deeper understanding or connection with the character. They give the character the depth and detail that allow us to empathize with them. Some authors provide too much enhancing detail, showing pointless information about the character, that bogs down the plot in its excessiveness.

How does an author develop these details? It is not a static process, so it always changing. We can turn to Buddhist thought for further enlightenment on the matter. "All existence is of the nature of interdependent arising; all things are constantly changing and interrelated with all other forms of existence." (John and Patricia Koller *Asian Philosophies*) Characters do not exist alone in our story in a vacuum, an author must provide the detail and depth that make their actions meaningful and propel the story as intended.

The impact of a character begins with the reader's first impression of them. In chapter 8 Card says, "Characters, like people, make good or bad first impressions. When characters first show up in a story, we start to like them—or dislike them—right away." This is where the appealing characteristics discussed above come into play.

> "I said *get up*!" The words boomed in his ears as Mona suddenly barged into the room, plucked off the pillow and tossed the bedding to the floor. Ordelius knew that Mona was not a woman to be trifled with. Over the years she had become rather broad in the beam, and there was solid strength in her akin more to an ox than a cow. Ordelius shrugged himself upright and swung his feet onto the cold floor, ducking to avoid the blow aimed in his direction.
>
> --"The Day Ordelius Dobber Died" *DargonZine 14*-2, JD Kenyon

Card says the most important step in the details is the elaboration of motives. "To make characters more believable, more real, we give them more complex, even contradictory motives, and we justify them better." To do this, an author must get into the character's pasts. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* saga, what does the reader really learn about most of the characters earlier lives? How does the reader learn what they find out? Some characters, such as Gandalf, have nearly a blank slate for a past, while others have more detail in their past. For example, throughout the saga we are given short images of the history that has caused Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor, to live so long as Strider, loner and woodsman.

There are two typical methods, as described by Card, that are used to give a character history. These are the remembered past and the implied past. Both are methods used to control the release of the back-story for each character, the events that occur before the story actually takes place.
The *remembered past* is when the characters remember their earlier lives as the story progresses. The author releases the information in order to provide motive, while controlling the quantity and timing to provide tension and uncertainty within the reader. There are a few techniques to carry out this action.

Flashback – "The most obvious technique—and the least effective and most overused—is the flashback." Card says. The major problem is that the action has to stop in order to include this piece of information, destroying the flow of the story. Including the back story as a character's anecdote in the present is slightly more effective. "However, convenient memories can strain the reader's credulity."

Quick References – Card says. Sometimes quick references are the best way to provide information., giving very short inserts of memories into the action. These are good ways to include less important information while using it to develop the dimensions of the character.

The *implied past* is a set of ways to develop a character's past without stopping the action. "You give the reader a sense that the character has already lived a full life without telling them exactly what that past *was*." Card elaborates. Three methods are *expectation*, *habits*, and *connections*.

Expectations – What a character expects will happen in a given situation provides the reader information about the character.

Habits – Habits, many of them unimportant, demonstrate information about a character's behavior, giving the reader a sense of how they behave on a regular basis.

Connections – The *connections* a person already has tells us how the person interacts with the world around them, showing us some of their "public persona."

> "You won't change your mind?
>
> It was guilt, guilt taking the face of anxiety. Although he was only sixteen, Ray Garraty knew something about guilt. She felt that she had been too dry, too tired, or maybe just too taken up with her older sorrows to halt her son's madness in the seedling stage—to halt it before the cumbersome machinery of the State with its guards in khaki and its computer terminals had taken over, binding himself more tightly to its insensate self with each passing day, until yesterday, when the lid had come down with a final bang.
>
> He put a hand on her shoulder. "This is my idea, Mom. I know it wasn't yours. I—" He glanced around. No one was paying the slightest attention to them. "I love you, but this way is best, one way or the other."
>
> "It's not," she said, now verging on tears. "Ray, it's not, if your father was her, he'd put a stop to—"
>
> "Well, he's not, is he?" He was brutal, hoping to stave off her tears…what if they had to drag her off? He had heard that sometimes that happened. The thought made him feel cold. In a softer voice he said, "Let it go now, Mom. Okay?" He forced a grin. "Okay," he answered for her.
>
> —"The Long Walk" *The Bachman Books*, Stephen King

Finally, a character is a dynamic creature. They change. These changes must be developed with some justification. There is little more unsettling than when somebody a person thinks they know changes their patterns of behavior radically. An author must tread carefully when developing these changes. As importantly, if an author creates a character who does not change, they must take care to clearly justify this lack of development.

CONCLUSION

*"What is either a picture or a novel that is* not *character?"* – Henry James

A writer faces many decisions when creating their characters. Some of these decisions, such as whether a character is minor or major and how to provide their background, have been discussed in this paper. Other decisions, such as name choice and point of view with which to present them, have been neglected in the interest of space.

All of these choices can be difficult and sometimes overwhelming. There are many places to start when working through this creative process. Hopefully this paper has presented some ideas to consider when authors begin the act of character creation. Readers want to read about memorable characters with which they can identify. The author must be able to identify with their character before the reader can. Spend time with characters, get to know them. “If you don’t care about a character, you can’t possibly write an interesting story about him.” Frey says.