

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER:

Your main character is the single most important element in your story. They are the body-suit your reader will slip on, in order to use the character's eyes and ears to guide themselves through the story.

The main character has to be attractive to the reader. **Attractive** doesn't have to mean **nice**, it might mean **nasty** – but it must mean **interesting**. The reader must care what happens to the character. If the reader doesn't care about the character, they won't care what happens to them, and bang goes your plot.

Attractive characters tend to not to be mindless drifters – they should have an idea of what they want and how to get it. But they will at the same time be imperfect and *aware of their imperfections*.

How do we create a well-rounded believable character?

Drawing direct from life is a good way to set out, especially with new writers. But be careful not to write from a position of familiarity that the reader does not share – **i.e. make sure you describe the character properly**. If drawing from life, pick someone you are passionately curious about. Your sentiment will infect the writing and encourage the same feelings in the reader.

Be aware that if you use yourself as a model, you risk creating an unsympathetic character, because we often fail to like ourselves enough and tend to be shy about our virtues. **ALSO**, because we experience ourselves primarily as observers, **a character based on self tends to be reactive rather than active** – an observer, not a protagonist. Characters based on self often work well as Dr Watson-style

narrators, supplying the point of view but not the action. Watsons are great characters but they need their Sherlocks.

What a character needs:

1. A clear physical presence: Every character needs a physical description to bring them alive. When we are writing we often run a film of the action through our head and fail to appreciate how blind the reader is without our help. **Describe your character, and describe them early.** If you leave it for too long then by the time you get round to it, the reader will have filled in their own mental picture of your protagonist. Then your belated description will conflict with their fixed mental image, and jolt them out of the story.

2. Soul: Your character's most important attribute. The "soul" is the seat of your character's dramatic need. The dramatic need should be for something fundamental yet simple – a need with which the reader can identify and empathise. It could be the need to be loved. Or to survive. Or to go home.

3. Mind: This represents your character's intellectual attitude to the world. A character who has the dramatic need to be loved might **think** they need no-one. Someone who **needs** to be an artist might **think** the most important thing they can achieve is their duty to work, family etc.

Setting up this internal conflict between **soul** and **mind** is very important. Someone who wants to be loved but fears that will never happen might focus instead on material acquisition, believing it plugs that emptiness inside. When constructing plots, we will find that there are two simultaneous journeys that have to be undertaken by the character: the outer journey, of the objective things that happen to the character, and the inner journey, of the transformation of character. The

transformation of character comes when superficial mental attitudes – **mind** – are peeled away and the true self – **soul** – emerges.

When constructing your character, give thought to the following:

Personal life – family, background, nationality, social group. **Public life** – job, school, acquaintances (who are your character’s friends?). **Private life** – what does your character do when they are alone? Dream? Read? Go jogging? Make model trains?

We all use cues to come to rapid decisions about the real-life characters that we meet. What would we learn from the house or bed-sit in which your character lives – from the books on the shelves, the cat or dog, the décor?

Ask yourself, what does your character carry with him/her? Most people carry a bag, and nobody has empty pockets. What could we learn about your character if we watched him clear out his pockets at the end of the day?

NB It is good idea for your character to have what I have heard described as a “circle of life” event ie a childhood event which has shaped an element of their personality. This might be the death of a parent, or moving country at a young age.