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Developing Family Characters – Handout

General Comments on Developing Character

A few quick notes on characters in general (and I am primarily discussing this in terms of character-driven fiction but it can apply to any genre you fancy):

So where do characters come from? Generally characters are a mixture of the writer and someone – that “someone” is either an invention or a real person. ***So it follows then that all characters fit somewhere on that continuum of you as writer and truth vs. imagination.*** I’m not one who believes characters exist outside the writer’s personality and often it is this aspect that truly makes those characters come to life. So if you’re writing a villain, touch into your baser side! It can be fun. But also remember even if you think you are fashioning a character after a real person, the result is still partly you and *your* “truth” about that personage.

You can find lists of *characteristics* that will prompt you if you feel your characters are not complex enough. But be careful you don’t simply list or describe too much, that the traits your characters possess become, instead, organically inserted into all aspects of that character. Dialogue, action, internal monologues, etc.

Also an objective correlative device (using setting, for example to characterize) can do more than a simple description as well.

Next, remember that everything you write should usually do at least three things: ***develop character, move the plot and orient the reader.*** This will definitely remove the temptation to simply describe. You might also *subtly* advance a theme as you characterize. But subtlety is important if character serves this function because I believe the most important function in writing is that it frame questions for us – not reach tidy conclusions about people or life or anything else!

One last thing: people are always *unknowable*; we are even unknowable to ourselves and developing character, is to me, framing this unknowable quality in ways ***that the reader participates and draws conclusions as she would observing real people.*** This is much more interesting than trying to oversimplify or nail a character down, but it is also more challenging!

Use of Point of View in Developing Characters - examples

There are endless things to discuss about developing characters and my colleagues may get into ethnicity and genealogy more, realistic dialogue, etc., but I’ll focus on something that may be unique to my experience and something others may not discuss ... and that ***is point of view in relation to both character development and relationships between characters.***

My current book, *Seasonal Roads*, is one of linked stories told from the point of view of three generations of women. However, there are at least six points of view in the book! since in some stories I use first person (the reader inside a character's head and limited to their perceptions and observations); sometimes a Hemingway reporting style third person (in which the reader views a scene entirely from the outside as if they are a fly on the wall); sometimes a close third (still in one character's head but with a bit more distance); or even second person. This allows me even a different vantage point within *each character!* (Speaking of Hemingway and despite a swing away from a more spare writing style, it is still important to remember that what you leave out of writing (and character building) is equally as important as what you put in if not moreso—*that unknowable quality*, remember).

So if you are working on a longer novel or a project of linked stories, one thing you might consider in order to develop this character relationship is altering points of view. This allows you to view the same set of circumstances through each character's eyes which in turn allows you to show (rather than tell or describe) differences between those characters and can work especially well in action scenes when trying to develop familial relationships. All character relationships in any story must be complex, of course, **but families are even more complex because of the history and the background** which can be manipulated by the writer to achieve real depth in the work and offer perhaps even more opportunity for verisimilitude. (All that hidden angst we all harbor, you know, makes for good fodder!)

To give you a quick example of this, the elder woman in my book dies of breast cancer. I will show you three examples from each point of view that illustrate how this same event is seen through each person's eyes and how this develops both their unique characters and their relationships with one another.

My linked stories are about three generations of women: **Norna is the grandmother, Aissa the daughter, and Jane the granddaughter.**

Page 12 – This is a scene regarding the breast cancer from Aissa's pov, the middle woman. Aissa is the most neurotic, the most likely to express feelings and her voice is extremely different from the other two women. Norna's illness has alienated Aissa from her mother; she feels shut out. This attempt to "know" her mother in a large part helps drive the plot. Notice how the description of Sam, Norna's friend, and the cabin she lives in, help to define Norna's personality. Here is a bit of dialogue and a scene that develops both Aissa and Norna. Aissa is remembering bits of her past:

Why write, Aissa? Why not be a bricklayer? Norna had asked her.

Seventeen then, she knew better than to debate with her mother the merits of bricklaying vs. journalism. Anyway, other people had questions as well.

Why in the world would your father marry your mother after she lived for over a year in a wigwam on the edge of town? With that Indian?

Aissa had no idea why. He was impressed with Norna's ass, she'd overheard her father joke once.

Is it true your grandparents found your mother at the county dump beneath a pile of old newspapers?

Yes, Summer of 1915, John and Rona Ansgar, childless, found Aissa's mother at the Luce County dump beneath the classified section of the Newberry Gazette. At dawn. They named the child Norna, Norse for "fate," and took her home.

Much later, Aissa remembers Norna standing at the stove, smells the wood smoke and corn stew like it was yesterday. Remembers Sam Gabow sitting at the kitchen work table in silence. Why are Indians so silent? Aissa wonders. Who the hell was he, Mother? Was he that Indian? And the reply now in her head, How many Indians do you think I have, dear? Norna had offered Aissa chilled Popov on the rocks with a twist of lime. Sam, however, had rolled a joint, which made the air in the room sweet and thick and hazy. While the big Indian moved about the kitchen that day, Aissa imagined Sam's body on top of Norna's frail one. Sam anointing himself with oil that smelled like cedar. A large sea shell filled with burning sage and herbs, another smell very like pot. Sam blowing tobacco smoke from his enormous lungs all over Norna's body. Sam dancing, banging a tambourine. Why didn't he chant? And then he did. A soft intermittent sound that vibrates even now inside her head. He had turned Norna's wrists upward, had blown smoke onto them. You'll need to take tobacco and food from your own portion and make an offering, he had told her.

Now, Jane leans forward to hug the dog and Aissa can see down her shirt, the flatness of her chest, only it isn't Jane's chest but Norna's flatness she remembers. It was early days in medicine in 1968 and Aissa remembers the wreckage, the angry ragged streaks of scar tissue, as if someone had tried to scoop a pebble off Norna's rib cage with a machete.

Page 131 – Jane, the granddaughter who is more like the grandmother, lives a sort of Einsteinian existence where she "glimpses" the past, present and future and believes they exist simultaneously. Rather than alienating Jane, the fact of Norna's illness brings she and her grandmother closer and in fact expands Jane's reality rather than limits it the way this has happened for Aissa. This is one of her memories:

Jane thinks of her grandmother's friend Sam, the big Indian she'd met once. She remembered her mother yelling about how Norna had given up medicine for Sam's voodoo, and how it would shorten her life by five years, maybe ten. Yet that was at least six years ago; Jane was six when her grandmother had been diagnosed.

"Don't be a fool, Aissa," Norna had replied. "Faith and science can't be separated, they are all part of a whole. And "faith" in chemotherapy takes a lack of intelligence more profound than any silly faith in God."

Now Norna cuts them huge slices of French bread. She spoons stew into brown bowls, sprinkles dried chives over the top and they sit down at the 7 foot harvest table.

Jane knows her grandmother feels the pain hovering over her, but Jane sees all around it, time like a giant piece of cloth and the pain only a shred, a tiny flaw in a vast enormous quilt. It stretched around everything, Jane knew, and she sees how that comforts Norna and how it comforts the animals who saw, too.

Page 134 – Norna is the most unknowable character in the book, which partly drives the plot, so I’ve chosen to keep some of that “secret” of her character even from the reader. Norna never once thinks or talks about breast cancer except for the above *one* sentence exchange with Aissa. Instead, objective correlative, a use of the natural world, characterizes Norna. Notice the distance in the third person compared to Jane’s or Aissa’s third person sections:

Norna stays two weeks on Isle Royale in 1927 and will return every year for two weeks until 1980.

In 1980, Candy and Rolf have an enormous collection of moose bones—gigantic jaws and metatarsus bones—and all joints arthritic.

In 1980, a year before Norna passes, there are five packs of fifty wolves on Isle Royale, nine hundred and ten moose; she will not know that due to accumulated problems with the gene pool, inadvertent introduction by humans of the parvo virus, and reduction of ice bridges to Canada from winters too warm, by 2013 there will be only eight unhealthy wolves left.

In 1980, Norna base camps at Oskey Basin, visits Lake Richie and Three Mile Campground, and at night she slaps mosquitoes, shivers during forty degree nights spent in a tent in July. She nurses her sore hips, tired from scrambling over rock and slogging through mud. She comes face to face with a moose cow and two calves, quickly moves out of the path, the musky smell of the cow’s warning huff so close she can nearly taste it. She watches a loon kill a merganser duck while its mother looks on; and she watches an eagle kill a loon baby.

No apologies.

She thinks about her Indian friend, Sam, and wonders if each predator appreciates the sacrifice the way Sam would.

She listens, silently to the wolves howl at night. Wolves that don’t as people think howl at the moon, but for reasons of communication: a rally cry for wolves to gather; a warning to keep outside wolves out of a pack’s territory.

When they lose a pack member.

Sometimes Norna stifles her own howls with her fists.

I hope this helps you see how altering point of view can be a useful technique in your toolbox. It is more appropriate for longer works but can work in a short story, too, with a deft hand. Happy crafting!