

Crafting the Memorable Genre Character: a Foolproof Formula

By Sophie Littlefield

(email sophie@sophielittlefield.com for permission to reprint)

I'm at that stage in my writing career – waiting for reviews of my first book – where I'm pondering that old adage, *Any publicity is good publicity*.

Presumably this means that any reviewer who finds his passions stirred is an ally, since the book in question has made an indelible impression, one that will provoke conversations and curiosity and increase sales. (Incidentally, this thesis has been proven by the b-school wonks at Stanford; see Sources.)

The same wisdom applies to the characters we create in our novels: *forgettable* is the worst thing that can be said about the people who populate our stories. As long as they invoke strong emotion – anything from slaving devotion to quailing repugnance – we have done our work well, and our characters will occupy a place in the reader's mind long after the final page.

THE FORMULA

I was preparing a proposal for an upcoming workshop on genre character and I decided to reduce the components down to their common denominators, to see if I could come up with a bare-bones recipe that would work in every genre.

Here's the result – the foolproof formula:

backstory + internal conflict + aggravating circumstances = unforgettable character

BACKSTORY

Characters can certainly – and often do, with compelling results – appear out of nowhere. But somewhere during the book, their backstory must be revealed.

Not all of it, certainly; readers will resent being forced to wade through any but the most relevant details. The venerable Dwight V. Swain cautions you should reveal only enough background “to make your reader – and you – believe in him.”

As you review your draft – and this is one of those rare times that I think it pays to go over an unfinished draft so as to avoid unnecessary tangents – consider every instance of backstory and ask yourself this question: “Must the reader know this about my character to understand what happens *in this book*?”

If the answer is no, *cut*. It's that simple.

Share only the experiences and details and relationships that shaped them, that brought them to the place they occupy today, that make it imperative that they can react only one way to the story problems you're laying in their path like so many forgotten mines. Oops – that would be aggravating circumstances, and I'm not quite ready to talk about that yet –

INTERNAL CONFLICT

- because you need to understand your characters' internal conflicts before you go unleashing your plot on them.

Internal conflict is merely a struggle that takes place in a character's mind. Hollywood story consultant Christopher Vogler uses the term "inner problem," a "personality flaw or a moral dilemma to work out" over the course of the story.

You already know that it's your characters' imperfections that make them interesting. As bestselling author Elizabeth George writes, "there is nothing more disagreeable than spending free time immersed in a story about an individual who leaps tall buildings of emotion, psyche, body and spirit in a single bound...a character possessing perfection in one area should possess imperfection in another area."

Now: how to design internal conflicts that will hold your readers' attention? You can make the case that they are merely the natural outcome of backstory, but I'd argue that the two are separate. If you presume that every abused child grows up to torture kitties...that every white-glove Connecticut debutante secretly longs to walk on the wild side...then you do your reader a grave disservice. Readers aren't searching for stories that have been already told; they plunk their money down hoping for something fresh, and it's your job to deliver it.

Let's say you've got your backstory figured out and you're confident that a character such as yours will react a particular way to the set of circumstances you're about to unroll. Now, dig a little deeper. What if your character sees the world a little differently than everyone else; if he's the one who breaks the mold, who dreams bigger or hurts more deeply or has to go to a darker corner than you ever thought possible to satisfy his cravings?

This is best illustrated with a few familiar examples:

Backstory: Happy-go-lucky, ditzzy hometown girl is devastated by sister's violent death while studying abroad.

Easy internal conflict: chasing down heinous bad guys is hell on a manicure.

Stronger: Push this party girl a little too hard and you awaken her hard-core bad-ass side, an aspect she never knew existed, a ball-buster whose thirst for justice is matched only by her taste for sultry dark-side avengers.

The character: Karen Marie Moning's MacKayla Mac Lane.

Backstory: Son of Ireland is dealt crushing blows with his child's death being followed in quick succession by divorce and the loss of his mother.

Easy internal conflict: alcohol and mindless sex are adequate salve to keep a hapless PI motivated enough to earn his next paycheck.

Stronger: Even the cold-cocked death of his relationship or the betrayal of everyone he loved in his youth can't shake our man's fundamental appreciation for complicated women or his dogged pursuit of an outcome that may be just a few shades more in common with justice than the alternative.

The character: Declan Hughes' Edward Loy.

Backstory: Not-pretty, unrefined young woman longs for career of her own in traditionally-male field of law enforcement in class-conscious Britain.

Easy internal conflict: it would be all too easy to do a My Fair Lady on our gal, giving her the sort of insta-makeover that our culture favors and dispenses regularly via reality TV.

Stronger: Explore the struggle to find motivation, satisfaction, vindication and yes – romance – all without changing a thing, without plucking an unattractive stray hair or losing a few pounds.

The character: Elizabeth George's Barbara Havers, who she has called her most popular character

Aggravating Circumstances

Stasis is the writer's enemy. - a well-conceived story forces character growth. And how do you provide that motivation? According to Swain, "You devise something that he or she must change in order to win happiness."

Being a glass-half-empty type, I usually work from a variation: devise circumstances the character must change in order to avoid doom or despair. But no matter, we agree on the gist: force your character to act.

Naturally the closer to the bone you cut, the better. Use their fears, aversions, longings, addictions; create circumstances which seemingly defy resolution. Push them to within an inch of their fictional lives, require them to conquer their weaknesses, use up all their reserves of hope, optimism, faith and self-confidence.

In a tight genre story, the aggravating circumstances should address the internal conflict. If your character is herpetophobic (Indiana Jones), have him face a pit of snakes. If your character fears commitment, saddle him with a responsibility he can't ethically refuse. If she longs for approval, force her to take an unpopular stand on an issue close to her heart.

We're tiptoeing around the edges of the hero's journey here - an entirely different topic for a different day - but merely keeping motivation in mind will enrich your characters from the outset. Combined with judicious use of backstory and conflict, you can create story people with staying power. Give this formula a spin next time you're creating a character from scratch.

Sources:

Berger, Jonah; Sorensen, Alan T.; and Rasmussen, Scott J. (April 2004). Is Any Publicity Good Publicity? A Note on the Impact of Book Reviews. *Working Paper*, Stanford Graduate School of Business.

George, Elizabeth: *Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

Hughes, Declan: *The Wrong Kind of Blood, The Color of Blood, The Price of Blood*

Moning, Karen Marie: *Darkfever, Bloodfever, Feyfever*

Swain, Dwight V. *Creating Characters: How to Build Story People*. Cincinnati, OH: Writers Digest Books, 1990.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

