

Creating Believable Characters

The characters you create, like those “characters” you might run into at the bank or the supermarket, are unique snowflakes. Each character, from the snotty teenager to the war veteran freshly returned from Iraq, deserves intricate backstory and ample development.

First and foremost, remember that you’re writing people. To you, the writer, these people are as real as your uncle’s snobbish affinity for Scrabble and time should be taken to craft a character that is both fluid and believable. Take time to do your research. Learn common mannerisms and quirks by people watching. I’m not asking you to follow people around like some PI from Cheaters. Find a place that’s comfortable, preferably along a wall so that you can have full view of the space, and people watch. This is a great way to collect intel and learn common gestures used by the average person. Watch their hands and facial expressions. Do the corners of their eyes crinkle when they laugh? Do they snap their fingers while waiting in line or twiddle their thumbs while skimming their email? Do they walk with a limp or speak with a speech impediment? All-important observations for an intel-collecting scribbler.

Remember that people are complicated and constantly evolving. Your characters will evolve on their own as they’re being written and that’s okay. You’re not actually creating the character who frothed your milk at the coffee shop. You’re creating a new character based on Coffee Man’s model. At this point, once you’ve got your bits and pieces/character shell, you can add some research (see my other post about the importance of research) to make him more interesting. What is his faith practice? Where did he grow up? What is his profession? Researching these details will allow you to create a more rounded character, somebody that you might run into on the street, a unique snowflake.

A good rule of thumb when creating characters is to write what you know. Don’t worry, writing what you know doesn’t mean you only write what you currently have packed away inside your cranium. You can pick up a book on welding and learn enough to craft a believable character. Of course, it depends on the book. The title “Beginners Welding” would likely be more useful than a large print selection from the kiddie section called “Jimmy Learns to Weld.” You get the picture.

So, when creating characters, remember to base your characters in reality. Craft believable backstory, unique quirks, and do your research to create a character that will light up a room of your choosing. Best of luck and, as always...

Happy Scribbling!

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