

Character Development

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions are important, and as the saying goes, you only get one opportunity to make one. This is maybe more true in writing, or in a film or theatre production, than it is in real life. After all, you don't want people to close the book or story you've written before they even give your character a chance.

Physical Description

What does *Physical* description do? It's evocative. It implies other aspects of the character. The reader imagines other details and begins to associate with other qualities. "Many considered her beautiful," — this alone doesn't quite give them a good picture. But it's a good idea to give your readers a couple of iconic physical traits to anchor their imaginations, and give them the power to create the rest in their minds. Don't bog them down.

Consider this sentence: "A sweet-faced guy who's probably done his job too long." What does that tell you? Does that stir your imagination?

Physical descriptions can be strengthened if they ***can also be acted***. Examples:

...an extremely attractive girl passes by. She turns and gives him a look to make hell freeze over...

...there was something about the way he moved, the tilt of his head — a cat-like tentativeness, a predatory quality...

...a big woman with small illusions — 180 Guatemalan pounds squeezed into a pink lace teddy. She grabs a cluster of garlic to her bosom and begins to chant...

Non-physical Description

(malevolent, compassionate, flighty, arrogant, manipulative, simple, etc.)

Is it important to tell the reader about these character traits or do you prefer to allow the reader to discover these traits as they read? (*DISCUSSION*)

Backstory

The backstory about a character is a narrative that outlines their pertinent history or background. It helps us understand what it is that makes them who they are and why they act as they do when they appear in a novel or story.

NOTE: It is more important for you, the author, to know the character's backstory than it is for the reader to know it.

When you first meet someone, you are often interested in their backstory. Why? Because:

- there are interesting stories behind the decisions that people make in their life;
- past choices that have been made by characters can determine the choices they make in the future;
- if you give your character a backstory it gives them a fully-, multi- faceted life, just waiting to be explored (Faceted definition, one of the small, polished plane surfaces of a cut gem.);
- but remember, a backstory is not necessary to the reader, to the storyline — but sometimes it helps the writer understand the intrigue.

Backstory reveals:

- it helps us understand why characters do what they do;
- helps understand the psychology of the character in the present;
- backstory can reveal why the character is afraid to love, why they are cynical, it gives insights into motivations, actions, and responses.

The influences of the past create a very specific character in the present.

The reader **sees** how the character acts, BUT it's the writer who **needs to know** why he's acting that way; needs to know what event in his history caused this reaction — but you **don't** need to explain it all to the audience — too much telling of the past can get in the way of today's story.

19th Century novelists put backstory first. Huge novels that went on forever about the past. Modern novels are front-loaded — and like a film that begins before the credits come on.

A few things to remember

Paradoxes are the crux of fascinating characters. Example: In *Gone With the Wind* we first see Scarlett as a flirt. We expect her to be seductive and manipulative — it's consistent with her character. But we might be surprised to learn that math was her favourite subject, that she is clearheaded in the midst of a crisis, that she is strong, determined, and shrewd.

Characters are more interesting if they're made of mixed stuff.

Characters come to life when you understand their world.

Research — so important. If you're doing a story about the homeless shelter; you've got to go there to sleep sometimes — otherwise details and emotions are missing.