

## The Importance of Character

After many years of writing and teaching others to write, I've come to suspect that most of us are asking the wrong question: *What's this story about?*

Plot is easy to articulate. The people I mentor often approach at the end of a session and rattle off the details of a current project. They tell me *what it's about*: *My story is about a guy who eats a poisoned sandwich and wakes up in outer space*. The person beams, certain that the work has been done for a good story.

"Okay," I say. "So what's the problem?" I've worked with writers long enough to know that the person wouldn't be telling me about the story at all if things were going well with the writing.

Sometimes the writer just makes a face and lets out a weary sigh. Sometimes I hear, "Well, my brother (friend/writing group/rabbi) read it, and I don't know. It just didn't have much impact." Most often, the writer says, "I've been trying to make it work. And I can't finish it. I *hate* it."

The relationships we have with our stories can be like bad romances. *The concept had seemed so promising at first, but what a dud it turned out to be!* We may fail to commit over and over, sure that the issue is with the stories. It's tempting to keep scrapping idea after idea, to believe that the right idea will solve the problem. The old platitude, "It's not you, it's me," might actually be true in this case. The writer may have faulty notions of what a relationship with a story is all about.

At this point, the writer of the sandwich story is hoping I'll say something like, *What you should do is have the main character discover that his mother is responsible for the bad sandwich. Blow up the escape pod. Make the two of them fight to the death*. However, this would simply extend the problem.

A plot is an account of a particular person's decisions within a particular circumstance. If the person isn't particular, no plot will be interesting, regardless of how many explosions or condiments or escape pods there are.

What I do instead is ask the writer a bunch of questions. "What would this guy have been doing on this particular day if the sandwich thing hadn't happened? What are the consequences for not showing up for that thing? What ongoing problems does he have? Does he have financial woes? Has his wife left him? What's his fondest wish for the future? Has he always wanted to be an opera singer? A llama farmer? Why is he the worst possible person to end up in space? Or the best?" Etc.

The writer's eyes often go wide because a number of realizations happen at once, electric currents in the brain. A) The writer had never considered who the character was outside of someone poisoned by a sandwich. B) The writer understands that the

character existed before we entered the story. C) The writer suspects that answering some of these questions about the character will make the story seem more real. D) The writer grasps that the character needs to *want* something, partly because real people want things and partly because desire gives the character reasons to make one decision over another. E) The writer is delighted to observe that the answers to the questions are already there in the mind, swirling around.

Maybe the guy who eats the sandwich is a lifelong grump, mainly because he had a terrible childhood in which his single father was rarely home and rarely fed him. Maybe he now works at a shoe store, which he likes because he doesn't have to look people in the eye. On the day he was abducted, he had planned to ask out that one cute security guard at the mall. It would have been his first date in two years.

Or maybe the guy who eats the sandwich is a recently married environmental activist, and they just found out they're going to have a baby. Maybe he doesn't really want to be an activist anymore – he wants to be a standup comic. But he hasn't told anyone, not even his wife. On the day of the abduction, he had been at an open mic at the Laff Factory, a place where most of the other comics are drug dealers.

In neither of the above scenarios has the writer yet thought yet about what's going to happen in outer space. Is that what will happen on the first page? The character will wake up in the spaceship? But what the writer does now understand is that a *particular* character is the key to the plot, because that character is motivated by particular desires and problems.

Ultimately, a good character is like someone we could actually know. This means the person has flaws and strengths, problems and worries, pride about some of the wrong things and some of the right ones. If writers can capture those qualities, not only will the process be more fun, but the final product will be irresistible. And it won't matter if it's about a sandwich and outer space, about someone battling a terrible disease, or about a wombat detective.

A story is a romance for the reader, too. We have to give those readers someone to fall for, to root for. This is not to say that our characters have to be likeable, but they do have to be three-dimensional and compelling.

At this point, the writer often says, "Thank you, thank you!" and bundles up a bunch of books and papers and races out of the room, bumping into the door jam on the way out. People who are drawn to writing tend to be pretty insightful about other human beings. They are empathetic souls, very well equipped to write excellent stories if they focus on the right question:

Who is this story about?

