

Characters - Give 'Em Some Attitude

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Successful writers know that if your characters aren't real, no one will read your book. Getting your reader's interest hinges on "character" above all else. Learn how to create compelling characters that draw reader's into your book.
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The other day, a writer friend of mine told me her publisher recommended she read a certain book to get the flavor of what they liked to publish. Eager to know, my author friend rushed to find the book and devour it... only to feel slightly disappointed - and confused.

She wondered what it was about this book the publisher liked. The story wasn't great. The writing was average. Some of the pacing seemed awkward. Then it hit her. It was the ATTITUDE of the protagonist that gave the book its appeal. The hero was feisty, quick to anger, even spiteful and yet somehow lovable.

It's no secret that I believe the key to good story telling is 'character'. It should come before everything else - before plotting, before story, even before putting pen to paper. If your characters aren't real to you, their stories will never work.

And whilst I've spent much time elsewhere talking about the importance of creating believable characters, I don't think I've given over as much time on their 'attitudes' as perhaps I could have done.

So let's do some exploring, shall we?

Think of some classic fictional characters. What's the first thing that comes to mind? Their physical appearance? Rarely. It's usually their demeanor, isn't it? Their unique way of interacting with the world - yes, their attitude towards what they do.

James Paterson's Alex Cross is a great character because he's all heart. He loves his family and truly values friendship - and takes his psychopath's activities very personally!

Patricia Cornwall's Kaye Scarpetta doesn't respond well to being patronized or underestimated. She's also way too protective of her niece. Notice too that she gets much more critical of her partner's habits as the series progresses.

The Da Vinci Code's Robert Langham is intrigued by mystery and secret symbols. Interestingly, despite being a simple college professor he seems to possess almost superhuman powers of endurance. In Angels and Demons, for instance, he actually falls out of a plane without a parachute over Rome... and survives with barely a scratch!

I think Harry Potter's appeal has much to do his ordinariness. He never believes he's capable of what he has to face. Everybody and his dog knows he's supposedly destined for greatness but he doesn't ever seem quite ready for it. The next time you're inventing (major and minor) characters, don't just imagine their physical attributes, try to give them depth by wondering what they would be passionate about or, conversely, have little interest in. What would annoy them - or thrill them?

Give them short term and lifelong agendas, things they are committed to achieving or seeing come to pass. These are the things that will help with your plotting. Once you know what one of your characters would definitely NOT do, your stories will begin to take on a life of their own.

Remember, never impose a story on a character. The best stories come out of the main character's conflicting agendas.

For example, it's not enough to have some anonymous killer trailed by any old ordinary detective. The killer must be fully realized - there must be very good reasons (if only in his own mind) why he does what he does. Similarly, for good fiction, the detective should be motivated by much more than just 'doing his job' to make a story like this compelling.

Once we know the killer hates women and perhaps himself, and that the detective is terrified of losing his wife to him, then we begin to care about the outcome.

I think one of the reasons Hollywood movies work so well is that the big stars come with a ready made attitude. We all know what to expect from actors like Jack Nicholson, Robert DeNiro and Julia Roberts. No matter what characters they play, we sense their attitudes, their strength and depth, even though we know they're only acting!

So, the message is that during character development, try to imagine being inside the heads of your characters. Don't just give them attributes, histories and agendas, go the extra mile and give 'em attitude!

Best regards and keep writing!

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