

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Creating Vibrant Characters

Mark Twain said that the difficulty of writing fiction is that it has to be plausible.

When I base characters on people I know, I know that their quirks and contradictions are “realistic.” When I create characters from scratch, I lose this support. Cleverly contrived contradictions sometimes make for unbelievable characters.

What makes a fictional character come to life? What makes Don Quixote so memorable? Why are we so invested in Elizabeth Bennet’s marital prospects? Why do we have nightmares (or fantasies) about the Wicked Witch of the West?

Part of it is unique and ineffable. Quixote lives because Cervantes poured his life experience into the character.

But much about writing characters can be learned and practiced. Austen’s characters come partly from her unique inspiration, but they also live because she crafted them so carefully, honing perfect exemplars of her world.

There are many resources and handbooks for writing characters. I learned a lot by reading essays on the psychology of Shakespeare’s characters. Studying how the Bard presents Hamlet or Lady Macbeth teaches us how to construct complex characters scene by scene.

Character Tips

- **Believable contradictions** — a pacifist who loves ice hockey, a teacher who hates kids, a vegetarian who craves barbecued ribs – whatever makes characters less stable and predictable while remaining plausible.
- **Meaningful contradictions** — not just clever juxtapositions, but character-contradictions that matter in the plot. How must a character eventually choose between conflicting desires and demands brought about by these contradictions?
- **Challenge/failure/struggle/success** — the character is challenged and fails, and must work to gain the skills and power to succeed. Some of this may be backstory — when we meet Rick in *Casablanca*, he is a bitter alcoholic. The challenge and failure are behind him, and the screenplay concerns a reawakening of the challenge, new struggles, and ultimate success. Characters who parade from one success to the next — Hercules, for instance, or Superman — make for tedious stories.
- **Irony** — can you get a bit of distance and gently portray the character’s foibles? Can you help us laugh at the character while still sympathizing? This device is used in romantic comedies, where puffed up egos are deflated, but all ends happily ever after. Kafka, too, builds comic effects on character-irony – the increasing distance between what the protagonist believes and what the reader perceives.

See page 2 for exercises

The Magical Writer

A Writing Intensive
in the Reclaiming Tradition

With George Franklin and Guest Teachers

Want to write a novel, memoir, or other narrative? Want to jump-start your writing, regardless of the style? Let Reclaiming magic help!

We'll look at the craft of writing and the emotional blocks that keep us from reaching our full artistic potential.

We'll meet in sacred space, share writing and support over the web, and gain understanding and skill from working with others. Writing can be an isolating practice - we'll use magic to weave a web of support and encouragement.

With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spellwork, we'll free our expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and other aspects of the writers' craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you'll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

George Franklin is a Reclaiming teacher and co-editor of Reclaiming Quarterly. He has written several novels and published one (visit directaction.org), and helped edit work by writers such as Cynthia Lamb, T. Thorn Coyle, and Starhawk. Magic is a key part of his creative process.

© 2011 George Franklin



*Magical Writing Ancestor — Jane Austen.
Wrote and published in the early 1800s. Based
on a drawing by her sister Cassandra.*

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Characters

Living Dialog

Fiction Versus Real Life

Dialog captures characters on the fly. Instead of telling us what characters think, show them arguing, analyzing, cajoling, misunderstanding, etc.

Dialog can enliven the “content” of a narrative. In my action-adventure novel about the discovery of a new species of garden ant, I can write scintillating exchanges between rival entomologists to bring life to what might otherwise be dry material.

Fictional dialog is a much-edited version of real life, as working from interviews reveals. In real life, we often speak at length, then listen as someone responds for a while. On the page, three or four sentences can seem like full expression. Anything more looks like a lecture disguised as dialog.

Break up lengthy “speeches” by having other characters ask questions or assert a differing view. The sharper the disagreement, the livelier the material.

Exception — when a “speech” is in answer to long-awaited questions and promises. Midway through *The Da Vinci Code*, we wade through pages of pseudo-dialog because it answers questions about the relationship of the Grail, Mary Magdalene, and the Vatican.

Similarly, we allow the villain to taunt the detective at length near the end of a mystery novel, so long as we are getting explanations of the clues and mysteries that have unfolded beforehand.

But aside from these payoff scenes, aim for short, crisp exchanges.

Character Studies

Study Favorite Characters

Think of a few favorite characters from books and film.

- What makes you like each character? What surprises you about liking them?
- What is their mission or chief desire?
- What are the character’s internal contradictions? Why are these plausible?
- What gets in the way of fulfilling the mission or desire? How do the character’s contradictions figure in?

Dirty Dancing Lessons

Watch the original *Dirty Dancing* and track the two main romantic leads, who are basically confident young people constrained by an adult world.

Watch how each character’s internal contradictions — their unique, half-unconscious doubts and hesitations vis-a-vis the adults — interweave and nearly ruin their relationship late in the film.

Only when each has separately stood up to the adult authorities can they clear the way for their own love.

In Search of Oz

In *The Wizard of Oz*, what is Dorothy’s foremost aim, and what internal dynamic is getting in the way? (Remember what Glinda says near the end: “You knew it all along...”)

What are the personal goals of the three companions, and how do these interweave with Dorothy’s goal? Why is the journey necessary, if the characters “knew it all along”?

Writing Exercises

Character Tarot Readings

Do a reading about a character. Try a general reading (past-present-future, perhaps) — and then ask specific questions, drawing one or more cards for each. At the end, look at all of the cards and see if any patterns emerge.

Do a tarot reading *for* a character. Try invoking the character and listening — what questions do you hear coming from the character? Can you give the character a reading in response to their own questions?

Thought — tarot cards don’t contain answers, but are a way of stimulating our imagination. Mary Greer says: The cards aren’t magical — the magic is in you.

Character Rants

Write a rant about anything on your mind. Take five minutes and just spew, with no regard for linearity or coherence.

Now rework the material as part of a character. Is the rant delivered as dialog? An interior monologue? Where does it take place? What sets it off? Does anyone respond?

Character Backstory

Write a fact sheet telling where the character was born and has lived, what schools they attended, etc. What are their favorite flavors of ice cream? What is their recurring dream? What secrets do they tell no one?

Write an anecdote starring the character.