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The Compelling Character: Inside and Outside

Two angles will make your protagonist compelling and likeable, someone the reader wants to spend time with: her personality and the things that happen to her. In other words, the inside and the outside.

1. The Inside

a. Five Necessary Character Traits. Protagonists in successful novels have personalities that are as diverse as the writers' imaginations. Almost anything goes. Sherlock Holmes is a drug addict, as is perhaps Steven Maturin (*Master and Commander* and others). Ignatius J. Reilly (*A Confederacy of Dunces*) has a personality that is a combination of paranoia and monomania. Scarlet O'Hara is self-obsessed and an inveterate schemer. Charlotte Simmons is foolishly naïve. Richard Sharpe (*Sharpe's Tiger* and others) carries a grudge against his betters.

Irrespective of their personality quirks, memorable protagonists almost always have these traits in common, and we will talk about each: 1) they are kind when it counts; 2) they are brave when they need to be; 3) they are active, not passive; 4) they are not fools; 5) they have the ability to grow. Almost every hero of classic and contemporary fiction has these five traits.

1. To be **kind** is a decision the protagonist makes that endears him to the reader. Often it is a counterpoint to the hero's otherwise bristly personality. An act of kindness can redeem a character who is unlikable due to her history or circumstances or choices. In our daily evaluations of people, kindness counts more than almost any other trait. Kindness in a fictional character makes a direct connection to the reader. It's what we want in anyone, and what we want in our heroes.

Successful characters typically are not Margaret Mitchell's Melanie Hamilton: too good to be true, day in and day out. Readers don't want a Pollyanna, but they do want a glimpse of kindness in even the toughest customer.

Kindness, even a meager measure—can make the reader root for the most irredeemable of characters. In Gene Wolfe’s science fantasy masterpiece, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, the protagonist, Sevarian, is a member of a guild of torturers and executioners, and he spends a goodly amount of the novel doing just those things. But Wolfe nicely adds an injured dog, Triskele, who Sevarian nurses back to health for no other reason than it should be done. We like Sevarian, despite his career choice.

Adopting a dog is an old trick used by novelists. In A.B. Guthrie’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The Big Sky*, protagonist Boone Caudill—who has just killed his lifelong friend and hunting mate Jim in a jealous rage, and who is not too likeable in any event—adopts a hound, Blue, by stealing the dog from its abusive owner.

2. By **courage**, I do not necessarily mean when the hero turns on her heels and races back into the burning building to rescue the old lady trapped in her wheelchair on the second floor. Physical bravery is indeed a component of many well-drawn characters, but the courage that makes many characters in fiction memorable and likable is the courage to forgive and the courage to sacrifice. These are the traits of the noble character.

Forgiving means to renounce a sentiment—anger, hate, resentment—that she has a right to. During the course of the novel she has earned the moral high ground—she deserves to feel righteous—but now she will cede some of it by forgiving.

Or courage can mean the ability of the character to sacrifice. Here the character’s bravery is her willingness—perhaps against common sense or in spite of her need for revenge or success or understanding—to give up something. The character makes the difficult choice, and surrenders something she highly values. Perhaps she has worked years for it—her reputation, her wealth, her career, her loved one, her health—and she is going to let go of what she values. Sacrifice is an enormously appealing human attribute, as valued as it is rare, and is the nature of a hero.

3. Your novel’s main character should be **active**. He cannot simply allow events to roll over him, accepting with equanimity whatever comes his way. Readers do not want a passive protagonist. Even a character who is retiring and passive at first (Jack Crabb in Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* comes to mind) eventually goes into action, often at the last minute and often when the crisis is upon him. Readers want a protagonist who has some energy, makes decisions, and moves forward. The reader is sitting in her chair. She doesn’t want a protagonist who sits in his chair.

4. A protagonist need not be brilliant, or even very smart. But he should **not be a fool**. A key ingredient of the relationship between the reader and a novel’s protagonist is respect. A reader will not care about and will not

want to accompany a character who the reader doesn't regard highly. A fool generates no respect. As Louis. B. Meyer said to David O. Selznick, "Never ask an audience to sympathize with characters that are acting like fools, David."

Of course, many protagonists do something foolish in the novel. Often that dumb act is early in the story, and is the setup for the entire plot, and the character spends the novel extricating herself from the mistake. Everyone makes a mistake, and readers understand a mistake. But can you think of a protagonist of a successful novel who consistently does foolish things? Readers won't put up with them.

5. James Scott Bell says, "We respond to the character who **changes**, who endures the crucible of the story only to emerge a different person at the end." A memorable character must grow during the course of the novel. Donald Maass sums it up: "[M]ake sure when the dust settles, your hero will never be the same again."

Usually the growth and change is for the better: the hero is a more complete person at the end of the novel. Certain difficulties in his character may have been resolved. Or he has been awakened to his true desires, or liberated from mental constraints. Often he has learned a hard lesson.

b. The Quirks. We are all compilations of personality quirks, gathered over the years, easier to collect than to discard. Readers find these oddities remarkably interesting in a character, particularly if the quirk is a harmless little add-on. The odd behavior reminds the reader of himself, if not in particular then because we all have quirks, and they are a reminder of our humanity.

As Orson Scott Card says, "The way to make such [minor] characters instantly memorable without leading the audience to expect them to do more is to make them eccentric, exaggerated, or obsessive."

Here is my favorite quirk of a fictional character: in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, the protagonist eats asparagus every day so he can smell it in his urine. My second favorite: in Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin novels, set in the early 1800s, Stephen Maturin, a surgeon and intelligence agent, will drop whatever he is doing to follow an exotic bird to get a good sighting.

"One notices people who stand out in a crowd," Sol Stein says. "That is exactly the kind of character you want for your novel." He points to Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Henderson in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, and Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* as notable examples.

We've discussed above those traits the protagonists of successful novels usually have. They almost always also have eccentricities that make them stand out in the reader's mind.

c. Mix Up the Traits. Discussing the appeal of Patrick O'Brian's series about the nautical adventures of Captain Jack Aubrey and Dr. Stephen Maturin, Richard Snow, editor of *American Heritage* magazine, notes that part of it is the pace and color of the stories, but "it is also the exploration of human emotions that were the same in Napoleon's day as they are in ours. In O'Brian's characters—in their pleasures and humiliations, their triumphs and failures, their ludicrous moments and their heroic deeds—we feel the vibrations of our own lives, and we come to cherish them as we do our friends."

Nobody is perfect, and your fictional character shouldn't be, either. Everyone has foibles and eccentricities. The peculiar passion, the funny obsession, the irritating little mannerism, the odd sense of humor. Human nature is a stew. Mix it up.

d. It's Not Always the Strengths. The editor-in-chief at Simon & Schuster Michael Korda said, "Characters' weaknesses are more interesting than their strengths," and he cited the characters of Graham Greene, John LeCarre, and William Shakespeare, in particular Othello.

Weaknesses endear a character to readers, and they rouse sympathy. We root for people we sympathize with. One of the reasons we read books is to find someone to cheer for. We want to be on that character's side as we accompany her on her adventure, cheering all the way.

e. But Don't Go Overboard. The depth of your characterizations—the layers that you add to your protagonist and the others in your novel—will often depend on the nature of your story. The hero of a thriller or a western doesn't usually require an exhaustive personality inventory.

While the audience for thrillers appreciates well-drawn characters, the readers more often focus on the detection of the foul plot and the pursuit of the villains. Romance readers are more interested in seeing deeply inside their heroine, to understand her problems and desires. "[I]t's a mistake to think that deep, detailed characterization is an absolute virtue in storytelling," Orson Scott Card says.

2. The Outside

Two external conditions work to make your character more likeable: hardship and the odds.

a. Hardship. In a novel, readers do not want things to be easy. They want them to be difficult, and the harder the better. The reader is sitting in a leather reclining chair next to a warming fireplace, with a cup of tea on the side table. The reader is doing this, but does she want to read about it? Of course not. She wants to read about a character whose body is about to be bitten in half by a shark, or a character who has picked up the phone to learn her fiancé has run off with a woman with an inheritance, or a character who has been sentenced to forty years at the Big House.

A protagonist should not have an easy path through the novel's 400 pages. Readers sympathize when a character has been dealt a bad hand, often before the narrative of the novel begins. The protagonist is an orphan at Coldstone House. Or he has just lost his bank account in a scam. Or she has watched her lifelong friend die of a wasting disease. Or she herself has a wasting disease. We like characters who are made to suffer, whom life has snubbed.

b. The Odds. But hardship alone isn't enough. The odds of success and happiness must be against the character. If the queen of England loses her heirloom diamond ring, she might not like the fact, but she can ask her chambermaid to reach into the vault and pass her another ring. If impoverished Mary O'Grady loses her tiny heirloom diamond ring, it's a catastrophe. The odds have been stacked against Mary. She's poor, and the ring is all she has. And her husband is a drunk and their only child has just run away to get away from the beatings. We respect the queen but we love Mary. Human beings are programmed to applaud the underdog. The movie *Rocky* is about Rocky, not about the champ, Apollo Creed.

So jigger the odds against your protagonist. His chances must be slim. He might not like it, but the readers will.