

KAREN MCCOY

How Characters Drive Plot

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"The story . . . must be a conflict, and specifically, a conflict between the forces of good and evil within a single person."

—Maxwell Anderson

Characters, whether they are protagonists, antagonists, minor or secondary, should be as multi-dimensional as possible. This is especially true for sci-fi, fantasy, and horror stories.

J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books have intricate plots, sophisticated world building, and a great sense of humor. While these are all great elements to include, what makes the Harry Potter books most memorable are the complex, layered characters. If Harry was flat and one-dimensional, it probably wouldn't matter if he lived in a world where pictures move and owls carry the mail.

Take the multi-dimensional Severus Snape. While his true motivation isn't revealed until the final book, his actions always keep readers guessing. His bitter nature and moral ambiguity set him apart, allowing his character to stand independent of the plot and remain interesting.

As agent Vickie Motter stated on her blog, "Often at conferences, I'll ask a writer to describe the main character. They will then proceed to tell me what happens to them in the plot. No, no, no. I asked about

the character. Who is your character? Why should we care? What makes them tick? What will draw readers to them?"

These are all necessary questions to ask while shaping multi-dimensional characters. Here are some other important elements to consider:

Characters must have a voice—don't make them speak; let them speak. When I first started writing, my dialogue was terrible. Part of this had to do with my unwillingness to let go of formal language, but the other problem was I was trying to *make* the characters speak, instead of *letting* them speak.

Now, when I go through revisions, I'll study the dialogue and ask, *Would so-and-so really say this?* If the answer is no, I let the character tell me what they want to say instead.

It's also important to make sure your character's dialogue is distinctive, especially if you're writing a first-person story with multiple POVs. If someone sounds just like everyone else, his or her diatribes won't be unique enough to keep a reader's attention.

But be careful of thick dialects. A common inclination is to change entire sentences to make a character sound different. Changing one or two words here and there (like *yer* for "your" or *an'* for "and") will do the trick.

Characters must have a motivation (even if it's not always obvious to the reader). There has to be a compelling reason for your characters to see a plot through. To ensure they won't walk away from a death-defying situation, even if they have every reason to.

In an interview, J. K. Rowling put forth a good question to ask characters: "Why fight?" (Why should Harry kill Voldemort? What does he have to gain?)

This "fight" question is a really good one to ask—not only will it help determine your character's motivations, but it's also a good element to include in a query pitch.

And it doesn't always have to do with actual fighting. A character might be compelled to help someone because of love.

A good example of character motivation is found in Janice Hardy's *The Shifter*. In the very first chapter, Nya is put into a dangerous situ-

ation because she's hungry. While battling guards, she reveals a unique set of magical abilities.

If Nya hadn't been motivated to steal food, she wouldn't have used her powers to get out of danger, and the plot would have been more stagnant at the beginning. In this way, character motivation drives plot (not the other way around).

Let's say your plot is already mapped out. No problem, just think about why your characters go places, how they interact with what happens to them, and what their motivations are.

Characters must have unique mannerisms/tics that make them who they are. When developing characters, it's often best to avoid stereotypes. Detective-type descriptions are a surefire way to leave your characters dead in the water. (And I'll bet readers won't care if your protagonist is five-foot-eight with size-seven shoes, unless these characteristics are necessary to the plot.)

When writing out scenes, study the actions of your character, whether he or she is tying a shoe or baking a cake. Does your character complete these actions differently than someone else would?

Terry Pratchett, author of the Discworld series, does this best. In his book *Wyrd Sisters*, he uses unique description to make an otherwise ordinary duke different than usual: "The duke had a mind that ticked like a clock and, like a clock, it regularly went cuckoo."

A final note of caution when creating memorable characters: Beware of too much backstory in the narrative. Background is appropriate when creating character sketches, but by the time the final draft of your manuscript is done, the character's childhood, mannerisms, and idiosyncrasies shouldn't be so overbearing that they bog down the rest of the story.

EXERCISE

Take a character from one of your completed novels or works-in-progress and pretend that he or she is sitting down to an interview. Ask this character the following questions:

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What makes you happy?

What do you consider your biggest flaws? Why?

What are you fighting? Why?

What annoys you more than anything?

Who do you hate? Why?

Who do you love? Why?

What are your hopes and dreams? What will you do if you don't achieve them?