

Start writing fiction



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Introduction

This free course, *Start writing fiction*, looks at how characters might be drawn and how setting is established. It explores the different levels of characterisation, from flat to round, and how **character** and **place** interact. It also works on the effect of **genre** and how genre can be used.

The main teaching material in this course is taken from an existing publication, *The Fiction Writer's Workshop* by Josip Novakovich (1995).

Novakovich is an award-winning writer (of short stories mainly), who teaches fiction writing at the University of Cincinnati. His chapters on 'Character' and 'Setting' are included within this course. I'll indicate when you should read these extracts and I'll also outline the listening and writing activities that accompany them.

This course is split into the following sections:

- **Character**
- **Setting**
- **Genre**

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Creative Writing](#).

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify strengths and weaknesses as a writer of fiction
- demonstrate a general awareness of fiction writing
- discuss fiction using basic vocabulary.

1 Character

1.1 Creating characters

Activity 1

Click on 'setting and genre' below to read the first few paragraphs from Novakovich's chapter on 'Character'.

[setting and genre](#)

Discussion

The dictum that 'character is plot, plot is character', attributed to Henry James (in Novakovich, 1995) is a familiar one, similar to Shakespeare's 'Character is destiny' (from *King Lear*). This is not to say that what happens to characters is inevitable or predetermined. It's simply that particular characters seek or attract certain events or encounters. If you start by building a strong sense of your main character or characters, then add a dilemma, challenge or conflict, you will automatically be generating your plot. Starting the other way around, with a chain of events into which you then fit characters, can often be more difficult and less convincing.

Character + conflict = plot

As an ongoing exercise, apply this formula when building stories in your journal. See if it works for you.

1.2 Round and flat characters

What about minor or peripheral characters? How deeply do they have to be imagined?

Activity 2

Click on 'Round and flat characters' below to read the next section. Showing the contradictions in characters is one way of making them 'round'.

[Round and flat characters](#)

Take one of the stereotypes mentioned (shifty-eyed thief, jovial fatso, etc.) or use one of your own. Write a brief scene in which you portray that character in a complex way, going against the usual expectations.

Examples:

- the bullying headmaster with a tender sentimental side;
- the meticulous manager who lives in a messy house;
- the shy librarian who goes bungee-jumping;
- the habitual flirt who avoids relationships.

Discussion

Check what you've written to see if you've shown the character in a sympathetic light. If your portrayal seems distant or aloof, rewrite it. Try to identify more closely with the character. If you haven't already used the first person ('I'), write it in the character's own voice. Does that make a difference?

1.3 Sources of characters

Activity 3

Click on 'Sources of characters' below and read the extract. This outlines the main methods of finding and developing fictional characters.

[Sources of characters](#)

Activity 4

Click below to listen to novelists discuss themselves and their fiction.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[The use of autobiography in fiction](#)

In the audio file above, novelists talk about how they have used themselves in their fiction ('the autobiographical method'), often as a starting point for the creation of someone different.

Activity 5

Imagine a character very like you but give him or her a dramatic external alteration. You might make the character the opposite sex, for example, or make them significantly older or younger. You choose.

Now write a brief character sketch in which you reveal the character's appearance, their feelings about it, and their current circumstances. Use a third-person narrator ('he' or 'she').

Discussion

'Write what you know' is a familiar piece of advice often given to writers. But 'what you know' can expand through imagination and sympathetic identification with others who are not like you at all. This is similar to what actors do – they are not confined to 'playing themselves' – and neither are writers.

Activity 6

Click below to listen to novelists discussing how they develop their fictional characters using a mixture of methodical research, accident and empathy.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Creating characters](#)

Discussion

In your notebook, as an ongoing exercise, try Monique Roffey's method of building character outlines to flesh out your characters and see how much you can discover about them.

Use headings:

- **Physical/biological:** age, height, size, state of health, assets, flaws, sexuality, gait, voice.
- **Psychological:** intelligence, temperament, happiness/unhappiness, attitudes, self-knowledge, unconscious aspects.
- **Interpersonal/cultural:** family, friends, colleagues, birthplace, education, hobbies, beliefs, values, lifestyle.
- **Personal history:** major events in the life, including the best and the most traumatic.

1.4 Portraying a character

Activity 7

Click on 'Portraying a character' below and read the extract, which outlines the main methods of revealing character in fiction.

[Portraying a character](#)

Activity 8

Imagine a new character and build a strong sense of the person by using the checklist shown previously. Here it is again:

- **Physical/biological:** age, height, size, state of health, assets, flaws, sexuality, gait, voice.
- **Psychological:** intelligence, temperament, happiness/unhappiness, attitudes, self-knowledge, unconscious aspects.
- **Interpersonal/cultural:** family, friends, colleagues, birthplace, education, hobbies, beliefs, values, lifestyle.
- **Personal history:** major events in the life, including the best and the most traumatic.

Now present your new character in the four different ways outlined in Activity 7. Here they are again:

- Make a **summary** of what the character is like.

- Show him or her through **appearance**.
- Show him or her through a **habitual or repeated action**.
- Finally, show him or her through a **speech in a scene**.

Discussion

Review your four 'takes' on this character. Although you may have shown different aspects of your character, check that there are no inconsistencies. For example, Flaubert's depictions of Madame Bovary all show her as sensual, whatever the means of portrayal.

Activity 9

Make a character desire something, and make the desire his or her driving force. Write a scene or a summary that creates reasons why s/he can never have what s/he wants. ('Three hours between planes' is a good example of this.)

Discussion

Check that you have made the object of desire desirable in our eyes – make us see from the character's perspective.

1.5 Tips on character creation

- Use a journal to build ideas for character.
- Consider all the influences that go into the making of your character: age, gender, race, nationality, marital status, religion, profession.
- Know about your character's inner life: what s/he wants, thinks, remembers, resents, fears, dreams, denies.
- Know about your character's behaviour, what s/he wears, buys, eats, says, works at and plays at.
- Know how your character speaks and how this changes according to context, mood and intention.
- See and describe your character vividly, how s/he looks, how s/he moves, his or her possessions and surroundings.
- Focus on your character's contradictions and conflicts in order to create a complex person and also to generate plot.
- Remember the four main methods of character presentation: summary, appearance, habit and scene.

2 Setting

2.1 Setting as antagonist

Nothing happens nowhere.

(Elizabeth Bowen, in Burroway, 2003)

Showing the **setting** in your **story** is just as important as creating convincing characters. Character itself is a product of place and culture, so the interplay of both contributes to your story's meaning and significance. Elizabeth Bowen's maxim warns of the kind of floundering and confusion which arises without a firm grounding in place.

Activity 10

Click on 'Setting' below and read the introductory section, which deals with the importance of setting and its links with plot.

[Setting](#)

Activity 11

Make a list of objects you remember from your childhood home. Don't use any particular order or many adjectives. Don't censor yourself – something seemingly unimportant may evoke strong impressions. Read through your list and circle the objects that evoke the strongest feelings and memories of events.

- What are these events?
- Do you see a story lurking there?

Now write a paragraph describing one of these events.

- Where exactly did it happen?
- What objects were involved?

Don't use any overtly sentimental language – let the details speak for themselves.

Example: In the space beneath the staircase I find my old dog's house, with his shaggy hairs caught in the rough edges of the wood planks, although the dog is long gone.

If you don't spell out the emotional significance of the dog, you create poignancy without sentimentality.

Activity 12

Click on 'Setting as antagonist' below and read the extract. This looks against place.

[Setting as antagonist](#)

Activity 13

Write a scene in which a character is unhappy in his or her surroundings. For example, he or she might be:

- shy
- frightened
- disgusted
- trapped
- homesick

Show the feelings through the descriptions of the place, rather than by naming the feelings.

Activity 14

Write a scene in which two characters are quarrelling about the setting. One wants to stay and the other wants to leave. A setting could be:

- a rowdy bar
- Disney World
- deserted beach
- zoo
- second-hand bookshop
- school classroom
- expensive hotel
- alien spaceship

Activity 15

Click on 'Setting for special effects' below and read the extract.

[Setting for special effects](#)

Activity 16

Write one paragraph describing a place where you have worked. Describe how the people used their tools, machines or other equipment. Try to engage our senses, as shown in the Richard Yates' example given in the 'Setting for special effects' extract.

Discussion

If you stated the type of workplace – an office, hospital ward or canning factory – delete the information and see whether it's still obvious. If not, rewrite the piece with a focus on the sounds, sights, smells and general atmosphere of the place.

Activity 17

Think about how mood and circumstances affect perception. In 250 words, describe a supermarket visited by a woman who has just received a promotion at work.

Now, in another 250 words, write about the supermarket from the perspective of the same woman, who has just ended a love affair.

Activity 18

List 6 objects found in a character's bedroom, office, garage, or other semi-private space. Be specific. Name them, for example:

- plants
- books
- magazine

Describe them, for example:

- clothes
- snacks
- photographs
- detritus

In 200 words, describe the character's space in a way that provides clues to character. Now consider: could any of these objects lead to a larger story? For example:

- Is there a shameful or glorious memory attached to one of them?
- Do any of them belong to someone else?
- Is one of them being hidden on behalf of another character?

Jot down some plot ideas.

Activity 19

Workshop

Read through your work on Activities 14, 16, 17 and 18. Choose two that you would like to develop further.

3 Genre

3.1 Categories of fiction

A **genre** is a particular type or category of fiction. It can apply to both the long and short form (**novel** and **short story/novella**, respectively). It's impossible to give an exhaustive list, but it includes:

- **crime**
- **psychological thriller**
- **action thriller**
- **realism**
- **magic realism**
- **dirty realism**
- **romance**
- **historical**
- **legal thriller**
- **gothic**
- **science fiction**
- **humour**
- **fairy tale**
- **gay fiction**
- **family saga**
- **political**
- **maximalist**

Note how readily these genres might overlap. They are not mutually exclusive. Most pieces of fiction contain glancing aspects of many different genres. Genres also overlap, and within any one genre there are often a number of sub-genres. For example, 'crime' is a genre, 'East End gangster crime' is a sub-genre; 'romantic fiction' is a genre, 'historical romance' is a sub-genre.

3.2 The uses of genre

There are two central uses of genre for any writer:

- You might wish to write within a particular genre; in which case, your question is – what are the defining characteristics, and possible 'rules' of that genre? Here, 'reading as a writer' is clearly important. The best way to see how to do this is to see how others have done it. Read and familiarise yourself with the specific 'tricks of the trade' to achieve that genre's particular effect.
- You might not wish to write within a specific genre. In this case, it's useful to know about genre for a number of reasons. First, to avoid unwittingly writing in such a way that you will be categorised within a particular genre. Second, you might wish to

'borrow' characteristics from any number of genres. An example of this is Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, where elements of romance, thriller, crime and historical drama all feature in a bestselling literary novel.

3.3 What can genres do for you?

Think of it like this: each genre novel suggests certain characteristics, qualities and plot patterns that are particular to that genre. When you read a murder-mystery, you expect there at least to be a murder, or some kind of love interest in a romance. The reader has certain expectations. To fulfil them – the murder-mystery opening with a dead body; the romance delivering the passions of a hero and heroine – means that readers recognise the familiar elements and progressions of the story, their expectations are confirmed, and in the end they feel a satisfaction in proportion to the extent to which the writing has either gratified or disappointed their expectations.

The writer enters into a 'contract' with the reader, which says that the writer won't mislead the reader unnecessarily, and that ultimately, the writer won't betray the reader by breaking out of the boundaries of the genre that the fiction has encouraged the reader to expect.

Does this make for a good piece of fiction? That depends.

For example, the story's progression might be too predictable. There might be an excess of 'expectation, satisfied', where the most obvious culprit committed the murder, just as you had known from the start. Or there were no tantalising 'red herrings' to lead you off the scent, no intriguing 'twists' in the plot to make the final outcome seem surprising, even though you had been encouraged to anticipate it.

Alternatively, the fiction might not be 'predictable enough': a great romance that fizzles out midway through the story, with the writer never again referring to that romance's existence – this, after having raised the reader's expectations about its importance within the piece of writing.

These are the pitfalls of not following the genre's 'rules'. They can also be turned to your advantage.

By diverging from your readers' expectations – perhaps by employing aspects of different genres – they can feel surprised, intrigued and excited, rather than feeling let down.

Activity 20

Click below to listen to an audio file in which novelists talk about the pleasures of working within existing genres or of subverting them

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Genre](#)

Discussion

This illustrates several ways in which a knowledge of genres will prove useful to you in the course of your writing – as a fund of ideas, material and stylistic methods.

3.4 A note on suspense

By raising various expectations in the reader's mind, a writer can create an atmosphere of suspense – the desire to turn the page and find out what happens next. How much will the story follow the reader's expectations, how much will it confound them? In this way, suspense is central to why some writing is interesting, and some is not.

It might be a matter of writing within particular genres, and satisfying or diverging from the reader's expectations in varying degrees. Or it might simply be a matter of 'pitch'. That is, where the pitch of your writing is created by the extent and nature of the tension between your ideas and characters.

E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1979 [1927]), describes this tension, as created in *Arabian Nights*, where Scheherazade avoids death by leaving off her story-telling each sunrise at exactly right moment of tantalising suspense: 'We are all Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next.'

Suspense, therefore, is not a characteristic of fiction restricted to the murder-mystery or crime thriller genres: it is the desired aspect of *all* fiction – the quality that inspires a reader to read on.

Raymond Carver takes this point a little further:

I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story.

(Carver, 1985)

Activity 21

Read each of the seven anonymous extracts (mostly beginnings) from different fictions. Note down which genre(s) each extract might fit into. Give reasons why. Remember, they might fit into more than one genre. Make notes on all the possible genres and sub-genres. The discussion at the end of each extract will reveal the source and some genre suggestions.

Extract 1

The voice on the telephone seemed to be sharp and peremptory, but I didn't hear too well what it said – partly because I was only half-awake and partly because I was holding the receiver upside down. I fumbled it around and grunted.

'Did you hear me! I said I was Clyde Umney, the lawyer.'

'Clyde Umney, the lawyer. I thought we had several of them.'

'You're Marlowe, aren't you?'

'Yeah. I guess so.' I looked at my wrist watch. It was 6.30 a.m., not my best hour.

'Don't get fresh with me, young man.'

'Sorry, Mr Umney. But I'm not a young man. I'm old, tired, and full of no coffee. What can I do for you, sir?'

'I want you to meet the Super Chief at eight o'clock, identify a girl among the passengers, follow her until she checks in somewhere, and then report to me. Is that clear?'

'No.'

'Why not?' he snapped.

'I don't know enough to be sure I could accept the case.'

'I'm Clyde Um –'

'Don't,' I interrupted. 'I might get hysterical. Just tell me the basic facts. Perhaps another investigator would suit you better. I never was an FBI man.'

'Oh. My secretary, Miss Vermilyea, will be at your office in half an hour. She will have the necessary information for you. She is very efficient. I hope you are.'

'I'm more efficient when I've had breakfast. Have her come here, would you?'

'Where is here?'

I gave him the address of my place on Yucca Avenue, and told him how she would find it.

'Very well,' he said grudgingly, 'but I want one thing very clear. The girl is not to know she is being followed. This is very important. I am acting for a very influential firm of Washington attorneys. Miss Vermilyea will advance you some expense money and pay you a retainer of \$250. I expect a high degree of efficiency. And let's not waste time talking.'

'I'll do the best I can, Mr Umney.'

He hung up. I struggled out of bed, showered, shaved, and was nuzzling my third cup of coffee when the door bell rang.

'I'm Miss Vermilyea, Mr Umney's secretary,' she said in a rather chintzy voice.

'Please come in.'

She was quite a doll. She wore a white belted raincoat, no hat, a well-cherished head of platinum hair, bootees to match the raincoat, a folding plastic umbrella, a pair of blue-grey eyes that looked at me as if I had said a dirty word. I helped her off with her raincoat. She smelled very nice. She had a pair of legs – so far as I could determine – that were not painful to look at. She wore night-sheer stockings. I stared at them rather intently, especially when she crossed her legs and held out a cigarette to be lighted.

'Christian Dior,' she said, reading my rather open mind. 'I never wear anything else. A light, please.'

Discussion

Source: Raymond Chandler (1958) *Playback*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Genre(s): 'classic' detective fiction.

Extract 2

The organ swelled as Jane approached the altar, light-headed with happiness and not eating. It had been worth it – the tiny waist of the wedding dress now fitted her with ease, and she was blissfully aware of her slender form moving gracefully beneath the thick satin. The air was heavy with the scent of white roses as, smiling shyly beneath her cathedral-length veil, Jane drew up alongside Nick. Looking at her with a gratifying mixture of awe and wonder, Nick's face lit up in a tender smile ...

The organ swelled and made Jane, fast asleep and revelling in her favourite dream, wake up suddenly. A dead, heavy weight was dragging itself across her chest.

Realising it was Nick, Jane groaned more with discomfort than relief as her boyfriend groped clumsily to get his bearings before starting to saw away at her like a lumberjack. She barely had time to let out more than a couple of dutiful moans before, having galloped past the finishing post even faster than normal, Nick dismounted and rolled, grunting, back to his side of the bed.

As usual, Jane was left to lie in the wet patch.

Discussion

Source: Wendy Holden (1999) *Simply Divine*, London: Headline.

Genre(s): 'chick lit'/popular women's fiction.

Extract 3

Living in Trenton in July is like living inside a big pizza oven. Hot, airless, aromatic. Because I didn't want to miss any of the summer experience I had the sunroof open on my Honda CRX. My brown hair was pulled up into a wind-snarled, curls-gone-to-frizz ponytail. The sun baked the top of my head, and sweat trickled under my black spandex sports bra. I was wearing matching spandex shorts and a sleeveless oversized Trenton Thunders baseball jersey. It was an excellent outfit except it gave me no place to stick my.38. Which meant I was going to have to borrow a gun to shoot my cousin Vinnie.

I parked the CRX in front of Vinnie's storefront bail bonds office, lunged out of the car, stalked across the sidewalk, and yanked the office door open. 'Where is he? Where is that miserable little excuse for a human being?'

'Uh oh,' Lula said from behind the file cabinet. 'Rhino alert.'

Lula is a retired hooker who helps clean up the filing and sometimes rides shotgun for me when I do my fugitive apprehension thing. If people were cars, Lula would be a big, black '53 Packard with a high-gloss chrome grill, oversized headlights, and a growl like a junkyard dog. Lots of muscle. Never fit in a compact space.

Discussion

Source: Janet Evanovich (1998) *Four to Score*, London: Pan Macmillan.

Genre(s): modern comic crime fiction.

Extract 4

I made my decision, abruptly, in the middle of one of Gareth Butcher's famous theoretical seminars. He was quoting Empedocles, in his plangent, airy voice. 'Here sprang up many faces without necks, arms wandered without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone, in need of foreheads.' He frequently quoted Empedocles, usually this passage. We were discussing, not for the first time, Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body. There were twelve postgraduates, including myself, and Professor Ormerod Goode. It was a sunny day and the windows were very dirty. I was looking at the windows, and I thought, I'm not going to go on with this any more. Just like that. It was May 8th 1994. I know that, because my mother had been buried the week before, and I'd missed the seminar on *Frankenstein*.

I don't think my mother's death had anything to do with my decision, though as I set it down, I see it might be construed that way. It's odd that I can't remember what text we were supposed to be studying on that last day. We'd been doing a lot of not-too-long

texts written by women. And also quite a lot of Freud – we'd deconstructed the Wolf Man, and Dora. The fact that I can't remember, though a little humiliating, is symptomatic of the 'reasons' for my abrupt decision. All the seminars, in fact, had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying. I thought, next we will go on to the phantasmagoria of Bosch, and, in his incantatory way, Butcher obliged. I went on looking at the filthy window above his head, and I thought, I must have things. I know a dirty window is an ancient, well-worn trope for intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness. The thing is, that the thing was also there. A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*

I was sitting next to Ormerod Goode. Ormerod Goode and Gareth Butcher were joint Heads of Department that year, and Goode, for reasons never made explicit, made it his business to be present at Butcher's seminars. This attention was not reciprocated, possibly because Goode was an Anglo-Saxon and Ancient Norse expert, specialising in place-names. Gareth Butcher did not like dead languages, and was not proficient in living ones. He read his Foucault and Lacan in translation, like his Heraclitus and his Empedocles. Ormerod Goode contributed little to the seminars, beyond corrections of factual inaccuracies, which he noticed even when he appeared to be asleep. No one cared much for these interventions. Inaccuracies can be subsumed as an inevitable part of postmodern uncertainty, or play, one or the other or both.

I liked sitting next to Goode – most of the other students didn't – because he made inscrutable notes in ancient runes. Also he drew elaborate patterns of carved, interlaced plants and creatures – Celtic, Viking, I didn't know – occasionally improper or obscene, always intricate. I liked the runes because I have always liked codes and secret languages, and more simply, because I grew up on Tolkien. I suppose, if the truth were told, I should have to confess that I ended up as a postgraduate student of literature because of an infantile obsession with Gandalf's Middle Earth.

Discussion

Source: A.S. Byatt (2001) *The Biographer's Tale*, London: Vintage.

Genre(s): modern gothic romance, 'literary fiction'.

Extract 5

I can hardly say what a curious mix of feelings mine were, the Sunday afternoon when Kitty came to call on us in Whitstable. She was more to me than all the world; that she should be visiting me in my own home, and supping with my family, seemed both a delight too lovely to be borne and a great and dreadful burden. I loved her, and could not but long to have her come; but I loved her, and not a soul must know it – not even she. It would be a torture, I thought, to have to sit beside her at my father's table with that love within me, mute and restless as a gnawing worm. I would have to smile while Mother asked, Why didn't Kitty have a beau? and smile again when Davy held Rhoda's hand, or Tony pinched my sister's knee beneath the table – when all the while my darling would be at my side, untouchable.

Then again, there was the crampedness, and the dinginess – and the unmistakable fishiness – of our home to fret over. Would Kitty think it mean? Would she see the tears in the druggot, the smears on the walls; would she see that the armchairs sagged, that the rugs were faded, that the shawl which Mother had tacked to the mantel, so that it fluttered in the draught from the chimney, was dusty and torn, its fringes unravelling? I

had grown up with these things, and for eighteen years had barely noticed them, but I saw them now, for what they really were, as if through her own eyes.

I saw my family, too, anew. I saw my father – a gentle man, but prone to dullness. Would Kitty think him dull? And Davy: he could be rather brash; and Rhoda – horrible Rhoda – would certainly be over-pert. What would Kitty make of them? What would she think of Alice – my dearest friend, until a month ago? Would she think her cold, and would her coldness puzzle her? Or would she – and this thought was a dreadful one – would she think her pretty, and like her more than me? Would she wish it had been Alice in the box for her to throw that rose to, and invite backstage, and call a mermaid ...?

Discussion

Source: Sarah Waters (1999) *Tipping the Velvet*, London: Virago Press.

Genre(s): modern take on Victorian romance, lesbian romance.

Extract 6

It was raining cool cats and kosher hot dogs in the city that afternoon and things weren't getting any sunnier as the cat looked over my shoulder at me looking over my bank statement. I was keeping us in cigars and tuna by tackling a murder investigation every now and then, but the big clients didn't seem to be queuing up on the street outside my building waiting for me to throw down the little black puppet head with the key to the front door wedged in its mouth.

In fact, things were so bad that the only person who'd sought my help recently in undertaking an investigation for him had been Ratso. Ratso was my flamboyant flea market friend who sometimes served as a rather weather-beaten Dr Watson to my postnasal Sherlock Holmes. In his role of Dr Watson he brought zero sophistication to the table – any table – but he was loyal to a fault, was possessed of a rather charming naïveté, and had a good heart, which any detective worth his low-sodium salt will tell you is invariably the greatest possible obstacle to understanding the criminal mind.

Ratso as Dr Watson I could deal with. Ratso as a client was a whole other animal, and I do mean animal. So, when Ratso first mentioned the matter to me, I demurred. About the fourth time he mentioned it, I inquired as to the nature of the investigation, and he'd said, 'Well, it's really a very personal matter,' and I'd suggested, perhaps a bit unkindly, 'then why don't you keep it to yourself?' The other bad thing about having Ratso as a client was that he'd never paid for a meal or picked up a check in his life and there was every reason to believe that working for him would very definitely not be a financial pleasure.

Discussion

Source: Kinky Friedman (1995) *God Bless John Wayne*, London: Faber & Faber.

Genre(s): contemporary spoof sleuth.

Extract 7

Outside her kitchen window, the hedgerow glistened as if the snow possessed a light of its own; when the sky darkened towards evening, an unearthly, reflected pallor remained behind upon the winter's landscape, while still the soft flakes floated down. This lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow, pauses in her chores in the mean kitchen to

look out at the country road. Nothing has passed that way all day; the road is white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin.

Father said he would be home before nightfall.

The snow brought down all the telephone wires; he couldn't have called, even with the best of news.

The roads are bad. I hope he'll be safe.

But the old car stuck fast in a rut, wouldn't budge an inch; the engine whirred, coughed and died and he was far from home. Ruined, once; then ruined again, as he had learnt from his lawyers that very morning; at the conclusion of the lengthy, slow attempt to restore his fortunes, he had turned out his pockets to find the cash for petrol to take him home. And not even enough money left over to buy his Beauty, his girl-child, his pet, the one white rose she said she wanted; the only gift she wanted, no matter how the case went, how rich he might once again be. She had asked for so little and he had not been able to give it to her. He cursed the useless car, the last straw that broke his spirit; then, nothing for it but to fasten his old sheepskin coat around him, abandon the heap of metal and set off down the snow-filled lane to look for help.

Behind wrought-iron gates, a short, snowy drive performed a reticent flourish before a miniature, perfect Palladian house that seemed to hide itself shyly behind snow-laden skirts of an antique cypress. It was almost night; that house, with its sweet, retiring, melancholy grace, would have seemed deserted but for a light that flickered in an upstairs window, so vague it might have been the reflection of a star, if any stars could have penetrated the snow that whirled yet more thickly. Chilled through, he pressed the latch of the gate and saw, with a pang, how, on the withered ghost of a tangle of thorns, there clung, still, the faded rag of a white rose.

The gate clanged loudly shut behind him; too loudly. For an instant, that reverberating clang seemed final, emphatic, ominous as if the gate, now closed, barred all within it from the world outside the walled, wintry garden. And, from a distance, though from what distance he could not tell, he heard the most singular sound in the world: a great roaring, as of a beast of prey.

In too much need to allow himself to be intimidated, he squared up to the mahogany door. This door was equipped with a knocker in the shape of a lion's head, with a ring through the nose; as he raised his hand towards it, it came to him this lion's head was not, as he had thought at first, made of brass, but, instead, of gold. Before, however, he could announce his presence, the door swung silently inward on well-oiled hinges and he saw a white hall where the candles of a great chandelier cast their benign light upon so many, many flowers in great, free-standing jars of crystal that it seemed the whole of spring drew him into its warmth with a profound intake of perfumed breath. Yet there was no living person in the hall.

The door behind him closed as silently as it had opened, yet, this time, he felt no fear although he knew by the pervasive atmosphere of a suspension of reality that he had entered a place of privilege where all the laws of the world he knew need not necessarily apply, for the very rich are often very eccentric and the house was plainly that of an exceedingly wealthy man. As it was, when nobody came to help him with his coat, he took it off himself. At that, the crystals of the chandelier tinkled a little, as if emitting a pleased chuckle, and the door of a cloakroom opened of its own accord. There were, however, no clothes at all in this cloakroom, not even the statutory country-garden mackintosh to greet his own squirearchal sheepskin, but, when he emerged again into the hall, he found a greeting waiting for him at last – there was, of all things, a liver and white King Charles spaniel crouched with head intelligently

cocked, on the kelim runner. It gave him further, comforting proof of his unseen host's wealth and eccentricity to see the dog wore, in place of a collar, a diamond necklace. The dog sprang to its feet in welcome and busily shepherded him (how amusing!) to a snug little leather-panelled study on the first floor, where a low table was drawn up to a roaring log fire. On the table, a silver tray; round the neck of a whisky decanter, a silver tag with the legend: *Drink me*, while the cover of the silver dish was engraved with the exhortation: Eat me, in a flowing hand. This dish contained sandwiches of thick-cut roast beef, still bloody. He drank the one with soda and ate the other with some excellent mustard thoughtfully provided in a stoneware pot, and, when the spaniel saw to it he had served himself, she trotted off about her own business.

Discussion

Source: Angela Carter (1996) 'The courtship of Mr Lyon', in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, London: Vintage.

Genre(s): fairytale gothic, magic realism.

Activity 22

Do you wish to write in a particular genre? Write down your thoughts in a journal. If not, what aspects of genre fiction do you consider relevant or useful to the kind of fiction you *do* wish to write?

Remember: even if 'your' kind of writing doesn't fit into any particular genre, there is always plenty to be learned from fiction that *does* fall into genres.

4 Conclusion

This free course, *Start writing fiction*, introduced you to the tools that help with your writing. Writing is an ongoing activity, and the only way to develop as a writer is to keep doing it. We hope that you feel inspired, and that you'll use the ideas we have explored here to take your writing further.

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