

Sources of characters

Where do you find fictional people?

You can completely make them up, using psychology textbooks, astrology charts, mythology, the Bible or, simply, your imagination. This is the *ideal method* – ideal in a sense that you work from a purely intellectual creation, an idea about a character whom you have not observed and who is not you. Although by using this method you don't draw from people you know to make your characters, you must speak of real passions, and each character must appear like a real person. *Real person* is a bit of a contradiction in terms because *persona*, the Latin root for *person*, means "mask." We usually take a mask to be the "unreal," phony part of a person. But wearing a mask at a carnival can help you live out your true passions that otherwise, due to social pressures, you keep in check. Fiction is a carnival. So give us real passions with good masks, and everybody will be fair game! Make up character masks, release dramatic conflicts beneath them, and you will create startling people, such as you would like, or fear, to meet.

The mother of all methods – though not necessarily the one you should use most – is the *autobiographical method*, for it is through your own experience that you grasp what it is to be a person. Because of this, you are bound, at least to some extent, to project yourself into the fictional characters you render by any other method. Many writers project themselves into all the characters they portray. This is, metaphorically

speaking, the fission approach: an atom may be split into several, during which an enormous amount of energy is released. Fyodor Dostoyevski split his personality into many fictional ones, all of them as temperamental as he. Mel Brooks, the comedy writer and movie director, thinks this is the primary way to write: "Every human being has hundreds of separate people living under his skin. The talent of a writer is his ability to give them their separate names, identities, personalities, and have them relate to other characters living with him."

In the *biographical method*, you use people you have observed (or researched) as the starting points for your fictional character. This seems to be the most popular method. Despite legal limitations on the biographical method, don't shut down this basic source of fictional characters. Hemingway said that if he explained the process of turning a real-life character into a fictional one, it would be a handbook for libel lawyers. The notion that writers work this way will keep some people quiet around you lest you broadcast their secrets. For a long while it irritated me that my older brother would not believe that I was becoming a writer; and now that he does, it irritates me even more because he does not tell me anything about himself. To find out about him, I talk to our middle brother, and as soon as my older brother finds out that that's how it works, he probably won't talk to him either.

Most fictional characters are directly or at least indirectly drawn from life. E.M. Forster, author of *A Passage to India*, said: "We all like to pretend we don't use real people, but one does actually. I used some of my family ... This puts me among the large body of authors who are not really novelists, and who have to get on as best they can." (By the way, most novelists are not really novelists, and they must get on as best they can. Nobody is born with this stuff, and hardly anybody becomes quite secure in the craft. I think that's comforting: Novelists are regular people, like you and me.)

Using the biographical method, writers often compose their characters from the traits of several people. To express it with another term from nuclear physics, this is the fusion approach: You fuse character traits the way you fuse atoms. Lillian Hellman, author of *Pentimento*, supports this view of making fictional characters: "I don't think you start with a person. I think you start with parts of many people. Drama has to do with conflict in people, with denials." She looks for conflicts in real people and gives these conflicts to her fictional characters, whose traits she gets from other people.

The fourth way to create fictional characters is the *mixed method*. Writers frequently combine the biographical and the ideal methods since there's a limit to relying on direct knowledge of characters. In part, this stems from our inability to know people in depth. Somerset Maugham, author of *Of Human Bondage*, said: "People are hard to know. It is a slow business to induce them to tell you the particular thing about themselves that can be of use to you." Unless you are a psychiatrist or a priest, you probably will not find out the deep problems of the people around you. That does not mean you can't use some aspects of the people you know. But soon you must fill in the gaps, and let's hope that then you will create a character independent from the real-life model. You may use ideas and imagination, or it may happen spontaneously, as it apparently did to Graham Greene, author of *The Human Factor*, who said: "One gets started and then, suddenly, one cannot remember what toothpaste they use ... The moment comes when a character does or says something you hadn't thought

about. At that moment he's alive and you leave it to him." If your character begins to do something different from what the real-life precedent would do, encourage this change, and forget about the real-life model. Soon you should have someone answering to the necessities of your plot and conflicts, not to the memory of the person you started with.

The ideal to strive for is a character who will come to life seemingly on his own. It will no longer be the person from life outside the novel that served as a starting point, but a fictional one, who not only is there to be written about, but who, in an optimal case, writes for you. Erskine Caldwell expressed this blessed autonomy of fictional characters: "I have no influence over them. I'm only an observer, recording. The story is always being told by the characters themselves."

Not all writers give their characters autonomy and allow them to dictate what to write down. John Cheever said: "The legend that characters run away from their authors – taking up drugs, having sex operations, and becoming president – implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft. This is absurd." Of course, Cheever believed in his method and distrusted the methods of other authors. I think it's silly when a writer assumes that his method is the method for all writers. However, it is good to learn what approaches exist, to try them all, and to see which works best for you.

But one principle about constructing characters can be stated unequivocally. Whether your characters attain autonomy or not, whether they come from you or from Greek myths, the more you get to know them, the better you will work with them. To work with a character, you might need to sketch it in several ways. You could start with this questionnaire (or make one up for yourself): Name? Age? Place of birth? Residence? Occupation? Appearance? Dress? Strengths? Weakness? Obsessions? Ambition? Work habits? Hobbies? Illness? Family? Parents? Kids? Siblings? Friends? Pets? Politics? Tics? Diet? Drugs? Favorite kinds of coffee, cigarettes, alcohol? Erotic history? Favorite books, movies, music? Desires? Fears? Most traumatic event? Most wonderful experience? The major struggle, past and present?

If you give quick, spontaneous answers, you might surprise yourself with the character that emerges. Don't worry if this works like a Rorschach blot, if it reveals something about you. You might do it in a silly way, have fun, and still get an idea for a character. And you might do it quite thoughtfully, in relation to your plot, if you've chosen one. (Let's say, your plot involves a son who gambles away his patrimony, until he becomes a father, and then works so hard to leave his son with a patrimony that he can't spend any time with him, and his son disowns him. You must devise character traits that would make him plausible.) If you don't have a plot yet, some of the answers to these questions, particularly the last one – the character's major struggle – might give you ideas.

Once you know almost enough – you hardly ever know enough – about the character, test her out. Portray her.