

What does the concept of character mean in creative prose?

For me, characters mean people. The story teller creates a fictional—or non-fictional—representation of the world and populates it with characters. If both elements, world and characters, are convincing, the experience of the story can be exceptionally vivid and 'real'.

I would also mention at this point stories in which the characters are convincing but the world of the story is either quite two-dimensional or non-naturalistic. For example, the novel, *Three to See the King* by Magnus Mills. The effect of such stories is to throw the emphasis onto the characters and their words, thoughts, actions and behaviour, as well as creating some surreal effects.

One might ask, is it possible to write a fiction in which the background world is richly done but the characters are only sketched in? It must be but I think that such a fiction is likely to be unsatisfactory. Certainly, as a critic, I pick up on books or sections of books where there seems to be an imbalance between description of the setting and the characterisations. Similarly, when other elements of the story dominate the characters, I tend to comment on this. For example, when a narrative appears to be plot driven. That is, when the needs of the plot seem to be governing the characters' speech, thinking, actions and behaviour. The character does something, for example, that enables a plot development or twist but which is out of character. (I should say that very talented writers aren't immune from such problems. The early novels of Elizabeth Bowen contained striking characterisations but as she wound the novels up the characters became increasingly less realistic and simply served the needs of the plot. *To the North*, for example.)

So, whatever character is, it seems to be the central component of stories—fictional or non-fictional. We read fiction because we want to 'meet' people we are interested in or identify with and who can teach us things about what it is to be human in general and about ourselves.

We might also want to escape the limits of our life, reading an adventure story or a love story. And of course, a lot of genre fiction in all its many forms is about action, plot, fantasy, gadgets, the bizarre implications of scientific theories and so on. And often these elements can be quite dominant. But generally, the characters need to be strong enough to hold their own in order for the story to work.

Clearly, however, stories have to have plots, there needs to be an element at the very least of description and there is likely to be an authorial voice. All these elements and more are therefore competing with characters and are in a sense jeopardising their existence. For a writer balancing all the different elements in a story so that the characters come across vividly and appear to have free will is a challenge.

If you need to develop a plot in a certain way, you are more often than not going to have to achieve your objective by having one of your characters do something. The trick is to make the character's action seem like it is in character, even if what is done is out of character. A lot of thought needs to be put into such sections of a story.

How as writers might we create characters for our readers?

It seems to me that there are two chief ways in which we can approach the creation of characters. We can either explore aspects of our characters before we start writing our story

or we can explore them as we write the story. In practice, most people will probably use a mixture of both approaches. I certainly do.

I think that generally writers will attempt some degree of preparation before starting a story or novel but the extent of this is very much a matter of personal choice and may well vary from project to project.

If you want your story or novel to have a very sharply defined structure and texture, one imagines that planning in detail beforehand might be something one would try. Though there is no reason why you couldn't equally try the explore-as-you-go approach and then work hard on shaping your material.

How you work is, as I say, a very personal thing.

If you are writing non-fiction, however, especially about something you know personally or about something that actually happened to you, you do by definition have a pretty good understanding of events and personality before you start. What you may not know is how to interpret or understand the events or the behaviours and emotions of others, or yourself. You may well use the act of writing about something in order to make sense of it or understand it.

To an extent fiction writers will also be using the act of writing as a way of understanding their characters more. Even if you plan a story or novel in precise detail, I think you should always allow yourself flexibility, especially as far as characters are concerned. Serendipity—being alive to new ideas about the kind of character you are writing about that you come across while you are working on your story and which make you view your character in a different way—is worth 'listening' to if it is going to enable you to create more vivid characters.

Similarly, you might find that what you learn about your character as you write modifies your view of them. If so, don't soldier on with the old view, but let the character develop in a convincing, human, complex way—and, if necessary, adapt your plot accordingly.

For me, the exploration of my characters before I start to write is vital. Although I don't try and work out exactly what they will do and why in every section of the story or novel. Far from it. I try to get to know my characters in advance, work out a plot that they are going to live through, but then adapt both these things and grow as I write and learn more about both them and the plot, as well as all the other elements that make up the narrative.

How do you plan your characters, get to know them?

One way is to draw them. You have an idea for your character and you then start sketching how they might look. What clothes they might wear. What colour hair and eyes they have and so on. The drawings don't have to be good. The important thing is that they enable you to visualise and get to know your character better.

You can also do character sketches. In doing so you might well be including or exploring details about your characters' lives that you won't end up including in your novel or which you might refer to only fleetingly. The idea of exploring such material is that you get to know your character 'inside out' so that you can write about how they would behave in your story convincingly.

In constructing your sketch you might ask yourself what the key aspects of their life are. This might include details like where they were born, when, who their parents were, what kind of house they lived in during their childhood, where they went to school, who they first fell in love with and at what age, where they went to university, or why they didn't go to university, what their career path has been and so on. You might end up writing a mini-biography for each of your characters.

You might then select certain key scenes from their biography—first day at school, for example—and start imagining what happened to them that day, how they behaved and felt and why that date was so formative. You could then write the story of that day, either as a summary or as if you were writing it as a story in its own right.

Another way of getting to know your character is to construct a survey—either a short one like that used for the exercise earlier or a fuller one, containing as many questions as you want.

Once you have, by whichever means appeals to you, got to know your character well, you might want to start working with her/him in scenes from your plot or taken from episodes in her/his past and experimenting with how the character speaks and behaves.

Frank Egerton 2011