Creating and Writing Great Characters
Transcript

This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/oct2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the October seminar for Writer's Huddle, Creating and Writing Great Characters.

NaNoWriMo

I wanted to tackle this particular topic this month, because next month, November, is National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), and that's when writers all around the world decide to write a novel, 50,000 words, so quite a short novel, in 30 days, during the month of November.

It's great fun, it's a challenge, it's something that's really good for kick-starting a writing habit if you've perhaps slipped out of that a bit.

If you're thinking of taking part in NaNoWriMo, or if you're curious and want to know a bit more, there's a NaNoWriMo forum within the Huddle, where you can talk to some of the other Huddlers who are also considering doing that.

So, the idea with NaNo is to start a completely new novel for the month of November, and of course you don't have to do that, and I know I'm not going to be doing that personally, but I wanted to talk about character for those who are perhaps considering starting a new novel, either right now, or maybe who are planning a novel a bit more longer term for the future.

Character and Plot

Characters are obviously absolutely essential to your novel, or to your short story if you're working on shorter fiction, and characters, for me certainly, are where I usually begin to plan, where my story begins.

The plot emerges from those people and from their potential interactions, so sometimes you'll perhaps see character compared to plot, and you may hear that some books are character driven and other books are plot driven.

You may be a bit unsure about which should come first: do you develop your plot and then come up with your characters, or do you come up with your characters and then develop your plot?

It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation, because certainly for me, I think that in good writing, **characters will have a strong influence on the way the plot goes, but the plot will also have a strong influence on the characters**.

In really good books, characters tend to change and grow throughout the story, so they're not the same person at the start of the book as at the end of it. That's very satisfying for readers, because they feel that they have lived with that person for the span of that book, and they have seen that person grow, they've seen them learn things and overcome challenges. This sort of character development is often seen as a real hallmark of good writing.

Looking Towards Publication

In today's publishing world, I think that character is particularly important, because if you're considering self publishing, then the way that most people find success is to write a trilogy or a whole series using the same set of characters – perhaps introducing a few new ones, but essentially having some core characters who readers can come to know and love over the course of many books.

If you're not quite sure how you might see that at work in the books that you're reading, maybe think about some of the TV shows that you watch, so

you might well have particular favourite characters within those shows, those that you root for, or if they're the villain then you love to boo them, and so on.

I know we've got a few Huddlers who are fan fiction writers, and if you write fan fiction I'd say there's a very good chance that you have particular characters who you like to focus on. It might be one character who you like to write about, or perhaps a particular combination of characters, whether that's a romantic pairing or a friendship group, who you really enjoy writing.

All of this is to say that, in a way, we're not only hard wired for story, we're also hard wired for character. **We care about people, and we want our fictional people to seem real to us**, in fact fictional people can seem more real and more knowable to us than the real people in our lives, because we have access in a novel to a character's thoughts as well as their actions and what they say.

Character and the Novel

Character has also been a real, huge driving force in novels. If you look back to the early days of the novel, in the 18th century, many many of those were centred on a particular character.

You've got novels like –

Pamela by Samuel Richardson

Tom Jones by Henry Fielding

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe

-- they're all novels that are really centred on the life of one character.

Of course you see that in fiction in the 19th century too, in novels by Charles Dickens, novels like David Copperfield, for instance.

Even in genres today that are more plot-driven than character-driven, so I'm thinking maybe thrillers, crime novels, mysteries, novels where the twists and turns of a plot are paramount, even then, **readers want characters that they can latch onto, that they enjoy reading about.**

Whether that's the detective solving a murder, whether that's the murderer or the villain of the piece, we want them to seem real, and even if perhaps they're painted in slightly broader strokes in that kind of fiction, they still need to be, fully developed, rounded characters.

As writers, our challenge is obviously how to achieve this, how to create characters that readers will really care about, and how to write those characters as well, and that's what we're going to be covering today.

Asking the *Right* Questions About Characters

The first point I wanted to make, because I know this is something that I've seen quite a lot of writers struggle with, is that **character is not just about coming up with a set of particular attributes for a person.**

In some workshops or writing books, you'll have exercises where you have a little questionnaire, and you fill in the questionnaire about your character, and it's supposed to give you a character somehow.

To be honest I feel that this is a slightly misguided approach. There's nothing wrong with knowing your character's eye colour, or their hair colour, or their birthday, or how many brothers and sisters they have – all of this is useful information to have in your head and keep straight on paper before you begin – but character is about far more than how somebody looks, or the sometimes irrelevant details of their life. It's rare that in a novel somebody's birthday is of paramount importance.

I don't think that these sorts of questionnaires or check-lists are necessarily a lot of help. As writers, we really want to be asking some of the hard questions, so you know, not things like what interesting quirks does your character have, or what do they carry in their pockets or something (though those can be kind of intriguing questions, and they can spark off a train of thought).

Instead, you need to ask questions that really get you to the heart of your character. Like, **what would they lie about?** You know, even if they're a good character, there are probably circumstances under which they would lie, and

maybe those are life-threatening circumstances, maybe those are circumstances where a friend or a family member is in some kind of trouble.

You can ask questions like, **Are there any circumstances under which they would kill somebody, or seriously injure them?** Obviously, if you've got a good character, they're not going to be doing this in day to day life, but you can probably imagine circumstances under which they could be pushed to a very difficult point or a very dark place.

These are the points where you really get to know who your characters are, you know, who they are deep down, and you might want to think of character in the slightly old-fashioned sense of the word character, so who we really are, are we somebody of "good character" or "strong character," as you might say.

Making Your Characters a Little Larger than Life

And when you're thinking about this sort of thing, when you're starting to get a picture of who your characters really are, it's useful to consider how you can make them a little bit larger than life.

I don't mean to make them unrealistic or superhuman or perfect in every way, or something like that, but I think that when we read, we want to read about people who perhaps are just that little bit braver than we are, or are facing circumstances that are much bigger than those we can imagine, or would face in our own lives.

We don't really want to read about characters who kind of have all the same faults and failings as we do ourselves, and, you know, maybe don't make huge progress in their lives, or backslide sometimes, or don't stick to their resolutions, and so on. Of course that makes characters very human, and of course your characters will have moments when they're far from perfect, and when things don't work out, and when they set themselves goals that they don't reach and so on, but t**here does need to be something in those characters that makes them just that bit bigger and bolder and brighter than everyday normal people.**

Using Backstory

Part of this can come from their backstory. You may have a character who's had a very traumatic past, and that might have affected them in all sorts of ways, it could mean that they've, you know, they've had to really struggle to get to where they are in life, and they've got a certain courage and bravery and strength that they wouldn't otherwise have had.

It could be that their past has led them into circumstances when they're doing some very bad things. They could be the villain of your novel, but those circumstances and their backstory help to explain how they became who they are.

You don't need to pin down every detail of the backstory before you begin writing, but it is useful to have maybe a sense of whether there were any big incidents in this character's past that really shaped them.

If they're a really good and moral, committed character, that doesn't necessarily come from nowhere. They might have been hurt in the past, and they've dealt with that by deciding that they would never want to hurt anyone else in that way.

Similarly, if they're an absolutely terrible villain, doing despicable things, it's unlikely that they were born that way. Unless you're writing something about supernatural evil, or something like that, then villains tend to have reasons behind how they became who they are.

It's helpful to have some idea of what those reasons might be, whether it's something like an abusive childhood, or a relationship that went terribly terribly wrong, or whether it's a tragic accident ... it could be almost anything, but there needs to be a reason why your characters are the way that they are.

Avoid Making Characters Too Black and White

Thinking here about good people and bad people leads me on to think about, it shouldn't be too black and white in your novel.

I think readers today are not wanting heroes who are whiter than white, who are perfect in every way, and similarly they don't necessarily want villains who are just despicably evil for the sake of being evil. They want characters who perhaps, instead of being completely one end of the spectrum or another, they're lighter or darker shades of grey.

Even the best characters will have some darkness in them, they will have moments where they're far from perfect, where they hurt somebody, perhaps even deliberately.

Even the worst characters will have moments where they actually do something that's good, when they show compassion for somebody, or they show some real emotion or feeling, or they second guess themselves, or when they perhaps listen to or attempt to listen to a voice of reason, and so on

By including these nuances in the way that you develop your characters, you can make them seem more realistic, make it easier for the reader to identify with them. This perhaps makes it a little bit more challenging for you as a writer, which is not necessarily a bad thing, because you are forcing yourself to not paint your novel just in terms of good versus bad, but there's a little bit more to it than that.

Giving Your Characters Goals

Your plot doesn't obviously exist completely separately from the characters. As we've said, the actions of the characters will determine what happens in the plot, and the events of the plot will have an effect on your characters.

On the character side of things, your characters should have a particular need or desire that drives them. Not every single character necessarily has to have this, but certainly your main character or main characters should have a particular goal that they're going for.

It could be a need as simple as they need to survive -- perhaps you're writing a story where they're running for their life, and their primary need right now is just to get away from the bad guys and get to somewhere safe.

It could be that they've got a more complex need or desire than that. Maybe they're stuck in a dead end job, and they really want to change careers, but that's going to cause conflict with their family or something.

There are all sorts of potential directions you could be going in with a character, but what matters is that there's something that they need to want. There are two options:

#1: They have to want to change their life in some way, so they're in a job and they want to be out of it, or they're in a poor relationship and they want to be out of that, or they aren't in a relationship and they want to find one, and so on. Those are all ways that they want to change how their life is currently.

#2: The alternative is that something happens at the very beginning of your novel, or even before the opening of your novel, that takes your character out of their everyday life in some way, and then **their need or their desire is to get back to the way that things were.**

Maybe they lose their job, under circumstances that were not their fault, so maybe somebody else has caused a problem at work and they've been unfairly blamed. Then the driving force behind them is to regain that job, and to prove themselves worthy of it.

Putting Yourself Into Your Characters

When you're thinking about your characters' needs and desires, and also about who they are in general, how they react to things, as a writer, it's helpful to put as much of yourself as you can into your characters.

That can be an uncomfortable thing to do. It can require looking at yourself in quite a dispassionate way, perhaps thinking about some of your faults or failings, or some of the things that you are not quite happy with in your personality, but that would make quite rich material for being included as your characters.

Obviously, you don't want every character you write to be a carbon copy of yourself, but you can use bits of your life experience, bits of your own backstory as it were, your personal history, to build those characters.

Sometimes that might mean exaggerating certain aspects of your personality, or imagining *what would I be like if my life had taken a different route?*

Sometimes it might mean hearkening back to how you were maybe a decade or two decades ago, especially if you're writing about younger characters. You might think about what it was really like for you to be that age, and think about the difficulties you faced as well as the enjoyment that you had and the things that you loved.

Really, there's no way to create characters who are not in some respects aspects of yourself. When you're writing a novel, or writing a short story, something that separates that from other art forms is the access to character's thoughts, to the inside of their heads, and obviously the only person's head who you can access is your own.

You don't know for sure what other people are ever thinking or feeling or what their motivations are, although obviously you can make good guesses at those, so you do need to put something of yourself into your characters, even into the characters who are not very nice people.

I think the more willing you are to do that, and the braver you can be with that, the richer and stronger and more real your characters will seem.

Making Your Characters Sympathetic

Then one more point to make, as we're thinking about creating our characters rather than actually writing about them, is that your characters need to be, at least to an extent, sympathetic.

Now, this is an issue that has perhaps attracted a bit of debate in the literary community, certainly in the more academic realm of literature, which is part of my background as a writer. There's perhaps sometimes a feeling that you shouldn't just talk about characters as likeable or unlikeable, and that a character can be someone we really dislike, I mean, maybe not really a villain, but maybe somebody who's really not a very nice person, or a weak person, or something, but that character could be brilliantly written, so it's not fair to kind of criticise a work of literature because you don't like the characters.

While I think that's a perfectly valid literary perspective, I think that **those of us that are writing for a general audience, rather than writing literary fiction, need to consider whether our characters are sympathetic**.

This is something that really matters to readers. Regular normal people, as opposed to literary critics, want to read a story where they can feel like they're part of it. They want to almost put themselves into the shoes of the main character, they want to feel like they're there in the room, and they want to spend time with characters who they actually enjoy spending time with.

Sympathetic Villains

Of course this doesn't mean you can't have characters who are villainous, or who are in some way opposed to your protagonist, but even those characters need to be in some way sympathetic, we need to understand on some level what drives them.

We need to see aspects of them that make us think, "Okay, I don't agree with their actions, but I can kind of see where they're coming from."

An example of this, if you've seen the TV show Dexter, is the title character Dexter himself. On the surface, you might think that he's not a very sympathetic character – he's a serial killer. (And I hope I've not massively spoiled this for anyone, but it's obvious if you've even seen the first episode of the series, that Dexter is a serial killer.)

The reason that we sympathise with him, and the reason that people have enjoyed watching the show for seven seasons now, is because the people Dexter kills are worse than he is. He's a serial killer targeting murderers and other serial killers, and people who've done horrific things, and he's "taking out the trash," is I think one way he puts it.

Although there's no arguing that what Dexter does is wrong, it's presented to the audience in a way that makes him seem quite a sympathetic character. He's someone you root for. As an audience member, you're not hoping that Dexter's going to get arrested and locked up in jail for life, because the writers have put enough into him that we can see the backstory, we can see why he is the way he is, we see the good in him as well as the bad, and so on.

Even if you are writing about people who are far, far from perfect, you can still make them sympathetic, and the key to this is really helping the reader to understand and to empathise with them. Helping the reader to, not necessarily condone a character's actions, not to say that what they did was right, was the best thing to do, but to understand those characters, and to have hope that those characters will grow and improve, and be able to move on with their lives.

Showing Your Characters Through the Writing

Once you've come up with the notes, or the ideas or plans for your characters, which is all the process of creating them, then you need to come on to writing those characters.

This is something that is perhaps not always quite addressed enough. Lots of writing teachers will talk about creating the character in the first place, but obviously putting the character onto the page into the story is a bit different, you can't just shove in great big chunks of your notes on their back-story.

There are a few things that I think you can do here, that can help, and some things that you *need* to do.

Key Technique #1: Write in the Voice of Your Main Character(s)

One is to try and really capture the voice of that character.

Whether you're writing in first person (so using the word *I* and writing from the viewpoint of your character) or you're writing in the third person, so you're writing about the character by their name (Bob or *Sue* or whoever they are), the narrative can have some flavour of the character's own voice, you can use the kind of words that they might use, and so on.

Now obviously in a first person narrative this is going to be to a stronger degree than to a third person one. If you're writing from a character's viewpoint and you're using the first person, you might even write in non-standard English, you might write in dialect, you might write in a very strongly voiced way – and there are lots of writers who do that very successfully.

If you're writing in the third person, you might not necessarily go to the same extremes as some first person writers, but you can still bring in a flavour of that character. You can include their thoughts within the narrative, or you can use the sorts of language that they might use, the sorts of words that they might use.

If you're perhaps struggling to get this a little bit in the third person, you know, you're struggling to get it right, you might want to switch to first person, just for the sake of doing this like an exercise. Once you feel that you're kind of getting the character's voice through, then you can go back to writing your novel, as you want it, in the third person.

This is just another way to show character and to really get their voice infused into your words. Hopefully, if you've got kind of several viewpoints, a reader might be able to pick up your novel in any place and flip into it and start reading, without necessarily knowing who that viewpoint character is, but being able to pick up who that character is, just from the sort of language that you use, the sort of observations that that character makes, and so on.

Key Technique #2: Show, Don't Tell

Then the next thing to say is something that I'm sure you've heard before as writing advice, **show, don't tell**.

Rather than telling us that, you know, a particular character is a bitter and angry person, you need to show them being bitter and angry. Show their response to someone who's cheerful, you know, or show them being kind of unreasonably annoyed about, you know, a small innocent mistake, you know, perhaps they get given the wrong change at a shop or something.

It can be quite a small incident, it can be as little as a line or two of dialogue, but that can show us very clearly what sort of person that character is, whereas if you just tell us "Bob was an angry man," then it doesn't really, it doesn't really give us a sense of who Bob is.

If you show Bob being angry and you show whether he expresses his anger in a hot burst of temper, or whether he's the sort of person who goes into a cold sulk for days on end, that tells us much more about who Bob really is,

You can do this showing through lots of different methods. One great one, like I said, is dialogue. You can have Bob say something: perhaps he's snappy or rude or irritable with this other character.

You can show it through actions, so you might have Bob glaring at someone, or tutting impatiently, or smacking his fist down on the table, or something like that.

You can show it through other people's reactions to the character, so even if Bob had never appeared in the narrative to this point in the novel, you could have other people talking about Bob, or you could have them avoiding Bob. You can make it clear, without necessarily saying "Bob is really angry and bad tempered," you can make it clear from their viewpoint that they're nervous around him, or that they don't like to be with him and so on.

The reader can pick up a lot from the ways that characters interact like that (or *don't* interact, perhaps, in this case). In general, you don't need to explain what you've shown to the reader. We're quite adept at picking up nuances of people's behaviour, because we do it all the time in life. Sometimes we have to form quite quick opinions of what sort of person someone is, and we can do this quickly in fiction.

Those are the two key things that I think you really need to do as part of your writing, so you need to get the voice right, and you need to show rather than tell.

Tools to Use When Writing About Characters

Then these which I'm coming onto are some things that I think are very very effective tools when writing about character.

They're not necessarily rules where you absolutely *must* do this, but they're certainly ways to strengthen your story and to get the most from your characters in your actual writing.

Putting Your Characters Under Pressure

So one of these which is pretty easy to do, but effective, is to put your characters under pressure. Don't let them just achieve what they want without any problems.

If your character's goal is to move from their dead end job into a better career, their dream career or something, then you don't want them to just write a job application letter and get an interview and go to the interview and, hooray, the interview's successful and they get the job.

While that's always lovely in real life, it's not what you're going to want in their novel.

Instead you want that character to fail, you want them to struggle, you perhaps want to pile on more pressures than that one initial need.

Maybe they not only need to get out of this dead end job because they don't like it and it's soul destroying, they've also had some big expense come up, so they actually need more money than the dead end job's providing.

Maybe there's some conflict in their workplace that is making that job an even more difficult or unbearable situation.

It could even be the case that they get fired from that job. So maybe in some ways they're happy not to have it, but obviously then their job hunting becomes even more paramount, and so on.

Tthese are all ways that you can make things worse for your characters, which may seems a bit of a horrible thing to do – but the more pressure you can put on them and the more obstacles you put in their path, the more chances your charactesr have to grow and to learn and to really earn what they have strived for.

That way, when the reader gets to the end of the book, they're satisfied, because the character has really worked for what they've achieved, rather than it just happening through luck or chance, or through everything just going right for them.

Hurting Your Characters

And then, following on from this, is something which I think can be tough to do. For me this is something that emerges perhaps in the second draft, or even in the third draft, and I don't always quite get it right in the first draft.

This is to let your characters get hurt, and by hurt, I mean that either physically, in the sense of either beaten up, or injured, or wounded, or whatever's appropriate for your particular story, or hurt in an emotional sense, like their partner breaks up with them, or somebody says something really wounding to them

Sometimes an emotional crisis or a painful emotional thing can be more dramatic or more revealing of character than just being physically injured, which is still dramatic, but perhaps, it can be a bit more surface

Obviously you can go for both types of hurt, so you can have a character who's physically injured at some point, but there's also some level of emotional damage to that character.

Like I say, this can be difficult to do, particularly with characters who are perhaps your heroes or heroines, or who are characters you really love, maybe particularly the characters who you have consciously put a lot of yourself into.

It can be hard to let bad things happen to them, but **conflict is a real driving force behind plot, and it's also the case that if a character is being hurt, it's a fast track to the reader's sympathy**.

If you open the novel on a character who seems like an okay person, as far as you can tell, they're not a bad person, and they are in a situation where they're in physical pain, or another character is physically hurting them, then we are immediately going to have sympathy for them. We wouldn't have this if we'd opened in a situation where things were okay for them, you know, there was no particular suffering going on. We naturally empathise with other people's suffering.

Tied to this is the idea of letting your characters' actions have consequences, so it might be the case that they try to get out of one problem by doing

something that perhaps is not necessarily the very best choice they could have made.

Maybe another character has been causing problems for them at work, and their solution to that is to get that person aside after work, and physically intimidate them, or even get into a fight with them, and maybe there's a little bit of punching on both sides and so on.

That might be initially satisfying to your character, it might even look like the other person has backed off from causing trouble, but there may be a consequence further down the line. Perhaps the character who was originally causing trouble then goes to the boss, or even to the police, and this puts your main character into an even worse situation.

So don't be afraid to harm your characters, they're probably more resilient than you think. You're probably not going to completely break them, and if you do you can go back and rewrite.

And don't be afraid to let your characters have consequences. Even if they're good people doing good things, there may still be knock on consequences for that, there may still be ways in which good things turn bad, or have some bad effects that they haven't foreseen.

And of course as well as this being a great way to really show what your characters are made of, and what they can do or will do in extreme situations, it's also a great way to get your plot moving on fast. This is one of those areas where character and plot really intertwine together.

Showing Characters at Their Best and Worst

You can show your characters at some point in the writing at their best, show them on a day or a moment when they actually, they are the very best person they are capable of being.

They may be even surprise us a little, if they're a character who is perhaps not always that great, by finding a depth of character, you know, finding a goodness in themselves, bravery, or whatever it might be.

The reader seses, this is who this person is capable of being at their very best, this is who they could be.

That's a really powerful thing, and it could be a driving force within that character's arc. Maybe they have a particular moment when they surprise themselves and us with just what they can do, and that encourages them to become a better person in general.

And then the opposite to that is to also, at some point in the writing (and this could be pretty close to the moment when they're at their best), show them at their worst.

Show them doing something that is really wrong, or it's cowardly, or it's a moment where they could have chosen the right path, they knew what the right thing to do was, but they didn't do it.

This is particularly powerful for a character who is generally a good character. We see the cost of that goodness, we see what they could be if they didn't have such strong moral values, for instance, we see perhaps the little bit of darkness within them.

If perhaps you're bringing in some backstory, we might see an incident in their path that they're, you know, horribly ashamed of, something they've done that they've never been able to make that right or they've never been able to forgive themselves for.

That can be a powerful thing. It could be that your character has one of their darkest, worst moments somewhere near the very climax of the novel, and then they have one of the moments where you really see them at their very best, and they actually overcome that.

So these are just some powerful techniques to work with, to really show some of the extremes of your character, you know, who are they, "who are they in the dark?" is sometimes a phrase which is used – so who are they when no one else is watching.

That might be good, or it might be bad, so don't be afraid to push your characters into some tricky situations to really see what they're made of when the going gets tough.

Don't Let Your Characters Act Stupidly to Fit the Plot

There's one trap I want to mention here, and I know it's one that's really easy to fall into as a writer – one I've been rescued from by beta readers and by people in writing workshops.

You don't want to let your characters act stupidly for the sake of the plot. Sometimes it's very tempting to have a character do something a bit stupid, or weak, or they're just a bit passive even, because that helps your plot move on more easily.

But that can be really unsatisfying to readers. So maybe think of a typical horror movie scenario, there's a deranged serial killer on the loose, and there's a bunch of teenagers out having fun, and they decide to go and investigate the old haunted house, or insane asylum, or whatever this ruined building might be.

You think, how could they be so stupid, and that can be a bit frustrating for the reader, and it can also stop them caring so much about the characters. It can look like cheating on the part of the author. If the only reason your plot works is because the character goes back for the hat that they dropped, and that gives the serial killer a chance to get hold of them when they could have escaped, then it's perhaps a slightly weak plot, and it needs a bit more work.

Like I say, this is an easy trap to fall into, because you want your characters to do what will fit the plot, but you may just need to do a bit more work to make sure your characters aren't being wilfully stupid.

Obviously we all make mistakes, but if you really need a character to do something stupid and careless, there has to be enough reason behind that. You have to show us why they were so distracted at this crucial moment. Why did they do this? Were they misled by another character, perhaps? There needs to be enough justification that we don't just think that this character has completely lost their mind.

So that's about it in terms of writing. Just to recap very quickly on that, the things that I think you really need to do in the writing are:

- To get the voice of your character right, even if you're writing in the third person.

- To *show* us what sort of character they are, through the dialogue and through their actions, and through the other characters' behaviour towards them, rather than just telling us what kind of person they are.

Then some of the very useful tools you can use are:

- To put your characters under pressure, to deny them what they want and to make things worse for them.

- As part of that, to let them actually get hurt, where appropriate to your work. That could mean physically injured: obviously in a thriller novel or something that can be effective, but you could also have a character who's in a fairly regular novel face physical danger, and that's powerful. Or you could have them emotionally hurt, damaged, and that may be through no fault of their own, or it may be because they've done something that has to have a consequence in the plot: their actions need to have consequences.

- Then, to show your characters at their best, show them at the moments when you see all that they're capable of, and show them at their worst, which is perhaps another way of seeing what they're capable of, but in their very darkest time.

- And don't let them act stupidly just because it fits the plot, however tempting it might be at times.

So, obviously you know, whole books can and have been written on character, and there's rarely one right way to do this.

The main thing that I want to leave you with is to say, do put thought into your characters, don't just come up with like a check-list of, this is my character's hair colour and eye colour and birthday, and their quirky trait that they have and so on.

Instead, think about some of the deeper questions, like, "Who are these people at their best and their worst?" and "What have they done in their past

that might show that?" or "What they might be going to do in the plot of the novel that shows that?"

As you write these characters, be willing for them to grow and to change and to be pushed and challenged by the demands of your story, because that will be satisfying for your reader.

It will hopefully make for a novel or a short story where it feels like that character or those characters have really won their happy ending, if that's the kind of story that you're writing. Or if you're writing more of a tragedy, that the characters brought the ending upon themselves – it's not just completely unfair fate, but you can see the roots of their destruction working the whole way through that novel.

Obviously, like I say, this is a big topic with lots of room for discussion, so do come by the [Writer's Huddle forums](#), and if you have particular thoughts on character, whether you want to talk about a character in your own work in progress, or whether you want to talk about perhaps some of the characters that you particularly loved in fiction (whether that's a novel or a TV program, or a film) then start a topic and let us know what you're thinking about.

There's a lot that we can discuss together, and a lot that we can learn from one another.

If you are doing NaNo, I wish you the very best of luck, and I hope I will see you in the forums in November, even if it's just to tell you how your word count's going, and I hope you have a really great month of writing.