

Heroes and Villains, with Lorna Fergusson

Transcript

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

You can find the video and audio versions at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/nov2013.

ALI: Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the November seminar for Writers' Huddle, on Heroes and Villains.

I'm with Lorna Fergusson today - she's our guest speaker this month. Lorna's a fantastic writer and an editor and a writing teacher. She lives in Oxford like me, and she's got a company called fictionfire.

The Chase and Self-Publishing

ALI (cont): Her novel *The Chase* was first published by Bloomsbury a few years back, but earlier this year she brought it out as an ebook and a paperback under her own imprint, [Fictionfire Press](http://fictionfire).

Lorna, I wondered if you wanted to say a few words about *The Chase* or about the experience with that.

LORNA: *The Chase* is about a couple who move to France to get away from a very tragic event that's happened to them some years previously. And the husband feels that if they move they can get away from the past.

The wife is less sure, and she's quite right, because you cannot leave the past behind you. When they get there, the house has its own past, which begins to affect their lives too.

The route to self-publishing was very interesting, and very challenging, but also incredibly rewarding in the sense that although I'd had a really good traditional publisher before, I loved having the control over how I brought the

book out, how I wrote the blurb, how I chose the cover and commissioned the cover designer. So it's been great fun.

ALI: I'm glad it's been a good experience. I've been traditionally published with one book, as you know, and self-published another.

I enjoyed both ways and it's interesting that you've done the same thing with the same book. In the Huddle we've got some people who are going for traditional publishing, some people who are going for self-publishing. I think both are really valid options, but like you I enjoy the control that comes with doing it yourself and doing it your own way.

LORNA: Yes, I think we live in interesting times! One of the great things for writers now is that whenever they do produce a book, fiction or non-fiction, whatever it is, they have that choice.

There's the increasing use of the term 'hybrid author', for authors who can have both traditional and self-publishing situations. I will probably try for a traditional deal for the book I'm writing just now, but if all else fails I know I can self-publish. That's a really nice mental safety net, to know that you can do it yourself.

The major lesson to be learned is that even if you have a traditional publishing deal, it's still down to you to a large degree to market your book and sell your book, unless you're a really big-name author.

You are the one who has to keep bringing the book to people's attention. Sometimes people think that if you're self-publishing you have to do all that work and if you traditionally publish they'll take that work off your hands, and they don't – they really don't.

ALI: It's a nice dream, isn't it? The good thing is that, as you say, we can get into print whatever path we choose. There's always the option and it means you don't have to write something thinking 'will this ever see the light of day?'

So let's take a look at Heroes and Villains, because this was a topic that a lot of us, including me, were keen to hear about. Whether we go with traditional or self-publishing, we can hopefully see our heroes and our villains in print and readers will be engaging with them.

Heroes vs Protagonists; Villains vs Antagonists

ALI (cont): I wanted to start with defining some terms.

Would you say there's a difference between hero and protagonist? I sometimes hear them being used interchangeably, but I'm not quite sure that that's necessarily correct.

LORNA: Yeah, I'd agree that it's not an exact correlation.

When you use the word 'protagonist', you're going back to the idea of Classical Greek drama: a protagonist is really the central or principal actor or character in the story. Which draws attention to their function, you know, and their position of centrality.

When you look at the word 'hero', it starts to acquire more of an aura of meaning around it, rather than just function. **We associate 'hero' not just with the idea of being the central character (which is one of the definitions of hero or heroine) but we also start to look for something special or exceptional in that character.** Somebody who's brave or resourceful, something we can look up to.

ALI: I agree, they're not the same, to me certainly in my writing. I've got characters I might think of as heroes and characters I might think of as protagonists, and it doesn't have to be one and the same. Though you know, obviously, there is that overlap.

I guess I'd say the same thing then about villains and antagonists. I suppose you'd agree there that the villain is perhaps something slightly different from the antagonist, or different even from an antagonistic force within the novel.

LORNA: As you say, an antagonistic force could be the typhoon that's heading towards the village, where the main characters live. It's an impersonal force, but it's their antagonist in a way. **An antagonist is that oppositional force or an adversary.**

And yet when we start using the word 'villain', we start thinking of going 'boo' – we start thinking of villainous characteristics. So I think both hero and villain, you've got that sense of, what is their function within the story? And then what is the reader's perception of them, as a person? And as you say, there's an overlap – it's like a Venn diagram, isn't it? But there are the two extremes of perception as well.

Examples of Heroes and Villains in Fiction

ALI: So I thought this might be a good point for us to maybe bring in a few examples of great heroes or great villains - depending on how we look at that - within fiction. Have you got any which have really stood out for you?

LORNA: Yeah. As you know I ran two workshops last year, one on heroes and one on villains. And there were a couple of interesting things that happened.

One was that the Villains workshop signed up much more quickly than the Heroes one.

Then when I ran them, there were various people who came to both, and I quite early on in each workshop asked people to come up with, you know, famous examples of either the heroes or the villains.

And once again, people found it easier to remember great villains than they did to remember great heroes.

Lynn Barber says "wickedness reads far better than niceness on the page."¹ So maybe it not only reads better but it's more memorable.

¹ http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article1133712.ece

Heroes

LORNA (cont): We came up with people like:

- Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*
- Sir Lancelot – who's a very conventional idea of a hero because he's a knight in shining armour
- Sherlock Holmes – who's an intellectual hero
- Mr Darcy – who's a romantic hero
- Heathcliff
- The Scarlet Pimpernel
- Jack Reacher
- Superman – where superpowers give him a heroic status

And then there were the famous heroines in fiction:

- Lyra in *Northern Lights*
- Elizabeth Bennet
- Jane Eyre
- Scarlett O'Hara
- Katniss Everdeen

-- people like that.

It was a good introduction to the workshop because it made us start to consider the different types of hero and the blurring of lines – I think that was a major lesson that came out, that **there is a blurring that goes on between heroes who are nothing but heroic and heroes who have maybe other aspects to them and whose morality might be a little bit more suspect.**

Villains

LORNA (cont): When we came to villains we had all the Bond baddies! We had Goldfinger, we had that whole image of the baddie turning round in his chair, stroking his white cat, going 'Good evening, Mr Bond.'

We had:

- Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*

- Cruella de Vil
- The White Witch
- Voldemort
- Dracula
- Mr Hyde
- Hannibal Lecter

-- and so on.

Again, **there were the ones where the darkness or the evil was very obvious, and very much of one note, and then there were the ones where that frisson of horror was blended with a frisson of attraction to the villain.**

Characteristics of Great, Memorable Heroes

ALI: It can be easy to make heroes and villains a bit one-sided: to have characters who are good and flawless, who always do the right thing. It may be tempting to make them some sort of ideal.

And obviously with villains you can go the opposite way and make them the Bond villain, as you say, and it can be very one-sided. And maybe for some genres that works quite well.

But I thought we might think about what sort of characteristics good heroes have – heroes who really do stick in your mind after you've finished reading.

LORNA: Again, we could start with what might seem very obvious things, like their names, and their good looks, because traditionally virtue has been associated with the idea of external beauty.

But when you look at their qualities, what makes them attractive, it's not just their good looks or their physical strength, if they happen to be Superman, but that sense of a moral level – their ability to be brave, to be resourceful, and to be self-sacrificing – because good heroes tend to think more of the benefit of others than of themselves; they're not selfish.

And that can create great stuff in your fiction, because it may bring your hero to a point where the hero or heroine has to sacrifice something that's very important to them for the benefit of others. And that makes us feel full of admiration for them.

Great Heroes are Vulnerable

LORNA (cont): Also, if you want to enrich your portrayal of a hero, you should make them vulnerable. Jane Austen said, 'Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked.' And it's just what you were saying, Ali, that somebody's too good - they're too good to be true. We can't really relate to them.

So you want to take them off the pedestal just a little and give them things like self-doubt, for instance.

One of the great episodes for Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* is when the Fellowship travel down the river and they split up, and Sam and Frodo have gone off towards Mordor. Aragorn is absolutely torn about what to do, whether to pursue them and support them, because that was the goal of their quest, or whether he should follow the party of orcs who have kidnapped Merry and Pippin.

He says that he feels that whatever decision he makes is going to be the wrong one. And to see a man of courage and stature agonise like that makes him more human, and makes us relate to him.

Great Heroes Should Grow

LORNA (cont): Linked to that I think is a sense that your hero should grow. If they are a hero from start to finish, we're never in doubt about how they're going to behave. We know they're going to be heroic.

If you introduce a little bit of doubt to the reader's mind, and maybe make the hero make the occasional mistake or regret something that they've done, once again they're more human, and they have flaws you can relate to. They have a character arc – that's a very important thing about characters, that they should change in the course of the story.

So if you look at good heroes, you can see that there are stages that they go through. They may start off as good anyway, as admirable in many ways, but you see them reach another level through the adventures that they have, whether they're Aragorn or Bilbo Baggins or Jane Eyre, who go through these tests in order to prove heroism.

ALI: I'm absolutely with you. I think a good hero is one who isn't perfect from day one, and who doesn't always get it right. They have to overcome things, whether that's self-doubt as you say or whether perhaps they're not actually very brave to begin with, and we admire them some more because they do something incredibly brave despite their fear.

Flawed Heroes

LORNA (cont): I wondered how flawed can our heroes be or should be? I think you mentioned Heathcliff when you listed heroes, and he's not somebody I'd traditionally think of as an obvious hero. So how far can you go with giving your heroes a darker side, or some flaws, or more negative characteristics?

LORNA: You can go quite a long way. You certainly can in the modern era, in that I think we are suspicious of people who are totally good, because we're quite a cynical culture. We want to see heroes with feet of clay.

So what happens is you're talking about a line of development, from the utterly good right through to the utterly bad. In the middle you've got that blurred area where we have the concept of the antihero.

Somebody like Heathcliff could be said to have the elements of the antihero, in that he is central to the story, he is an object to this day of romantic devotion, - - although I don't find myself drawn to him! – but he has these bad qualities, of violence, aggression, bitterness, cynicism, cruelty. And yet we still like him.

So there's the mystery of being drawn to characters who don't have good qualities. I think if you give them a backstory so that we can see the blend of

elements in them and we can see the moral quandaries that they're in at times, then we relate to the bad stuff.

Scarlett O'Hara is another case in point. She's so famous, and we cheer for her, and yet we also want to slap her occasionally because she does some truly awful things in order to survive and get what she wants. She's driven by selfishness, which is a negative quality, and yet she evinces courage and resourcefulness, which are positive. So I think mixing it up is useful.

ALI: Yeah, I agree that you can go quite a long way with making your heroes into characters who are very richly drawn, and who like you say have that depth of background, those reasons for being who they are.

Certainly to me as a reader, that makes them much more engaging characters. It makes me want to read on, want to find out what happens to them and what happens to the people around them.

Characteristics of Great, Memorable Villains

ALI (cont): So let's turn and look maybe at villains now, and see what characteristics perhaps really good villains – or maybe I should say really bad villains – tend to share. As you say, villains are often quite memorable characters.

LORNA: They're memorable because they're often really colourful. And again, you can go from the very obvious pantomime villain, who comes on stage and we all go 'boo, he's behind you', to very, very subtly portrayed villains.

Villains can display things like, again, violence and cruelty, utter selfishness and self-centredness, because nothing matters to them but getting what they want.

They can be extreme and psychopathic, which is fascinating to us. We're endlessly fascinated by the psychopath because that's somebody who does not

share the kind of qualities we expect in a human being. They are incapable of guilt or sympathy.

Redeeming Features

LORNA (cont): One of the most famous psychopaths in fiction is Hannibal Lecter. Why is that? Why do we like Hannibal? And it's because **even somebody as extreme as he is has some redeeming qualities.**

He's learned. He's cultured. He's very, very polite. So he may have blood smeared round his mouth but he's got Bach playing in the background and he does nice drawings. So again it's that mixing up of things. One way [to create great villains] is to give them some redeeming features.

Backstory

LORNA (cont): Another is to give them a past that makes us understand why they are a bad person. So when you look at somebody like Pinkie Brown in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, who's had a very deprived background, his bitterness and his rejection of human warmth and values comes from who he was as a child.

Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon*, the first novel that featured Hannibal, featured a serial killer called the Tooth Fairy, and we get an insight through his point of view of his past. We never lose sight of the fact that he's terribly evil and he must be stopped, but we understand him.

So that's another way of making a villain memorable, giving them that backstory and that reason for how they came to be the way they are.

Wit and Charm

LORNA (cont): You can also give villains wit and charm, so that even when we know they're doing bad stuff, they're fun to be with. And this can lead to some problems in that sometimes the villain can be more interesting than the hero.

A famous example in literature is Shakespeare's Iago, who convinces his so-called best friend Othello that Othello's wife is having an affair. And the joy of the play is in watching him run rings round Othello, who in his goodness and

innocence doesn't understand the treachery of his best friend. Iago's language is sharp and witty, his techniques are fascinating, so you find yourself drawn to him.

Another thing you can do is to give the villain an arc as well, and not have them be a baddie all the way through the story. You can give them the chance to repent. You can give them a growing sense of guilt. Then you have the choice, of course, of whether you allow them to repent and reform, or whether you let them slide back into their evil. That's up to you. But that's a way of enriching the story, definitely.

ALI: Iago's an interesting one, because he's not a character who we have much reason to be sympathetic toward, is he? There's no real justification for his behaviour towards Othello.

LORNA: It's a very interesting feature of that play. If you compare him to a very similar character that Shakespeare wrote about, Edmund in King Lear, when we look at Edmund and he's plotting against his father, it's because he's illegitimate and he feels bitter about that illegitimate state, and how society treats him. So he wants to ease out his legitimate brother so that he can inherit. And we can understand that.

When we look at Iago, although Iago says that he suspects Othello has slept with his own wife, and he says that he's jealous of Cassio, who is being promoted into the job he wanted, it never seems enough to explain the utter pleasure that man takes in doing evil.

Right at the end of the play, when they have caught him and he is asked, 'Why would you do this? Why would you be so cruel?' he says, 'Don't ask me.' He says, 'From this time forth I never will speak word.' He refuses to give us that understanding of his motivation. So it becomes a bit of a mystery.

ALI: And maybe that's part of his appeal. Because he is a character that almost takes over the play, and I've heard people suggest it should actually be called 'Iago', not 'Othello'. He's that central to it. But I think maybe it's about things like wit and charm. I think he has five soliloquies to the audience. He gets a lot of screen time, so to speak.

LORNA: He makes us complicit with him. He talks in a very intimate way to us. So does Richard III, you know, when he's wooed Anne Neville, he talks to the audience and says 'I need a new mirror, I'm better-looking than I thought I was', and invites you to laugh with him, at the good people.

ALI: And as you say, there can be a very fine line between, you know, the good characters and the evil characters, as to where our sympathies lie.

Heroes and Villains in Fiction for Children

ALI (cont): I wanted to just move on at this point to talk about children's literature. Although I've not done any children's literature, I know we have got people in the Huddle working on that. And I wonder whether the lines need to be more clearly drawn?

Do you need to have heroes who are obviously good and do the right thing, and villains who are obviously bad, and eventually get punished or get their comeuppance? Or can you still have these shades of grey?

LORNA: We tend to look at children's literature more on a moral judgment level. Traditionally, children's literature is seen as something which is there not just to entertain the kids but to teach them something valuable about life.

And when you look at the first engagement you have with stories, fairy stories, things are often very clearly defined, because we need to know where we stand. The Wicked Queen is bad, Snow White is good, and there you are.

Because there's such a rich market in children's literature these days (a lot of people say we're in a new golden age of children's literature) those boundaries have become a lot more blurred.

I think a lot depends on the age group that you're writing for, because the rise of young adult allows the writer more leeway to create complicated heroes and villains, and to start blurring those boundaries.

Examples of Villains in Children's Fiction

LORNA (cont): Even if you look at the Wicked Queen in Snow White, an adult reader can see she has a reason to want to destroy Snow White, because she is ageing, she's losing her looks and we can all relate to that!

If you look at Smaug in The Hobbit, he is the dragon, he's the destructive force – he's one of those witty villains, though, mind you.

If you look at something like Philip Pullman's Dark Materials trilogy, it's interesting that in the first book Mrs Coulter is this very chilly glamorous and seductive villainess who charms Lyra, and then we learn that she's doing absolutely horrible, horrible stuff. And she seems to have no conscience about it. But over the arc of the trilogy, you get to know more about her story, and she almost achieves a kind of tragic dimension by the end. So you know, the story develops her as a character.

But it is difficult, if you're writing children's fiction – you do feel a responsibility. And you do get debates about certain types of children's writers who put, you know, fairly extreme violence and sexual activity and swearwords in. Where do we draw the lines? I think the age group is important.

ALI: It's interesting that you mention the seductive and glamorous nature of villains. It makes me think of the White Witch in the Narnia books. Edmund is very much drawn in, with the Turkish Delight and everything.

And I think that is something which is not necessarily common to villains, but it's certainly a not infrequent characteristic, that they can draw people in. They can be very alluring – think of the popularity of vampires, for instance.

LORNA: If there's no temptation, there's no tension. If a three-headed monster comes at you, you know where you are. And that's one level of villainy, or evil, or scariness and drama. But if somebody comes at you and they look beautiful, and they are charming, and they are clever, and you're drawn to them, then that tests you much more, and it can test the reader but it can also test the hero or heroine within the story.

Female vs Male Villains

LORNA (cont): One interesting thing that came out of the Villains workshop was that we discovered that quite often, when you look at female villains, they use different techniques or they use more of the seduction, hypocrisy, duplicitousness in their villainy than male villains do.

And we thought about maybe how the social and historical context affects these female villains, that they resort to these methods because society doesn't allow them to be overtly aggressive, for instance.

ALI: That's an interesting consideration. I suppose to me male villains can still be quite attractive in that way, though 'seductive' might not be the right word. I'm thinking of, for example, Lovelace in Richardson's *Clarissa* (which is massive and I doubt any Huddlers have read it).

He's initially very attractive and Clarissa's very drawn to him. And Richardson's trying to make a rather didactic point that just because men are attractive and witty and charming, you need to beware - they might be up to something terrible!

Maybe today literature has moved on slightly from that sort of thing. But I think we do still have the danger of perhaps being attracted to the bad guy, and you see it particularly in vampire literature.

LORNA: I think it's always worked and it always will.

ALI: It's an interesting trope.

Antiheroes: What Are They?

ALI (cont): Something that we mentioned earlier that I wanted to turn back to was antiheroes. Because 'antihero' is a term that I see used and I'm not sure I've ever been 100% confident of exactly what an antihero is.

Are they a type of hero? Are they a type of villain? Are they something else completely?

LORNA: Yeah, it is a tricky term. Literary terms are tricky things.

If we define hero in terms of being the focal character in the story, then **the antihero is the focal character who is a flawed person, who is at that crossing point between virtue and vice.** And they can do some really bad stuff.

I think my favourite antihero is Tom Ripley, in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, who does atrocious things. Again, one of the things you can do with an antihero is bring the reader right into their perception of the world.

We're inside Tom's head. We understand his envy at the start of the book, of all these rich, glamorous people. He wants to be part of that world. He notices the contempt that they show to him. So we find ourselves almost rooting for him even when he does terrible things.

Another example is Meursault, in Camus's 'L'Etranger', whose morality just doesn't cohere with what society says morality should be, and who feels that he's justified in what he does. He doesn't understand condemnation, because his behaviour to him is normal: it's what you do.

And he feels he's a more honest character, because he doesn't act hypocritically or pretend to conform to values that he doesn't understand or respect.

We find ourselves repelled by him, but at the same time admiring him for staying true to what he thinks is true, even if that truth is not what society says is true.

So antiheroes give you that sense of ambivalence, and ambivalence again is a great way of creating reader engagement. If the reader finds their attitude fluctuating over time, between feeling positive and negative towards the character, you've got them – you've reeled them in. You've got their attention.

ALI: For me, then, I suppose an example would be Dexter from the TV series and the books. Dexter's a serial killer, but he kills other killers.

Because the show focuses so much on him, you do sympathise with him as a viewer. And I know I've read a few newspaper articles attacking that: the Daily Mail in particular isn't keen on the idea that a serial killer is presented almost as a hero. But he is an antihero, and a complex character.

LORNA: I think a lot of TV characters are antiheroes. Another really famous one is Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*. He's a Mafia godfather and a serial killer, and atrocious things are done in his name, and yet the focus of the drama was on his psychology.

That was the very interesting new thing that that series did, to have him going to therapy - and again you were constantly swayed to and fro. One minute you'd feel sorry for him in his mental agonies, and the next you're horrified by him. James Gandolfini acted him so brilliantly. His eyes would just go cold, and you'd think 'oh, I thought this man was cuddly, and he's really not.'

ALI: That maybe ties in with what we were saying, that villains can be seductive, they can draw us in, they can look like nice people or they can look like people who we'd sympathise with.

To me that's a good thing, because they look like they're characters who've been drawn well. And I think I've heard it said that you should be able to flip a

story round, and if you told it from the villain's perspective, they're the hero in their own mind.

Nobody (outside of Bond villains) does evil for the sake of doing evil. They've got reasons for feeling justified, however misguided those reasons might be.

LORNA: So when you're inventing them you don't just invent the white cat. You invent the reasons why this man loves cats.

Mistakes Writers Make with Heroes and Villains

ALI: Something, you know, we could discuss as we come to the end of the seminar, is maybe what mistakes you see being made quite often with heroes and villains. Either in books that you've read that have been published which could, perhaps have done with a bit more work, or books that you've edited for clients.

Are there common mistakes that you see coming up again and again?

LORNA: I think if there are any mistakes, it's to do with characterisation in general. It's just a general thing, that the character somehow hasn't come to life.

Reliance on Stereotypes

LORNA (cont): When they don't live, it may be that the writer has taken a very stereotypical route.

The reader immediately thinks 'oh, ho-hum, it's one of those characters,' and they switch off. Because they think 'I know this character inside out, I've seen this character time and time again.' It's like sitting down in front of a TV drama and seeing the world-weary detective pour a glass of whiskey.

So factor in something new. Something that makes them slightly unusual, even if the character's main situation is quite conventional. You can have a world-weary detective, but try and add something different.

So Inspector Morse loved opera, and that just gave him that new dimension, and that conflict with his sidekick, who liked beer and going down the pub and didn't understand opera at all. Try to find some new facets to enliven what may be at the core quite a stereotypical character – because you could argue we're all stereotypical in our own ways.

Lack of Backstory

LORNA (cont): The other thing I think weakens characterisation is the reader feeling as if the character has no existence except during the scenes in which they appear. That there is no sense of a backstory, or a past, or the baggage that they carry with them. That can make them come across as quite flat.

Being Static

LORNA (cont): If this is a major character, this is one of your central characters, and they don't have any conflict, they don't show any signs of changing, there's no testing of them, then the character can come across as flat and unengaging and unpredictable.

When Jane Eyre is sent to Lowood School we want to know how she's going to cope with it, because it's such a terrible environment. When she moves to Thornfield Hall and meets Mr Rochester, we want to know if she can win Mr Rochester.

When she wins him, and it turns out he happens to have a mad wife in the attic, we want to know what she's going to do about it. There is the great temptation, when Mr Rochester offers that she should be his mistress.

And her reaction is to run away in the dead of night, and virtually die in the process, because she leaves all her worldly goods in the carriage and staggers across the heathland starving to death, and conveniently collapses on the doorstep of the people who turn out to be her cousins. Handy!

But at every stage of her journey, she has had to make choices, and hers are heroic choices because she is a good and heroic person and she gets her reward at the end when she makes the final choice, when St. John Rivers proposes that she should marry him and become a missionary with him.

She knows morally and spiritually, that's he's a good man, it's a good offer, she could do good in the world, and yet it is wrong for her and her sense of who she is.

And it's at that point she hears Mr Rochester calling her name. And it's at that point she decides to go back to him. And that's why we get the happy ever after.

So a character should be continually making choices, and the decisions that they make are born out of who they are and born out of what they carry.

Jane is seriously tested because she had a dreadful childhood. She was bullied and outcast. So the love of a man like Rochester – it isn't about the grand house and the money, it's about somebody who respects her and sees her for who she is. So that makes that a major, major temptation for her. To turn her back on that is the hardest thing in the world. And we admire her for it.

ALI: You're absolutely right, we do. And for me the appeal of *Jane Eyre* is that I want to know what happens to Jane, particularly as she starts off as a child in really difficult circumstances. She's an appealing character: she likes reading, she's a very sweet and innocent child, and as a reader you just really want to root for her and you really want things to turn out well throughout the whole book. You don't read it for the intricacies of the plot, you know, you read it for the character.

And I think that's the case for me with any great book I've really loved and enjoyed. It's not about the twists and turns of the plot. You know, interesting and gripping as those may be, **what really keeps me interested and what I remember afterwards is the characters, whether they were the villains or the heroes. It's the people.**

They, as you say, need to feel real. And they need a backstory, and also at the end of the book, you want a sense that they will continue to exist.

LORNA: Yeah – which gives rise to fan fiction ...

ALI: ... and all the sequels to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Are Heroes or Villains More Fun to Write?

ALI (cont): I thought we'd end with a slightly more personal question, which is: which do you enjoy writing more, heroes or villains? Which is more interesting for you as an author?

LORNA: The obvious reply would be, like everyone else, I prefer writing villains, because they're more fun to write about.

But I've been thinking about this. I'm writing a very hefty historical novel right now with two central characters as a dual narrative one. And neither of them is what you would say a perfect man. **So really, what I've enjoyed is exploring their vulnerabilities and the mistakes they've made.** And then the question of whether they can individually redeem themselves – their parallel situations.

I think it is hard to write a truly good character. I think that's a really hard thing to pull off. So most of us end up writing villains that have some sympathetic elements and heroes who have some negative elements. Because of the very thing we've been talking about with *Jane Eyre*: you want your reader to really care about what will happen to that character.

One book where I felt the writer created a character who was truly, truly good, without being schmaltzy and sick-making, was Marilynne Robinson in *Gilead*. The hero of *Gilead* is a truly good man, and it's a wonderful book, I would strongly recommend it. And it's a quiet goodness. It's not the goodness of Aragorn wielding a sword and chopping arms off orcs. It's the goodness of

somebody's soul and inner nature. And that is an incredibly hard thing to pull off.

ALI: I'll look out for that one. It sounds like an interesting read - thank you.

To me, what all of this is saying is that there are lots of different ways to do heroes and to do villains. There's not one cookie-cutter hero and one villain where you have to tie everything to that archetype or something. There are lots of ways to do this successfully.

But what really matters is characters who have a character arc, who go on a journey. And characters who have a backstory and reasons why they're a good person if they're the hero, and reasons why they're a bad person or why they do the things they do if they're a villain.

LORNA: Yeah, I agree. I think so.

ALI: Good, I'm glad we agree! That's a good point to end on, I think.

Well, thank you so much for being here to do the seminar with us, Lorna. It's been great to get your views on heroes and villains. And I know this will really help and feed into what people in the Huddle are writing at the moment.

We've got a few of us doing Nano and things like that right now. So it's a good and exciting time for all the fiction writers among us.

I'll put links to Lorna's sites and Lorna's books and so on with the notes for the seminar, so that you can go and learn a bit more about Lorna herself and about what she does. Do pick up her book *The Chase*, which is a really good read. It's what I would describe as a literary novel, but it's very, very accessible. So it's very entertaining, it's got good characters and a plot as well as beautiful writing. Which some literary writers don't quite pull off, always.

So it's been really good to have you here, Lorna, thanks so much for joining us in the Huddle.

LORNA: You're very welcome. I really enjoyed following through all my thoughts on these things.