Character

Knowledge of your characters also emerges the way a Polaroid develops: it takes time for you to know them. One image that helps me begin to know the people in my fiction is something a friend once told me. She said that every single one of us at birth is given an emotional acre all our own. You get one, your awful Uncle Phil gets one, I get one, Tricia Nixon gets one, everyone gets one. And as long as you don't hurt anyone, you really get to do with your acre as you please. You can plant fruit trees or flowers or alphabetized rows of vegetables, or nothing at all. If you want your acre to look like a giant garage sale, or an auto-wrecking yard, that's what you get to do with it. There's a fence around your acre, though, with a gate, and if people keep coming onto your land and sliming it or trying to get you to do what they think is right, you get to ask them to leave. And they have to go, because this is your acre.

By the same token, each of your characters has an emotional acre that they tend, or don't tend, in certain specific ways. One of the things you want to discover as you start out is what each person's acre looks like. What is the person growing, and what sort of shape is the land in? This knowledge may not show up per se in what you write, but the point is that you need to find out as much as possible about the interior life of the people you are working with.

Now, you also want to ask yourself how they stand, what they carry in their pockets or purses, what happens in their faces and to their posture when they are thinking, or bored, or afraid. Whom would they have voted for last time? Why should we care about them anyway? What would be the first thing they stopped doing if they found out they had six months to live? Would they start smoking again? Would they keep flossing?

You are going to love some of your characters, because they are you or some facet of you, and you are going to hate some of your characters for the same reason. But no matter what, you are probably going to have to let bad things happen to some of the characters you love or you won't have much of a story. Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time. As soon as you start protecting your characters from the ramifications of their less-than-lofty behavior, your story will start to feel flat and pointless, just like in real life. Get to know your characters as well as you can, let there be something at stake, and then let the chips fall where they may.

My Al-Anon friend told me about the frazzled, defeated wife of an alcoholic man who kept passing out on the front lawn in the middle of the night. The wife kept dragging him in before dawn so that the neighbors wouldn't see him, until finally an old black woman from the South came up to her one day after a meeting and said, "Honey? Leave him lay where Jesus flang him." And I am slowly, slowly in my work—and even more slowly in real life—learning to do this.

A man I know once said to me, "The evidence is in, and you are the verdict." This will be true for each of your characters. The evidence will be in, and each of them will be his or her own verdict. But you may not know what this verdict is at first. You may only know your characters' externals instead of their essences. Don't worry about it. More will be revealed over time. In the meantime, can you see what your people look like? What sort of first impression do they make? What does each one care most about, want more than anything in the world? What are their secrets? How do they move, how do they smell? Everyone is walking around as an advertisement for who he or she is—so who is this person? Show us. Whatever your characters do or say will be born out of who they are, so you need to set out to get to know each one as well as possible. One way to do this is to look within your own heart, at the different facets of your personality. You may find a con man, an orphan, a nurse, a king, a hooker, a preacher, a loser, a child, a crone. Go into each of these people and try to capture how each one feels, thinks, talks, survives.

Another way to familiarize yourself with your characters is to base them partly on someone you know, a model from real life or a composite—your Uncle Edgar, but with the nervous tics and the odd smell of this guy you observed for ten minutes in line at the post office. Squint at these characters in your mind, and then start to paint them for us. Pages and pages of straight description, though, will probably wear us out. See if you can hear what they would say and how they would say it. One line of dialogue that rings true reveals character in a way that pages of description can't.

How would your main characters describe their current circumstances to a close friend, before and then after a few drinks? See if you can take dictation from them as they tell you who they think they are and what life has been like lately. Here is a passage by Andre Dubus that I always pass out to my students when we first begin to talk about character:

I love short stories because I believe they are the way we live. They are what our friends tell us, in their pain and joy, their passion and rage, their yearning and their cry against injustice. We can sit all night with our friend while he talks about the end of his marriage, and what we finally get is a collection of stories about passion, tenderness, misunderstanding, sorrow, money; those hours and days and moments when he was absolutely married, whether he and his wife were screaming at each other, or sulking around the house, or making love. While his marriage was dying, he was also working; spending evenings with friends, rearing children; but those are other stories. Which is why, days after hearing a painful story by a friend,

we see him and say: How are you? We know that by now he may have another story to tell, or he may be in the middle of one, and we hope it is joyful.

Think of the basket of each character's life: what holds the ectoplasm together—what are this person's routines, beliefs? What little things would your characters write in their journals: I ate this, I hate that, I did this, I took the dog for a long walk, I chatted with my neighbor. This is all the stuff that tethers them to the earth and to other people, all the stuff that makes each character think that life sort of makes sense.

The basket is an apt image because of all the holes. How aware is each character of how flimsy the basket really is? How present are your people? Someone once said to me, "I am trying to learn to stay in the now—not the last now, not the next now; *this* now." Which "now" do your characters dwell in?

What are your characters teaching their children by example and by indoctrination? For instance, I was teaching Sam peace chants for a long time, when he was only two. It was during the war in the Persian Gulf; I was a little angry.

"What do we want?" I'd call to Sam.

"Peace," he'd shout dutifully.

"And when do we want it?" I'd ask.

"Now!" he'd say, and I'd smile and toss him a fish.

The words were utterly meaningless to him, of course. I might as well have taught him to reply "Spoos!" instead of "Peace" and "August!" instead of "Now." My friends loved

it, though; all three of his grandparents loved it. Now, how much does this say about me and my longings? I think something like this would tell a reader more about a character than would three pages of description. It would tell us about her current politics and the political tradition from which she sprang, her people-pleasing, her longing for peace and her longing to belong, her way of diluting rage and frustration with humor, while also using her child as a prop, a little live Charlie McCarthy. The latter is horrifying, but it's also sort of poignant. Maybe thirty-five years ago this woman had to perform for her parents' friends. Maybe she was their little Charlie McCarthy. Maybe she and her therapist can discuss it for the next few months. And did this woman stop using her kid, once she realized what she was doing? No, she didn't, and this tells us even more. She kept at it, long after the war was over, until one day she called to her three-and-a-half-year-old son, "Hey—what do we want?" And he said plaintively, "Lunch."

I once asked Ethan Canin to tell me the most valuable thing he knew about writing, and without hesitation he said, "Nothing is as important as a likable narrator. Nothing holds a story together better." I think he's right. If your narrator is someone whose take on things fascinates you, it isn't really going to matter if nothing much happens for a long time. I could watch John Cleese or Anthony Hopkins do dishes for about an hour without needing much else to happen. Having a likable narrator is like having a great friend whose company you love, whose

mind you love to pick, whose running commentary totally holds your attention, who makes you laugh out loud, whose lines you always want to steal. When you have a friend like this, she can say, "Hey, I've got to drive up to the dump in Petaluma—wanna come along?" and you honestly can't think of anything in the world you'd rather do. By the same token, a boring or annoying person can offer to buy you an expensive dinner, followed by tickets to a great show, and in all honesty you'd rather stay home and watch the aspic set.

Now, a person's faults are largely what make him or her likable. I like for narrators to be like the people I choose for friends, which is to say that they have a lot of the same flaws as I. Preoccupation with self is good, as is a tendency toward procrastination, self-delusion, darkness, jealousy, groveling, greediness, addictiveness. They shouldn't be too perfect; perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting. I like for them to have a nice sick sense of humor and to be concerned with important things, by which I mean that they are interested in political and psychological and spiritual matters. I want them to want to know who we are and what life is all about. I like them to be mentally ill in the same sorts of ways that I am; for instance, I have a friend who said one day, "I could resent the *ocean* if I tried," and I realized that I love that in a guy. I like for them to have hope—if a friend or a narrator reveals himself or herself to be hopeless too early on, I lose interest. It depresses me. It makes me overeat. I don't mind if a person has no hope if he or she is sufficiently funny about the whole thing, but then, this being able to be funny definitely

speaks of a kind of hope, of buoyancy. Novels ought to them hope; at least, American novels ought to have hope. French novels don't need to. We mostly win wars, they lose them. Of course, they did hide more Jews than many other countries, and this is a form of winning. Although as my friend Jane points out, if you or I had been there speaking really bad French, they would have turned us in in a hot second—bank on it. In general, though, there's no point in writing hopeless novels. We all know we're going to die; what's important is the kind of men and women we are in the face of this.

Sometimes people turn out to be not all that funny or articulate, but they can still be great friends or narrators if they possess a certain clarity of vision—especially if they have survived or are in the process of surviving a great deal. This is inherently interesting material, since this is the task before all of us: sometimes we have to have one hand on this rock here, one hand on that one, and each big toe seeking out firm if temporary footing, and while we're scaling that rock face, there's no time for bubbles, champagne, and a witty aside. You don't mind that people in this situation are not being charming. You are glad to see them doing something you will need to do down the line, and with dignity. The challenge and the dignity make it interesting enough.

Besides, deciding what is interesting is about as subjective as things get. People hand me books and articles to read that they promise are fascinating, and I wake up holding the book, with a jerk—like when you wake up from a little nap at the movies, thinking that you are falling out of an airplane. Here,

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hat he be able to appreciate my mother, whose jokes hinge on some grammatical subtlety or a working knowledge of higher mathematics. You get the picture. Robbie is about as interesting as a pair of red high-top Converse sneakers. But Robbie points to the mattress on the floor. He grins, slowly unbuckling his belt, drops his jeans. "Lie down," says Robbie.

This is interesting enough for me.

Another thing: we want a sense that an important character, like a narrator, is reliable. We want to believe that a character is not playing games or being coy or manipulative, but is telling the truth to the best of his or her ability. (Unless a major characteristic of his or hers is coyness or manipulation or lying.) We do not wish to be crudely manipulated. Of course, we enter into a work of fiction to be manipulated, but in a pleasurable way. We want to be massaged by a masseur, not whapped by a carpet beater.

This brings us to the matter of how we, as writers, tell the truth. A writer paradoxically seeks the truth and tells lies every step of the way. It's a lie if you make something up. But you make it up in the name of the truth, and then you give your heart to expressing it clearly. You make up your characters, partly from experience, partly out of the thin air of the subconscious, and you need to feel committed to telling

on telling the truth lies/truth lies in the name of truth.

the exact truth about them, even though you are making them up. I suppose the basic moral reason for doing this is the Golden Rule. I don't want to be lied to; I want you to tell me the truth, and I will try to tell it to you.

One final reminder: you probably won't know your characters until weeks or months after you've started working with them. Frederick Buechner wrote:

You avoid forcing your characters to march too steadily to the drumbeat of your artistic purpose. You leave some measure of real freedom for your characters to be themselves. And if minor characters show an inclination to become major characters, as they're apt to do, you at least give them a shot at it, because in the world of fiction it may take many pages before you find out who the major characters really are, just as in the real world it may take you many years to find out that the stranger you talked to once for half an hour in the railroad station may have done more to point you to where your true homeland lies than your priest or your best friend or even your psychiatrist.

Just don't pretend you know more about your characters than they do, because you don't. Stay open to them. It's teatime and all the dolls are at the table. Listen. It's that simple.

Dialogue

Good dialogue is such a pleasure to come across while reading, a complete change of pace from description and exposition and all that *writing*. Suddenly people are talking, and we find ourselves clipping along. And we have all the pleasures of voyeurism because the characters don't know we are listening. We get to feel privy to their inner workings without having to spend too much time listening to them think. I don't want them to think all the time on paper. It's bad enough that *I* have to think all the time without having someone else dump his or her obsessive-compulsive, paranoid thinking on me, too.

On the other hand, nothing can break the mood of a piece of writing like bad dialogue. My students are miserable when they are reading an otherwise terrific story to the class and then hit a patch of dialogue that is so purple and expositional that it reads like something from a childhood play by the Gabor sisters. Suddenly the piece is emotionally tone-deaf and

there's a total lack of resonance. I can see the surprise on my students' faces, because the dialogue looked Okay on paper, yet now it sounds as if it were poorly translated from their native Hindi. The problem is that the writer simply put it down word by word; read out loud, it has no flow, no sense of the character's rhythm that in real life would run through the words.

In nonfiction, the hope is that the person actually said the words that you have attributed to him or her. In fiction, though, anything goes. It is a matter of ear, just as finding the right physical detail is mostly a matter of eye. You're not reproducing actual speech—you're translating the sound and rhythm of what a character says into words. You're putting down on paper your sense of how the characters speak.

There is a real skill to hearing all those words that real people—and your characters—say and to recording what you have heard—and the latter is or should be more interesting and concise and even more true than what was actually said. Dialogue is more like a movie than it is like real life, since it should be more dramatic. There's a greater sense of action. In the old days, before movies, let's say before Hemingway, the dialogue in novels was much more studied, ornate. Characters talked in ways we can't really imagine people talking. With Hemingway, things began to terse up. Good dialogue became sharp and lean. Now, in the right hands, dialogue can move things along in a way that will leave you breathless.

There are a number of things that help when you sit down to write dialogue. First of all, sound your words—read them

out loud. If you can't bring yourself to do this, mouth your dialogue. This is something you have to practice, doing it over and over and over. Then when you're out in the world—that is, not at your desk—and you hear people talking, you'll find yourself editing their dialogue, playing with it, seeing in your mind's eye what it would look like on the page. You listen to how people really talk, and then learn little by little to take someone's five-minute speech and make it one sentence, without losing anything. If you are a writer, or want to be a writer, this is how you spend your days—listening, observing, storing things away, making your isolation pay off. You take home all you've taken in, all that you've overheard, and you turn it into gold. (Or at least you try.)

Second, remember that you should be able to identify each character by what he or she says. Each one must sound different from the others. And they should not all sound like you; each one must have a self. If you can get their speech mannerisms right, you will know what they're wearing and driving and maybe thinking, and how they were raised, and what they feel. You need to trust yourself to hear what *they* are saying over what you are saying. At least give each of them a shot at expression: sometimes what they are saying and how they are saying it will finally show you who they are and what is really happening. Whoa—they're not going to get married after all! She's gay! And you had no idea!

Third, you might want to try putting together two people who more than anything else in the world wish to avoid each other, people who would avoid whole cities just to make sure

they won't bump into each other. But there are people out there in the world who almost inspire me to join the government witness protection program, just so I can be sure I will never have to talk to them again. Maybe there is someone like this in your life. Take a character whom one of your main characters feels this way about and put the two of them in the same elevator. Then let the elevator get stuck. Nothing like a supercharged atmosphere to get things going. Now, they both will have a lot to say, but they will also be afraid that they won't be able to control *what* they say. They will be afraid of an explosion. Maybe there will be one, maybe not. But there's one way to find out. In any case, good dialogue gives us the sense that we are eavesdropping, that the author is not getting in the way. Thus, good dialogue encompasses both what is said and what is not said. What is not said will sit patiently outside that stuck elevator door, or it will dart around the characters' feet inside the elevator, like rats. So let these characters hold back some thoughts, and at the same time, let them detonate little bombs.

If you are lucky, your characters may become impatient with your inability, while writing dialogue, to keep up with all they have to say. This is when you will know that you are on the right track.

Dialogue is *the* way to nail character, so you have to work on getting the voice right. You don't want to sit there, though, trying to put the right words in their mouths. I don't think the right words exist already in your head, any more than the

characters do. They exist somewhere else. What we have in our heads are fragments and thoughts and things we've heard and memorized, and we take our little ragbag and reach into it and throw some stuff down and then our unconscious kicks in. For instance, say you have a guy walking down the street, and it's cold, and you've always wanted a leather topcoat, so you give him one. Then you follow him down the street. Describe what you see, and listen carefully.

Say this boy meets a girl. The boy in the leather overcoat meets the beautiful girl with the harelip and the Gucci bag, on the street, and he can't just say, Hey, let's get married! Things need to happen. They need to get to know each other, even if just a little. They will talk to each other, and they will talk about each other to friends. Get all this down. After you've spent a while with them, they will start to sound more like themselves—because you are getting to really know them—and you may see that you'd better get rid of that topcoat, it's pretty jive, and that you need to go back and redo the early dialogue. But don't stop and do it just now. Keep moving; let them spend some time together, let them jam for a while. Come back later for the rewrite.

The better you know the characters, the more you'll see things from their point of view. You need to trust that you've got it in you to listen to people, watch them, and notice what they wear and how they move, to capture a sense of how they speak. You want to avoid at all costs drawing your characters on those that already exist in other works of fiction. You must

learn about people from people, not from what you read. Your reading should *confirm* what you've observed in the world.

As you learn who your characters are, compassion for them will grow. There shouldn't be just a single important character in your work for whom you have compassion. You need to feel it even for the villain—in fact, especially for the villain. Life is not like formula fiction. The villain has a heart, and the hero has great flaws. You've got to pay attention to what each character says, so you can know each of their hearts.

Only in the comics and formula movies do we get any pleasure from destroying totally evil and sinister villains, because in those cases they've been systematically depersonalized. They commit only acts of atrocity and sociopathology, and they say terribly evil things, and then we get to ritually kill them. There can be, at the end of the book, the relief that comes with justice.

You can't write down your intellectual understanding of a hero or villain and expect us to be engaged. You probably have got to find these characters within the community of people who live in your heart. For instance, just to mix media for a moment, if Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* hadn't had an emotional understanding of Hannibal Lector's heart, his mannerisms would not have rung so true or been so terrifying. The first time we see him, he's simply standing there, expressionless, with his arms by his side. It is just chilling. I felt like I might break out in welts from sheer anxiety. I felt like my neck had developed a life of its own and was

going to wait for me out in the lobby. To have this effect on us, Hopkins must have sympathized with something inside Lector, must have understood something about his heart.

The writer needs to try to understand each of his or her characters in this way. The only thing to do when the sense of dread and low self-esteem tells you that you are not up to this is to wear it down by getting a little work done every day. You really can do it, really can find these people inside you and learn to hear what they have to say.

For example, let's say you have a main character whose feelings can be hurt if he's spoken to sharply—unlike you, ha-ha-ha. Say he is also a little like you in the sense that when he gets a bit depressed or tense, he heads for a rib joint to eat a pound of burned, fatty meat. So he is perhaps also a little overweight—not that you are overweight. I'm sure your weight is just fine. *Anyway,* let's make him someone who works in an office, someone who's been pampered—what could he say that lets us see this? Let's dress him carefully because we may have to humiliate him in a minute. For instance, we can see by the precision of the knot in his tie that his wife tied it this morning. His clothes and ring and shoes are all going to talk, and they are going to help us find out who he is, but more importantly he is going to say things to his secretary and to his callers and to the people with whom he works, and these people are going to say things back to him, and we want to hear both sides of these conversations.

What if his boss says something to him that seems innocuous but that cuts him to the quick? And what if this time he re-

sponds in a completely different way than heading out for barbecue? What if he starts saying things that have nothing to do with what *you* had in mind, and it all mysteriously rings true? What if he says something so insulting to his boss that it puts his job in jeopardy, and then, instead of a little assault eating, he responds by spending his entire lunch hour at an adult bookstore? Well, maybe you had him wrong to begin with. Maybe he goes from being an Ivy League lawyer to a semisuccessful rug salesman in two lines of dialogue. This may not be convenient for you, but at least now you can see with whom you are really working.

Now I want to hear how he describes his day to his wife, what he leaves in and how he says it, and what he neglects to mention. So you make an attempt at capturing this by trying to find him in your psyche, this person who has been talked down to, whose skin is a little thin, whose feelings are easily hurt. You write a shitty first draft of it and you sound it out, and you leave in those lines that ring true and take out the rest. I wish there were an easier, softer way, a shortcut, but this is the nature of most good writing: that you find out things as you go along. Then you go back and rewrite. Remember: no one is reading your first drafts.

I need to digress again for a minute: you create these characters and figure out little by little what they say and do, but this all happens in a part of you to which you have no access—the unconscious. This is where the creating is done. We start out with stock characters, and our unconscious provides us

with real, flesh-and-blood, believable people. My friend Carpenter talks about the unconscious as the cellar where the little boy sits who creates the characters, and he hands them up to you through the cellar door. He might as well be cutting out paper dolls. He's peaceful; he's just playing.

You can't will yourself into being receptive to what the little boy has to offer, and you can't buy a key that will let you into the cellar. You have to relax, and wool-gather, and get rid of the critics, and sit there in some sort of self-hypnosis, and then you have to *practice*. I mean, you can't just sit there at your desk drooling. You have to move your hand across the paper or the keyboard. You may do it badly for a while, but you keep on doing it. Try to remember that to some extent you're just the typist. A good typist listens.

I sometimes imagine that instead of a little kid, there's a long-necked, good-natured Dr. Seuss character down there, grim with concentration and at the same time playing. He cranes his head toward the sound of the characters talking, but not like a court reporter, more like somebody sitting alone at an adjacent table, trying not to pry but wanting to take it all in. You may want to come up with an image or a metaphor for this other part of you that is separate from your rational, conscious mind, this other person with whom you can collaborate. This may help you feel less alone.

One last thing: dialogue that is written in dialect is very tiring to read. If you can do it brilliantly, fine. If other writers read your work and rave about your use of dialect, go for it. But

be positive that you do it well, because otherwise it is a lot of work to read short stories or novels that are written in dialect. It makes our necks feel funny. We are, as you know, a tense people, and we have a lot of problems of our own without you adding to them. (However, someone behind me in line at the market last week, during a storm, said, after smiting her own forehead, "Oh, vat vader," and then pointed outside to the rain. I was tempted for the rest of the day to write an entire novel about her, in dialect.)