

Writers Workshop #5

Who are these Characters in My Manuscript and Why Are They Doing Such Strange Things?

Suppose you are working on a novel or short story. You have your characters' names and ages, a setting, and a plot. You think you know what the theme or themes are. Maybe you're working on your first draft, or maybe it's your sixth. Your critique group, however, whoever they are—friends, parents, classmates, mentors (sorry, your dog doesn't count, even if you read the entire manuscript aloud to him)—like your story, but they say it's a little unfocused, as are your characters. They're...uneven. Some of their actions seem to come out of the blue and no one, including you, is sure why they're doing what they do. Those scenes are dramatic, though, or funny, or just intriguing, and you'd like to hang onto them. You think they're important to the story, even if you aren't sure yet why.

How do you fix this sort of mess? Who are your characters, on a deep level, and why are they behaving in these extreme or uncharacteristic ways?

A talk with your therapist, critique group, best friend, or even that dog might lead you to new insights about your character. Yet how do you then translate your insights into scenes or dialog or narratives so that the disjointed segments become integral parts of the story?

Here is one way to get there: Step inside the head of each of your troublesome characters. Even if you are writing from only one person's point of view, take time to let each character speak.

For instance, while writing *NOT LIKE YOU*, a phone scene between Kayla and her mother Marilyn wasn't working. Kayla had run away to Denver, and her mom didn't seem to be overly concerned. To some degree, that made sense: Marilyn was a self-absorbed alcoholic. But she was trying to make improvements in her life, and I wanted to show that Kayla's brash act had shaken Marilyn to her core. Honestly, though, I wasn't sure exactly how Marilyn was feeling. I couldn't just make her say, "Kayla, you've shaken me to my core." Marilyn is a prideful person, and she'd had a hard time showing affection to her daughter. She's terrified of intimacy, in other words. Plus, people usually don't say things like that. Yet, I knew she recognized in her daughter some of who she herself had been as an angry, runaway teen.

Setting my manuscript aside, I wrote something like this, from Marilyn's point of view: (I can't find the actual draft, but this should be close.)

Jeez, I'm scared. I don't know what to tell her. Do I sneak up there and grab her? But I don't know where the hell she is. Damn it. I gotta stay cool. She'll freak if I start yelling. Even though I want to. Just come home, baby. Why don't you just come home? I'll do anything. Just ask me. Tell me. Anything, babe. Jeez. My heart's pounding like it's gonna leap out of my chest. I could call the cops. Yeah. That would be the responsible thing, right? Wield a little muscle here. What am I afraid of? Call the damn cops already. Anything could happen to her up there. You'll never SEE her again. Call. Now! Whoa. Get a grip. I can't call the cops. What am I going to tell them? There must be a million runaways in Denver, brown-haired girls like Kayla. A million, at least, and I don't know where she is. And she'll kill me. She'll never forgive me. What do I do? What do I tell her? How do I get her to come home? What if I never see her again?

Writing this passage gave me a better sense of both Marilyn's feelings and her dilemma: how could she assert her authority and caring as a mother but not scare her already resentful daughter away? How could she show some trust in Kayla while also taking care of her own very real fear that she might not ever see her daughter again? I wound up using several elements from that inner monologue to craft Marilyn's part of the conversation in a way that showed her caring and respect for Kayla while staying true to her own character.

Here are several ways to explore alien story elements—those out-of-the-blue behaviors your characters exhibit—that you think have should remain in the manuscript.

1. Write from the point of view of your secondary characters. Let them tell you how they see the situation. Let them look at it from all different angles and emotions. Let them give their first impressions, their worst fears, their blind hopes.
2. Write about your characters' history, even if those events occurred before your story takes place. You might discover an earlier trauma or formative experience that helps to explain a character's seemingly irrational behavior. (Then, of course, you have to figure out how to weave that earlier experience into your story without adding 300 pages to your manuscript.) Was there a death, an illness, an accident? Did this character once fall in

love in Argentina and have her heart broken? Did she grow up wandering in the woods for hours with a favorite dog, loving her solitude and nature? Was your character raised by a Holocaust survivor? By a world-famous French pastry chef? By a pod of whales?

3. Have your characters write letters to each other that they would never send.
4. Write from your characters' perspectives as if they are 70 years old and looking back on the story.

I have used these kinds of techniques for every novel I've had published. I've written pages and pages from various characters' points of view and time frames. Sometimes I resist: Why do all this writing if it won't go into the book?

I've never regretted it. I always get at least one gem from the exercise, something that makes a scene work, or reveals a vital aspect of a character's history or personality that I previously hadn't understood.

Not convinced you need to do this? Here's a simple analogy: Suppose you're trying to see a photo on the wall, but the refrigerator blocks your way. You can sit there and say, "Well, I just can't see it. I'm trying my hardest, but I just can't see it." Or you can stand up, walk around the fridge to a new position, and look at the photo from there.

I know that seems like a blazingly simplistic, kind of stupid analogy. But it fits. It's all about shifting your perspective. You can't see all the complicated angles that enrich a story unless you're willing to take the time to consider it from many points of view.

I'm so glad I wrote this. I've finished a 360-page first draft, and my characters are barely on the page. Time to practice—again—what I preach.