

Drawing Characters from Real Life

Introduction

If we want our books to impact and make a difference, then it's so important to feature memorable characters in them. **NB 'Characters are the heartbeat of a novel.'**

My experience of wondering why I hadn't enjoyed a book, then realising I just didn't *care* what happened to the characters—no real depth and not true to life. Yet there are so many memorable *real live* characters around us on a daily basis we can use to help us write novels featuring memorable and even unforgettable characters. **As well**, there are so many rich layers within each one of us just waiting to be mined in our writing!

Quote from *Escaping into the Open* by Elizabeth Berg p 104-105:

'Whenever people ask me where I get my material, I am genuinely befuddled. "Well ... from life!" is what I usually say. What I meant is that each of us, no matter who we are or what we do, is offered potential story ideas daily. The people we know, the things that happen to them and us, the random scenes we witness and the conversations we overhear—all of these things are rich with raw material; all of them are capable of serving as a vehicle or springboard for a good story, in one way or another. We need only be aware. We need only be awake, and curious, and willing to share ...

To be more specific: Think of all that is at the buffet table for your consideration each day: the sight of hair in sunshine, a small kindness from one stranger on the street to another, a grave injustice on a playground, the feel of veins on a leaf, the swell of anger in your own throat. Think of the inadvertent charm and humor you can find in people everywhere. ...

To find your stories, look closely at your job and the people you work with, at your family and the changing dynamics therein, at human interest pieces in the newspapers. ... Look to your heart—to its soaring and its grieving; look to your many moods, your vulnerabilities, your learning and changing, your strongest beliefs, your deepest fears, your triumphs and failures.

Ultimately, for me, and I think for you, too, it is not so much a problem of finding material as it is limiting it.

Exercise

Think of someone you met or noticed today, even in passing. May even be someone in this room! What was it that struck you about them? Could even be yourself! Write either two or three sentences, describing the person and/or what he or she was doing or write a brief dialogue, showing some aspect about their personality or what he or she might have been feeling.

Degrees of borrowing characters from real life (NB These categories overlap)

Early 20th century novelist **E M Forster** (*A Room with a View*, *A Passage to India*) said, "We all like to pretend we don't use real people, but one does actually."

- **Basing a main character or main characters on a real person** (either yourself or someone else)

Examples from famous authors:

Anne of Green Gables based on L M Montgomery's own childhood experience of being brought up by maternal grandparents from younger than two—a lonely life when she had lots of imaginary friends. Relieved to return to Prince Edward Island—trained to be a teacher.

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Little Women was written by Louisa May Alcott and set in the Alcott family home in Concord, Massachusetts. The novel follows the lives of four sisters – Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March – and is loosely based on the author's childhood experiences with her three sisters.

The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald. *More than most other writers, Fitzgerald drew upon his own feelings and experiences for his novels and short stories. Yet Fitzgerald's fiction was never just thinly-disguised autobiography; it was instead transmuted – or transformed – autobiography. None of the protagonists of his novels ... can be fully identified with Fitzgerald, though he clearly assigned certain of his own emotions and experiences to them. In his best work ... autobiographical elements invest the work with an intensely "felt" quality.* Judith S. Baughman

Examples from my own novels:

Helena, All the Days of My Life—inspired by Czech migrant at our church at that time

Laura—inspired by blind friend Heather (personality traits and actual life experiences)

Jenna—compilation of my own and others' personalities and experiences

- **Modelling other more minor characters on a real person** (either yourself or someone else)

Examples from famous authors:

Characters in ***The Kite Runner*** (and ***A Thousand Splendid Suns***) by Khaled Hosseini. Hosseini's father was a diplomat and his mother a high school teacher in Kabul. 'Hosseini's "very fond memories of [his] childhood" in peaceful pre-Soviet era Afghanistan, as well as his personal experiences with Afghanistan's Hazara people, inspired his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. One Hazara man, Hossein Khan, worked for the Hosseinis when they were living in Iran. When Hosseini was in third grade, he taught Khan to read and write. Although his relationship with Hossein Khan was brief and rather formal, Hosseini's fond memories of this relationship served as an inspiration for the relationship between Hassan and Amir in *The Kite Runner*. In his 2013 novel, *And The Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini draws on his family's time of exile in Paris as well his experiences with children in Afghanistan.'

Examples from my own novels:

- Jenna's mentor Rosemary in *Jenna* is very like my own mentor
- Jenna's parents *my* parents!
- Vietnamese doctor in *Helena's Legacy* modelled on child adopted by colleague

- **Creating characters from several people, plus imagination**

(May involve appearances, speech/mannerisms, chosen actions or reactions)

Examples from famous authors:

- **Maeve Binchy** born and lived in Dublin—wonderful Irish Catholic characters in her novels
- **Charles Dickens** knew a lot about debtors' prisons—his father had been in one (David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, The Old Curiosity Shop, Pickwick etc)
- **John Grisham** was a lawyer who writes nothing but courtroom dramas

Examples from my own novels:

- Music teacher's hair in *All the Days of My Life* was inspired by my sister's neighbour!
- Kind minister Geoff's words and actions in *Jenna* a combination of various ministers
- Jenna's father's response 'What on earth would you want to do *that* for?' re going to bible college was something some friends said to me
- Alexandra's reactions overseas in *The Inheritance* based on friend's experiences

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- **‘Accidental’ drawing from real life characters**

Sometimes we may not realise until later where an idea or emotion has come from

Quote section ‘Tapping the Well’ in Vinita Hampton Wright’s book *The Soul Tells A Story* p 92-93:
Think of your soul as a great well. At the open mouth of that well is your conscious life—your thoughts, opinions, known emotions and accessible memories. Down a little deeper is your unconscious life—your dreams, intuitions, the memories you’re not always conscious of. Deeper still ... is what I call the Beyond Conscious. ... Your well goes down deeper than you know, and it has been gathering information for a very long time. When you are doing work that is truly creative, you are tapping the well.

Examples from my own novels:

- My mother’s ‘But what would people *think?*’ in *Helena’s Legacy*
- Father in *Jenna*—whole self-made man idea
- Grandfather calling me ‘Girlie’ in *Jenna*
- Aunt/lady at door of church who were rather snobbish—mother in *Helena’s Legacy*

Why draw characters from real life (whether one’s own or another’s)?

NB Comment ‘*All great fiction is autobiographical since authors write most effectively about what they know.*’ (Will discuss later)

- **Being able to add more realistic detail makes for more believable characters with whom readers can relate.** Readers feel they are ‘there’ and that you know what you’re talking about.
 Eg *Helena’s dream in All the Days of My Life*—my own picture
 The various details Heather gave me to write *Laura* eg a blind child’s world is not ‘dark’!
 Things blind children can do that defy belief that she actually did. **NB** Readers’ comments that *Laura* must be a true story because it was as if I was there
 Account of Susan’s baby’s birth in *Helena’s Legacy* taken from daughter’s experience with the birth of a friend’s baby
- **Adds emotional depth to our characters, especially if writing from our own experiences.**
 This can help readers really *care* about our characters.
Quote from Mark Tredinnick *The Little Red Writing Book* p 152-3:
If you want to write, be prepared to hurt, wrote Natalie Goldberg (wrote ‘Writing Down the Bones’—writing as Zen practice). You can’t write well unless you are ready to write out of that wounded, brave, eternal soul that you are deep down. And sometimes that’s going to hurt. ... It is out of the true story of yourself that you must write.
 Eg Experience of discovering the words of ‘Be Thou My Vision’ in *Laura*
 Girl who asked why there were no male elders in *Jenna*
- **Can be easier—and more successful—than trying to imagine a character into existence.**
 These may turn out to be a bit unreal and not speak naturally, if we don’t take time to really ‘inhabit’ the character and understand what is going on inside him or her. (Talk about this later)
- **We have a wealth of material at our fingertips in our own lives—why ignore this? People’s personalities, stories and experiences are so amazing—including our own!**
 Eg I could never have ‘thought up’ the two incidences in *Laura* that impact my readers the most
 Eg My enjoying writing the angry first chapter of *The Inheritance* where Michael lashes out at his mother over her perceived hypocrisy and at God as well—fuelled from real life!
- **Can enrich the dialogue we write** (Can hear how others speak in our heads)

Issues involved in using real life characters

- **Sense of ‘using’ people (personality traits, appearance) or their experiences**

NB Daughter’s comment: ‘Just don’t use me!’

ALSO quote from interview with David Baldacci

He says that one of the only downfalls to living the writer’s dream is that the people in your life think twice before telling you things. “They don’t want to see it in the next book.”

Their names, however, are a different story. Baldacci frequently selects the names of friends to serve as characters in his novels, my friend’s father included.

BUT author who auctions off the right for people to have their names feature in his novels!

- Need to pray about it and feel comfortable before God with what you have written.
- Need to be honest about your motive in using this material Eg Is it for a good purpose? Is it out of spite? Is it to mock someone or put them down? My experience in writing *Soul Friend*.
- **Needing permission/letting the person know**
Eg With first two novels, no one to ask, but still changed heroine’s surname
My experience with *Laura*—checked it out with Heather, especially re family members
- **Considering the feelings of others**
Eg Issue of Laura’s brother who was tempted to engage in a homosexual relationship. Had (subconsciously?) chosen Heather’s brother’s name!
Part in my non-fiction book *Soul Friend* re Joy’s husband—too personal
- **Our own vulnerability if using our own experiences**
Eg My experiences with *Jenna*—had to stand by my beliefs etc (non-fiction even more difficult)

Skills to work on in drawing characters from real life

- **Be observant! Sit and watch people. Train yourself to note facial expressions, eyes, stance.**
*When you’re people-watching, do more than take in the details they present to you. Take one of those details and run with it. If you see a person in the airport who is very well dressed and carrying expensive, luggage, what else might you deduce about her? Is her home luxurious? ... Where is it? How—and where---does she eat breakfast? Does she have children? Failed dreams? Weird allergies? Who are her parents? Elizabeth Berg *Escaping into the Open* p 115*
- **Try to understand others’ motives and what drives their actions**
- **Try to understand yourself more and see why you do the things you do.**
Perhaps work through a book such as *The Artist’s Way*, read some counselling books or even attend a basic counselling course. My own experiences with this.

Writing with real life information—how to manage this

- **Realise a character doesn’t have to embody the *whole* of a real person**—can just be some mannerism or comment they often make or something about his or her appearance
- **Write a profile of your main characters** at least. Can be as detailed as you like.

PPT The Character Checklist *Revision and Self-Editing* Bell p 31:

For each of your main characters, consider the following:

Sex, age, occupation

Point of vulnerability

Current living conditions

Personal habits: dress, manners, etc

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Physical appearance and how she feels about it
 Where she grew up
 Main attitudes about people and events
 Main shaping incidents in past influencing present life
 Dominant attitude
 What her parents are like
 Her relationship with other family members
 Schooling and her performance there
 Others think of her as
 What she likes to do in her free time
 She is passionate about
 The one thing she wants more than anything else
 Her major flaw
 Her major strong point
 What I love about this character
 The secret to be revealed

- **Have their faces in mind as you write dialogue.** How would he/she react? What would he/she say in this instance? Would they say anything or remain quiet?
- **Try to get right inside the character's head as you write**—not just in dialogue. What would motivate him or her to act this way? What emotions would he or she be feeling?

Exercise

Using photos of family members on ppt, write a brief description or dialogue incorporating something you observe about them. Share with group or with person next to you.

For discussion

When you first start to write fiction, you may draw heavily from people you know. But as you go on, you will probably find your characters only vaguely inspired by acquaintances. Berg p 111

Have you found this to be true in your own writing? Why do you think this might be the case?

All great fiction is autobiographical since authors write most effectively about what they know.

Do you think this is true? Discuss.

Conclusion

My hope that this seminar will have inspired you to take note of the rich tapestry of personalities around you and in you and not to be afraid to take these to create authentic, memorable characters who will inspire, intrigue or annoy your readers as required. Pray for participants.