Week 1: Characters Characterizing Themselves

It’s the willingness (compulsion) of a writer to dig up the secrets of her/ his characters, like truffles. Foremost, this unearthing comes from familiarity—from the writer spending ample time burrowing in the following locations:

1. The character’s heart
2. Her/ his mind
3. Her/ his present & past (and depending on the narrative perspective, maybe even the future)

The longer a writer spends occupying a foreign set of perceptions, a consciousness independent from the author’s own heart, mind, and specificities of life, the author learns how the character herself would act. How would she respond to certain stimuli, certain pressures? What’s important to her? Is she funny? What are the great regrets of her life? What are her goals, her private desires? Has she ever been in love, in peril?

Often, despite a writer’s best planning and preconceived notions of a character’s identity, I’ll argue that it’s a process of observation to truly pinpoint who our main players are. We have to see them act, talk, think, interact; we have to see them stalk the habitat of the page so we know the nuances and complexities of their souls. This is the essence of characters characterizing themselves.

This invariably (and frustratingly) will lead to some trial and error, false starts that take us in certain directions that don’t make the final draft. Resist the urge to think about the discarded scenes as wasted pages. Try to think of it as the research necessary to render an independent heart and mind. Writers have to possess a reservoir of knowledge in order to zero in on and reveal the right aspects of character.

Week 2: Characterization continued – Useful “schizophrenia”

Finding the correct balance between thought process (interior life) and the mechanics of plot (external life) is one of the hardest things we do as authors. Rendering the emotional landscape of a character is important, as it thrusts the reader into the decision making
process, helping to create psychologically “real” protagonists. Readers want to understand why characters do what they do; they want to see that there’s logic behind decision making, even if that logic is flawed, sociopathic, or deluded (faulty logic is more interesting on the page anyway).

For our purposes this week, we’ll look exclusively at how to render a convincing consciousness, a thought process independent from the author’s yet one fully inhabited and brought to life.

**Week 3: Characterization continued – Dissonant notes**

When I build characters’ psychologies/decision making mechanisms, I always imagine my readers to be leaves floating on a stream. In this example, the stream is the character’s consciousness, the logic system. The reader, while captive in this foreign landscape, just floats along, observing, witnessing, and after awhile, understanding how a character is hard-wired, even if that character is vastly different than the reader herself.

Maybe it’s in this space that literature can perform its most important function: maybe it can teach empathy. Maybe looking through the perspective of someone who challenges or belies our moral coding can help open our minds to the experiences of others.

Don’t we want these characters to think and act differently from us? They’re telling their remix of history. We as readers are the nosy neighbors peeking in and gobbling up the “facts,” even when we know the facts are contorted, slanted.

Besides, where would the fun be if things weren’t all gummed up, biased, and wonky? That’s the humanness, the “us.” We recognize ourselves in well rendered characters because they have a point of view, a vantage point, a voice, a heart, strengths and weaknesses. That’s not only what makes them real people on the page, it’s what brings us to life as well.

**Week 4: Characterization continued – How to write dialogue in which my characters sound unique from one another**

Dialogue can be one of the most informative tools at a writer’s disposal, yet it’s also probably the hardest to master. We have to not only figure out what we want our characters to say, but how to phrase it. Our diction, the pacing of our dialogue, its layout on the page, these are all problems that can be solved in many ways, and we’re here to hone your unique style of tackling these issues.

Dialogue is such an indispensable tool because it allows our readers to draw her/his own conclusions about a character. They hear the words coming directly from a character’s mouth, without any narrative filters; thus, the reader gets to determine for herself: is this character forthright, earnest? Are they lying, omitting some facts, manipulative? Are
they making a suspect decision, but doing the best they can to get by? Are they being taken advantage of? Are they taking advantage of someone else? Are they angry, sad, brokenhearted? And how can we use dialogue to convey these emotions without ever having to tell our readers how the characters are feeling?

Week 5: Plotting tactics – forging internal and external conflicts

The big “chicken and the egg” question that a novelist grapples with as she sits down to start a new project is what to focus on first: should she dedicate herself to learning about her main character? Or should she try and get things happening on the page (plot)? This isn’t an either/or situation. In fact, they’ll inform each other. Each new plot point that a character navigates will illuminate something about her/his true nature. And each hypothesis—yes, we are guessing early one—a writer has about who the protagonist is will inform how she/he tackles obstacles.

Our key word this week is duress. That is, what is the duress—either physical, emotional, or both—that you have introduced into your character’s life? What’s the immediate conflict affecting their world?

Week 6: Making a meaningful series of events

The best plots aren’t controlled by an authorial presence. Plot springs from the characters themselves (our protagonists).

Think about it like this: Authors create characters… characters create plot. This is due to the fact that the protagonist’s decision making will induce the next undulation, curve, revelation, heresy, etc. in the story.

Therefore, I’ll argue going forward that our working definition of plot should be this: A meaningful series of events. And the adjective meaningful is assigned to the protagonist—she or he will determine the moments we zero in on, the scenes to examine, the story we tell.

Week 7: Plotting continued – Dangling bait

Plot is intertwined with structure. It’s not just what we say as writers, but also when we say it that creates wonder, mystery, and excitement in our readers. Stretching action across many pages or chapters can help solidify a reader’s attention. Plot is a meaningful series of events, but it’s also a manicured system of events. The order we parcel out information is just as vital as what those moments might contain.
Week 8: Plotting continued – Mapping Images

As we’ve already discussed, the best stories contain internal and external conflicts for their protagonists. There needs to be synergy between these forces. In fact, perhaps we can even say that the best external conflicts map to what a character’s internal dilemma is (again, this idea of a character-driven plot: the action springing forth from the internal dilemma raging in the character his/herself).

Week 9: The Water Balloon – How much is enough? What’s too much?

Early attempts at scene building will often lead to each end of the information-spectrum, leaving you with moments in your narrative that aren’t doing enough work to earn their space or perhaps they’re chock full of so much cogent information, that you’re asking the reader to retain an impossible amount of details.

So how do we go about finding that proper amount of information? How do we decide what’s a robust, rich scene squirming with vibrant details versus one that isn’t yet functioning as an ideal unit in our story?

Week 10: Revision Strategies

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention some tactics for what comes next, not only in finishing the rough draft, but of what to expect and how to plan to finish subsequent revisions. I want you to leave our class feeling somewhat prepared for that day when you do complete the first draft, with at least a basic understanding of how to continue to work on your creative project. Revision will be the driving force that shapes your narrative.