

Characterization Workshop
Gencon 2006 - Mike Stackpole
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Mike and I share a common view: you learn to write by reading. If you don't read, you aren't going to be able to write or, at minimum, you are going to have a tough go because you'll be wasting time by constantly reinventing the wheel. Mike suggests that when you read a novel you keep a notebook nearby. Take a moment after each chapter to jot down notes about the plot and characters when you are done with each chapter. When you have finished reading the book, go back and look at your notes. You should be able to analyze how the author constructed the novel based on your notes. If you have a particular genre you want to write or an author whom you admire, this will help you deconstruct how they do what they do so you may learn.

This out of the way, Mike dove right in to his particular style of character development. He calls it blitzkrieg characterization. The idea is to introduce all of the major factors about a character in a single paragraph. Steven King and Mervyn Peake are two authors Mike gives as excellent examples of this kind of style. One of the way this is achieved is through opposition statements. This is where you give two bits of information about a character that agree and a third which is in opposition to the previous two. "He's the kind of guy you want at your back, a loyal friend, but watch out if he's been drinking." Here's another: "He was in church every sunday and was always impeccably dressed, but you didn't trust him with the collection plate."

Next, Mike gets on his soapbox about the concept of the "fatal flaw." For the most part, I agree with his views in this regard. Mike asserts that the essential problem with the "fatal flaw" method of characterization is that your character obsesses over his or her flaw so much that it takes over the story. If the character doesn't directly worry about their fatal flaw, then it is obvious to everyone else in the story that this is their flaw and, as a result, everyone AROUND that character is harping on the flaw. As a result, the flaw ends up consuming everything in your plot. Your plot becomes telescoped and it becomes difficult to maintain tension and reader interest. Instead, use a problem/resolution and change/growth model for your stories. This ensures that your characters are not wooden and that they can develop in unexpected ways without overpowering or conflicting with your plot.

To develop a character, you have to know who they are and where they come from. They need a background. Ask yourself:

- * What is this character's job?
- * Who is this character's family?
- * What kind of love life do they have?
- * What level of education do they have?
- * Are they a healthy individual and/or do they have any physical limitations?

Write a paragraph for each of these questions. Then, write a sentence to contradicts everything in the paragraph. Remember your blitzkrieg! Define the person. Define their life. Define the cracks in their life.

Do this for at least three characters and no more than five. These are your point of view characters -- your main characters. If you have at least three then you avoid the typical good versus evil dichotomy and move into a triad. If you have more than five it becomes unwieldy and difficult to write, not to mention hard for the reader to follow.

A story begins at a point of change in someone's life. They are one kind of person, do a certain job, have a specific relationship, and so on. Something happens and one or more of the stable things in a person's life changes. This is where your story must begin. At the transformation point. If you define the life goals for each character and the steps they must take to achieve those goals you have your basic plot. Then, ask yourself what STOPS the person from just going and DOING what they need to do to achieve their goal.

According to Mike, the best thing to do is to have your previously mentioned three to five characters have conflicting goals. If one of your characters achieves their goal, it will prevent one or more of your other characters from achieving theirs. Instant tension and conflict! This is good.

Finally, Mike says not to forget romance. Readers love a romance. It doesn't have to take over the story. You don't have to write a romance novel. However, every person has a love life. A sex life. If you ignore this, you ignore one of the major parts of an individual's personality and motivations. You can torture your characters (and your readers) by not allowing the romance to have a culmination. That's perfectly fine. You can have your characters care for one another but not express this to the object of their affections. There is also the rather typical marriage of obligation storyline -- the star crossed lovers -- which always works well. Mike also suggests what he terms, "the ex-factor." Throw your characters against their old lovers or spouses. Guy is married to new person but must go on quest with old lover or ex-wife for example. You get automatic tension and history and snark to play with.

One of the checks and balances Mike suggests as you write is to compare the level of drama to the level of character change. If you have ratcheted up the physical danger then the emotional danger should also go up. If you have a huge event then the characters should be changed by the event in a manner that is proportional to the drama.

Next, if a character is afraid of dogs and you mention this, then there should be a reason for giving the information. If someone finds a ring in their pocket on page two then by the end of the story someone should have used that ring for something critical to the plot. Character Joe is afraid of dogs. Why? He had some gruesome thing happen to him (or someone dear to him) via a dog. Set up an event in which a dog is central. Show the confrontation of that fear to be debilitating (in a manner similar to what some do with a fatal flaw). Do this in a way that is either funny in some manner ("Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?") or have it become a problem. Then make this character overcome their fear to resolve something or to save someone. Mike says it is particularly helpful if you have the fear cause your character to overcome some kind of separate character flaw.

Another way Mike suggests to help develop your characters while moving plot is to have them break a promise. What is the promise? Why was it made? When does it become unkeepable? How is it broken? What are the consequences?

Also, do not forget that your world is a character too. It has a feel and a look and a personality. It has weather and an ecosystem. There are social orders and economies and weapons and technology. Your characters will constantly be confronted with the world and will be interacting with every part of the world. It can present obstacles or be helpful or be benign. You can also use your world as a physical manifestation of internal conflicts -- just be careful not to over do.

Change occurs. Actions have consequences. Changes and actions do not have to be large but they must follow a cause and effect scale.

As a final note, Mike said not to be afraid to discover more layers of depth. Give your reader, and yourself, some credit and ADD things instead of taking them away. If you write yourself into a corner, ADD something. Make it MORE complicated. Don't dumb things down. Ask yourself, if I pull this character or plot thread out, how will it change the book? If you can pull out a character or plot thread and it doesn't mess up the entire thing then you haven't done enough. You haven't interwoven events sufficiently and you haven't thrown in enough complexity.

As I recall, Mike ran out of time. He usually does. This isn't because he doesn't cover everything he has planned, it's because he is efficient about his talks and opens things up for questions. What happens in his workshops is part lecture and part dialogue with the audience. He often gives examples from books he has written. In this particular weekend he discussed his X-Wing books and also the decision to kill off Chewbacca (which he pushed for much to many a fan's upset). Lots of interesting and useable information here. Hope some of you find it helpful.