

GETTING A PLOT TOGETHER

- Part 2: Putting the characters and plot together

by Sherry-Anne Jacobs

Characters are the pivot of a novel, and can make or break a story if they don't ring true to the reader. That doesn't mean true in an abstract or modern sense, but true to their fictional situation, whatever it might be, with believable motivation and reactions. In other words, the characters and plot/setting must suit. Which means the writer needs to think very carefully about what sort of person will be formed by those circumstances, and what sort of person will have the capacity to deal with a particular situation.

In most genres, the writer needs to create central characters a reader can relate to and 'attach' to ie care about. After all, the hero and heroine, or whoever else the main protagonists are, will be the ones who carry the tale, and if the readers don't care, why should they bother to read on? Then there are the villains and supporting cast who have to have their own agendas, and will need personalities which are different again. It would be a very boring story if all the characters were alike, wouldn't it?

And as some of the emotion/action will come from characters reacting to one another 'inside this mythical world/situation' then you have quite a job on your hands. What do they look like? What are their main personality traits? How will they all react to the situation and to each other?

In a few genres, it might be necessary to create central characters readers will hate and shiver about - horror, for instance. Literary fiction often uses very flawed characters, sometimes even

undefined stereotypes. If you haven't read Part 1 on plotting and genre expectations, you might like to read that as well as this article to gain a better understanding of how important genre needs are.

There's a lot to consider, isn't there?

Well, relax! It's the finished product that matters, not how you start writing a book. Some people need to have everything plotted, every character fully developed, before they can start the 'real' writing. Others only know how the story begins and then move into the adventure along with their characters. Others, myself included, do a rough plan and really work on the central characters and devise a few sub-plots, then start writing and see how it all turns out, expecting and getting some changes on the way. Whatever sort of writer you are, just make sure you see everything very clearly by the time you finish and are prepared to revise as necessary to create a truly coherent plot and characters so real they walk around in readers' memories ever after.

THE CORRECT WAY?

To do this, you have to find a method that suits you. Don't let anyone tell you there is a single 'correct' way. There definitely isn't. I have a friend who begins to plot by writing a 10-page essay on her main characters. I couldn't do that, but we're both published because our final result is good enough. Other writers develop lists of their characters' attributes and fill them in like questionnaires each time. When I write historical novels, I have to do some research into the period/setting, as well as working on character development before I can really get going, because the period influences both the characters and the plot. My coming series about the early history of the music hall (PRIDE OF LANCASHIRE, STAR OF THE NORTH, etc) stemmed

from my surfing the Internet and finding an interesting web page on early music halls - before they were called music halls.

HOW I WORK

Finally, only you can work out what you need in the genre you have chosen to write in. How you create your characters is entirely up to you, and indeed, it could be the subject of a whole how-to book. I'll end this short article by talking about how I work - then I advise you to go away and think how it will suit you to work.

I usually start with stereotype characters (eg small red-haired woman, fiery temper; handsome man with dark hair and tiny scar on one cheek) who will suit the plot I have vaguely in mind. Then I visualise each character, building him or her gradually into an individual. And during that first period of intense creativity, usually about a week, I sleep very badly and my dreams are peopled with images of these characters, emerging from the mists of my imagination.

In my 2000 Anna Jacobs novel, *LIKE NO OTHER**, I wanted a very strong woman living a hard life, so I made Rachel tall, gaunt and overworked, not pretty or girlish. Then I had to work out why she was overworked - which brought in her family situation. The setting was the eighteenth century, and the action took place in a stark valley on the edge of the moors. (I grew up near 'Wuthering Heights' country.) From that first stereotype, I developed Rachel into 'her own person'.

I then went on to paint a picture of a strong woman who was indeed 'like no other', a woman who triumphed (but only just!) over all that life could throw at her, who loved her husband and son fiercely, and who struggled desperately to keep her life together when others threatened her.

I gave her a temper which sometimes betrayed her into unsuitable behaviour (because no one is perfect) and a love of money (because she'd always been so short of it). And I put her at the mercy of life and the gentry, as poorer people always have been, but in ways which suited the mid-eighteenth century setting.

In the end, Rachel seemed very real to me and she became one of my very favourite characters ever. But she wasn't like that to start with. I had to invest a lot of work and time in developing her, and I also had to do a lot of research into the period, then apply it to Rachel and her situation. I can't stress too strongly that writing isn't just a question of sitting down and producing words. You also need to do a lot of visualisation and thinking things through - before, during and after your first draft.

That's how I bring my characters and plot together. You will need to work out a way to do it that suits your personal situation and your type of writing. In other words, you're not only learning to write, but you're trying to understand how you as a unique individual write best and cater for that. Goodness, there are so many variables to bring together! It's a fascinating process.

In the next plotting article I'll give you my third set of thoughts on getting a plot together.

*PS If you want to read the first chapter of **LIKE NO OTHER**, or any other of my published novels, please visit my web site at <http://www.annajacobs.com>