

Re-Audition Your Cast of Characters

By Virginia G. McMorrow

Heaving a sigh of relief, you shut off the computer, roll back your chair, and give a shout for sheer joy. You've finished your novel, revised it, let it sit there for a couple of weeks, maybe had a few knowledgeable folks read it, rewrote a few scenes, sharpened some dialogue, added another red herring, and printed out the final copy.

So, of course, you plan to send it out the very next day.

But you might consider keeping it around a little longer. Of the many other aspects of the novel that you should revisit (plot, motives, setting, etc.), don't forget characterization. Take one more look at your cast of characters to see whether they really work well, not only together but also within the overall plot.

The following points, using the initial letters in CAST OF CHARACTERS as an acronym, will help you focus on some key points when you conduct an objective audit of your protagonist as well as the supporting actors. To be effective and memorable, your characters should have, at the very least, the following traits.

Compelling. One definition of compelling is "urgently requiring attention." To me, that just means that your protagonist (and possibly some of the key minor characters) must be someone about which the reader has a driving need to know all there is to know regarding that person. Successful mystery series would quickly fall apart without the lure of a compelling detective and/or sidekick.

The bottom line is simple: If you don't care about your characters, particularly the protagonist and those close to her, then the reader won't care either. For these purposes, "caring about" goes beyond liking. For example, you might detest your villain (and you probably should), but you care enough about two things to sufficiently develop the villain's persona: (1) that person as a character and (2) your readers' satisfaction.

What makes a character compelling? A number of things, including:

- Depth of character (through which we must delve, layer by layer, to uncover the whole person with all her dark secrets, passions, and virtues)
- Honor and integrity (the need to see justice done, protect the weak and innocent, and make a difference)
- Courage (the determination to go on, especially in the face of true danger, whether physical or emotional)
- A sense of style (a personal flair that sets him apart, no matter how wacky)
- A sense of humor (the ability to laugh and put things in perspective no matter the dark shadows surrounding him)
- Faults (allowing the reader to relate to the protagonist as someone who is all-too-human, just like us)

Aware. Your private eye or cop or amateur sleuth must be aware not only of clues, but also nuances in behavior, language, and personal interaction. Further, she must be knowledgeable about world and community affairs, which often have a bearing on solving the crime. For example, recent thefts from the local pharmacy or hospital may be an indication of illegal drug sales. Though a less important trait for minor characters, an alert sidekick often helps the professional gather the puzzle pieces and click them into place.

Smart. The protagonist has to be a little smarter than the average bear – not necessarily brilliant, but decidedly intelligent, logical, and intuitive. All these traits also hold true, unfortunately, for the murderer – otherwise one wouldn't need your great detective to follow the bad guy's trail. While minor characters shouldn't be idiots either, when they lack the finer points of higher education, sometimes for the sake of humor, it can add to the plot or characterization. A character, particularly in a big-city setting, can be street-wise and diploma-less.

Tactful. When appropriate, tact and discretion are essential, particularly if the detective wants to keep and gain clients, garner respect in the community of both civilians and police, and illicit more information from a trusting source. But keep in mind that a lack of discretion may actually work to make the plot more tangled. For example, if a minor character lets slip an important clue to a prime suspect, that action may plunge the detective into deeper trouble or danger, thus heightening the suspense.

Original. We all read every book published by our favorite authors and adore their detectives and sidekicks, but duplicating someone else's work in your own novels won't do. This is not to say that certain character types are not meant for replication (e.g., the tough cop, the old lady snoop), but they should have your personal signature and interpretation to be legitimate. Don't use gimmicks. Instead, use character traits or background details that add to the character's authenticity.

Feisty. Mealy-mouthed detectives rarely solve the case, unless they're playing dumb. Naturally, there's a place for restraint, manners, and decorum, but when dealing with criminal elements, unsavory creatures, and rude individuals, your characters (both major and minor) have to stand up and be counted – without sliding into slapstick comedy. For example, what detective would back off from a tough old man who witnessed a murder when all she needs to do is prove she's just as tough? If you prefer an overly polite, self-contained detective, a feisty sidekick should sufficiently liven things up.

Credible. Despite the fact that we're writing fiction, characters must be believable. Unless you're writing science fiction or fantasy, there's a limit to how far you can stretch the reader's imagination – and tolerance. Consider a character's reaction to events. It has to fall within the persona you've created. Characters shouldn't change their personalities abruptly, without warning, unless there's a good reason for the shift.

For example, let's assume your detective or cop is a hard-ass and never shows outward signs of discomfort when viewing a corpse. That's ok, because if he does, then you know it's significant in some way. Maybe the dead person is someone he knew in a past life or reminds him of the first homicide he witnessed (and couldn't prevent). Or consider your old lady snoop's poker-playing best friend, who faints at the sight of blood from a paper cut. If she's alone and finds a bloodied, still-breathing person, she's likely to keep presence of mind to call 911 first, then faint, because she knows how important it is to save that person's life.

Human. Being human means having faults and a dark side. You know the old rule: Your villain can't be completely bad, and the heroine can't be completely good. They both have to possess positive and negative traits, a flaw or two that would make them just like the rest of the world, along with a saving grace. A dark secret is always useful to help the reader understand the character's motivation and pain. Minor characters must be human, too, not just stick figures without some amount of depth.

Athletic. Jumping over tall buildings in a single bound isn't part of the job description, but the ability to chase bad guys and protect oneself, within limits, are essential. While the private eye can, sooner or later, lose sight of the escaping suspect when said suspect bounded over the chain link fence, the private eye should be able to at least run a block or two. And again, without being overly dramatic, even old lady snoops and their best friends have to be in relatively decent shape (from their thrice-weekly walking groups).

Resourceful. Stuck in a darkened closet, hands and feet securely tied, the detective needs to find a way out of a jam, without always depending on the cavalry to charge in and effect a rescue. Creative solutions are also necessary for tricking deceitful witnesses, discovering dark secrets about friend and foe, and escaping from personal problems when they get too distracting. And beyond the protagonist, a resourceful sidekick is always an asset to the team.

Attached. The protagonist needs to exhibit loyalty to someone or something. She might be loyal to a friend, a spouse, a partner, a pet, a memory – or even just the need for justice. Family life may be shattered, friends may be scattered, but the lonely private eye these days needs some semblance of comfort and satisfaction. Even the murderer, who may be a sociopath, is attached to the driving force urging him to kill. Or perhaps it's what he was attached to, and subsequently lost, that motivates him to take revenge.

Curious. Without inquisitiveness, detectives rarely find the clues they need to solve the present puzzle, much less future ones. A detective is curious about the world at large, never knowing when that information may come in handy. And being curious, the sleuth learns how to interview a witness or suspect for maximum effectiveness, as one question leads to another. Wondering about the half-hidden door of the florist in which the body

was found might lead the detective (or other character) to a subterranean room in which bones are discovered.

Timely. It's important to portray your characters appropriately, given the era and circumstances. A Victorian sleuth speaks a lot differently than a modern-day cop in New York City. Use appropriate slang and conventions, unless the character is a legitimate throwback (e.g., an authentic hippie in the 21st century).

Engaging. Make the character intriguing, personable, and appealing. There must be something about her that grabs and holds you captive through 300 or so pages, some identifying trait that will make the reader pick up the next book in the series the minute it hits the bookstores. Maybe it's the love of accordion music or the cool way she handles her dysfunctional family or his taste for custom-tailored suits. Even key minor characters supporting the detective in her search for the murderer (or in her personal life) should keep you entertained.

Relentless. Let the character hit brick wall after brick wall. Don't make her job easy. Although she might falter (due to weariness, lack of faith, loss of confidence...as you, the author, might falter), she gets right back up, brushes off her jeans, and keeps on going. Driven by the hunt for truth and justice and the need to keep the innocent safe, she continues in the face of danger and peril and dead ends. (Not a bad trait, considering that we writers know it well.)

Minor characters need determination, too. For example, if the detective is plagued by a dark secret, her sidekick (or best friend) might drive her crazy until she confesses all and finds relief and comfort.

Skilled. Not only should the detective be skilled in the detecting arts (surveillance, tailing, interviewing, etc.), but he (or his sidekick) should also have a few odd proficiencies (e.g., winemaking, carpentry) to make it interesting and help him inadvertently solve the crime.

So before you send your manuscript to an agent or publisher, take just one more look. You might be surprised at what you find.

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