

Compelling Characters Transform Even the Feeblest Story Idea

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Now that you're back home sitting at your computer, the brainstorm you had while having your hair cut sounds pretty ridiculous. So ridiculous that you can't even discuss it with your writing group, never mind your agent. But the creative side of your brain keeps gnawing at the idea, which goes something like this: Your protagonist (AKA, amateur private eye), Sally, is the manicurist who discovers a dead customer buried under the dirty towels in the local beauty parlor.

Admit it, the idea does indeed sound ridiculous. But if you believe that you have a credible story line, with all the right suspects, motivations, red herrings, and clues, then you owe it to yourself to tackle the hard part. In my experience, the hard part isn't deciding on the murderer or what clues to leave where, but creating a convincing protagonist who will transform that semi-ridiculous idea into a page-turning, maybe even contest-winning, novel. Without a sympathetic character, the best motives, clues, and suspects are meaningless.

This developmental process is (to me, anyway) what writing's all about. To add substance to the skeletal frame of your story line, you should, of course, follow all the steps that the great writers and instructors teach. Know the minutiae of your character's background (in this case, the protagonist is a woman). For example, where Sally went to school (no college degree, but she did attend the Cosmetology Institute of Greater Metropolis), number of siblings (one sister, whom she hates), profession (manicurist), personality traits (has a great, unladylike laugh), and so forth.

But knowing all these facts in excruciating detail isn't enough to make a successful transition from stereotype (or shallow protagonist) to a genuine, compelling character that your reader wants, indeed needs, to know. You have to jump into that character's mind and become that person (in your imagination, of course) – if only for a little while.

The concept is very similar to what so many actors and actresses say about their performances. They have to understand their character so well that they become that person and react as that person would when faced with various scenarios. The writer's job is much the same as we create realistic, emotional scenes through an awareness of how the protagonist thinks and reacts to certain people, words, and situations. Remember, she has to be real to you before she can become real to your readers.

Let's assume, in this scenario, that the protagonist is Sally, the local manicurist. The following list explains what you can do, not only to develop Sally as the amateur sleuth, but while doing so, also add depth and complexity to the plot. As you'll see from the examples, both objectives are really connected.

First, Do Some Background Research

- Don't just gather data from the Internet, but go to your beauty salon and observe the resident manicurist (or, to the extent possible and practical, whatever trade or profession your character is involved in) at work. What are the tools of her trade, and does she wield them in her own eccentric manner? (Did the dead woman borrow and never return an expensive, inscribed nail file, which was, unfortunately, a gift to Sally from her beloved grandmother?) Find out what the manicurist talks about. Nail grooming? Local gossip? Personal love life? Movie stars? Does she talk or does she just nod and listen sympathetically? (Does Sally know pertinent gossip about the dead woman's love life that would scandalize the town? Or vice versa?)
- Sit on the train going to work or on a park bench on a Saturday afternoon and watch people – through Sally's eyes. Imagine the manicurist making character judgments by observing people's nails (or, lack of nails) and grooming. Maybe she's a palm reader, too, which gives her some extra cash on the side (and insights into her customers, especially the ones who criticized the dead woman) when she's cutting cuticles.

Next, Create a Network of Friends and Enemies

- Provide her with a family. Does Sally belong to an extended clan of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews? Is she an only child? A twin? How does she relate to the family? Is there a favorite or hated sibling? (Does her sister think Sally murdered the customer?) Are they all neighbors in a small town in Iowa or scattered around the country and/or the globe? Was Sally the brave one who moved away from the neighborhood (or the scared one who stayed behind)?
- Expand her social contacts within the story line. Who does she have lunch with? Who's her best friend? Who doesn't Sally like enough (that person may or may not be the murderer, or, ironically, it may turn out to be the person she likes and admires the most who tossed the body in the canvas cart of dirty linens)? Is her best friend the owner, who won't step outside the door without reading her daily horoscope? (Did the horoscope warn about the owner's "dirty laundry"?) Is Sally a polite busy-body who listens to everybody's gossip, then forms her own judgments? And are those judgments accurate?
- Give Sally a relationship (or, lack of one). Is the manicurist married? Dating the local police chief? Happy and content to be living with her goldfish? (Does her relationship with the owner of the local laundry help her find clues to the murderer's identity? Or was the dead woman her lover, who refused to go public with their gay relationship?)

Then, Understand What Makes Her Tick, and Why

- Describe Sally's religious beliefs (or lack of them). Maybe a priest or rabbi in her family or neighborhood is her confidante. (Maybe Sally used to be a nun who was unhappy and has since left the convent – yet still cares enough about her parishioners when she finds out the dead woman worked in the rectory and orphaned three little kids. Or maybe her best friend is a priest, who constantly tries to convince Sally, an

atheist, that God exists, an argument heightened when she finds the dead body in the laundry.)

- Give her a personality and show it. Is she kind? Sympathetic? Is Sally brusque or intolerant with stupid people? Was her childhood full of fun or does she have regrets and nightmares (somehow linked to the murder victim)? Does she laugh at silly jokes and make you genuinely think you're funny, even when the opposite is true? Does she visit the senior center on weekends to volunteer her time? Or read to little kids who are terminally ill because she lost a child or someone close to cancer? Is Sally an emotionally strong woman, but faints at the sight of blood? (Did she faint at the scene when she saw the slit throat and destroy crucial evidence, thus making the police think she's an accomplice?)
- What's Sally's pet peeve? What really, truly gets her blood boiling? Is Sally an environmentalist? Or maybe she doesn't care about the environment, and jumps all over people who do, but is devoted to the orphanage in her town. Does she hold grudges when people tick her off? (Did the dead customer say something to Sally in private in the back room or the parking lot?) Or is Sally mellow, letting everything, large and small, roll right off her back? Or is that cool, calm exterior only a front (because she's got some serious emotional issues and has been seeing a psychologist, who also happens to be the dead woman)?
- Is there something she wants to be or some goal she wants to achieve? What's holding her back? Family responsibilities? Money problems? Self-confidence? Alcoholic tendencies? (Did the dead woman laugh when Sally said she wanted to be an air force pilot?)

And Then, Describe her Status

- What's her financial standing? Does Sally have an inheritance in the bank that allows her to buy a new car every year? A new motorcycle? Maybe she lives from paycheck to paycheck and depends heavily on tips (and the dead woman was always cheap). Does she spend money freely on those she cares about, even though her bank account is practically nonexistent? (Or does she have a Swiss bank account that the murder victim accidentally discovered?) Who does she owe money to? Who owes her money? (Did the dead customer owe Sally any money? Or does Sally know that the dead woman owed money to the beauty parlor owner and refused to pay it back?)
- Is she well liked in the community because she's involved in charity affairs? (Or shunned because the dead woman had been spreading rumors that Sally poisoned her own mother for an inheritance?) Does the local mayor want her to run for election as his aide because of her integrity? (And is the dead woman the mayor's ex-wife, who threatened to expose his scandalous money skimming from the public budget?)

The list is endless, as are the possibilities, but the point is the same: Know your character – emotionally – inside and out. Just giving your private eye a diploma or a sister or a

dying mother won't do the trick. Imagine how she'll feel when she proudly hangs that diploma behind her manicurist station (in defiance of the owner's ridicule). Or slams the phone on her meddling older sister (who won't let Sally off the hook for a childhood grudge). Or cries at her mother's deathbed (knowing she might have saved her mother's life if she'd been at home to call the paramedics instead of playing tennis with her drug-addicted boyfriend). Knowing these personal reactions will not only deepen your character, but also, possibly, lead you to a different killer or take your story line along a very different path.

Injecting your own experiences and emotions, as well as witnessing interactions in your daily life, will help bring out the protagonist's depth of character – making Sally someone the reader wants to see again and again. Make that character evoke genuine responses in your readers – make them laugh, make them cry, make them afraid – most of all, make them want desperately to turn the page. By touching the reader in some way, even the most ridiculous plot line can seem amazingly credible – because a real flesh and blood character will be investigating the crime and injecting the story with a unique spirit.

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