

Creating Characters

By [Randy Ingermanson](#)

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About The Author:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 6000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

Part 1

If you want to write great fiction, then you need great characters. You can get away with a so-so setting and a plodding plot and a threadbare theme, if only your characters are great people that your readers want to spend time with.

And what makes a great character?

Lots of things. I could make a long list, but today I'll focus on one in particular.

A great character has a strong internal conflict.

OK, that's progress. And what makes a strong internal conflict?

Again, could be lots of things. Again, I'll focus on the one that the smart money bets on.

A strong internal conflict comes from a conflict in a character's core values.

We're starting to get somewhere. What, exactly is a "value?"

You can come up with all sorts of definitions for what a value is, but I have a working definition that serves me pretty well. A value is a motivating force for which the character can give no reason.

Let me give you an example from Star Wars. (The original Star Wars movie, perversely numbered as Episode 4.) We'll look at two core values of Han Solo.

Here's the backdrop. Late in the movie, the Death Star is approaching the rebel planet. Luke is getting ready to go into battle. Han Solo is loading up his ship with money so he can leave the rebel planet. Luke wants Han to stay and fight, but Han insists that he has to go pay off Jabba the Hutt. Luke calls him a coward and Han leaves in a huff.

If George Lucas broke into the movie right here and interviewed Han, it might go something like this:

George: "Han, why are you leaving your friends in danger like this?"

Han: "Because I need to go pay off Jabba the Hutt."

George: "Why do you need to pay off Jabba the Hutt?"

Han: "Because he's got bounty hunters all over the galaxy looking for me."

George: "And why do these bounty hunters motivate you to leave your friends when they're in crisis?"

Han: "Because if they find me, they're going to kill me, you ninny."

George: "And the problem with that is ...?"

Han: "I don't want to die."

George: "And the reason you don't want to die is ...?"

Han [exasperated]: "Because I don't want to die!"

George: "Han, you're not making sense. You don't want to die because you don't want to die?"

Han: "Right!"

George: "Aha! You value your life, then, right?"

Han: "Well, duh! Doesn't everybody?"

George: "No. Luke and all these rebels are going into battle right now against hopeless odds because they value freedom more than life."

Han: "I don't get that. Nothing is more important than life."

END OF INTERVIEW

See how that works? One of Han Solo's values is his life. He can't give a reason for it. He thinks it's obvious. He can't understand it when other people consider something else more important than their lives. That's what a value is -- something so "obviously important" that you can't give a reason for it.

But that's not the end of things. If Han Solo's only value was his own pitiful little skin, then he'd have flown off to pay Jabba the Hutt, leaving loopy little Luke to face the wrath of Daddy Vader.

That isn't what happened. In the climactic battle, Luke is bearing down on his target, but he's got Darth Vader on his tail, shooting at him. Luke's a sitting

duck. Vader is going to whack him before Luke can fire his torpedo. But then . . .

Out of nowhere, a ship appears, fires some shots, and sends Darth Vader's Tie fighter zinging off into the abyss and out of the movie. Luke has a free hand to shoot up the Death Star, which he does, brilliantly.

But who's in that cavalry ship? Surprise, surprise, it's Han Solo, who's come back to save lucky Lukey.

Now let's get George to cut the action and interview Han Solo once more:

George: "Han, you came back! Why'd you do that?"

Han: "I thought Luke might need a little help."

George: "But it was dangerous! You might have gotten killed."

Han: "Yeah, well . . . that's not as bad as some things that could happen."

George: "Don't tell me you've suddenly caught the Freedom Fever? What could be worse than dying?"

Han: "That bratty Luke called me the C-word."

George: "Help me out here. I've lost the script. What did he call you?"

Han [spluttering]: "A cow... A cow..."

George: "He called you a cow? Don't give me that bull!"

Han [with clenched teeth]: "He called me a cow...ard."

George: "So? You are a coward, aren't you? Running off to save your skin?"

Han [grabbing George by the collar and shoving him against the wall]: "Don't you ever call me a coward! Nobody calls Han Solo a coward and gets away with it!"

George [gasping]: "Easy, Han. Take a deep breath. And let me take one too. What's the problem here? There's no shame in being afraid."

Han: "Is too."

George: "Really, now? What's so horrible about being afraid?"

Han: "I don't mean being afraid. I mean when people think you're afraid."

George: "You'd better elaborate on that. Only an idiot isn't ever afraid."

Han: "Han Solo is never afraid."

George: "Han Solo is talking about himself in the third person. What's got into Han Solo?"

Han: "I don't tolerate people thinking that I'm afraid."

George: "What's this now? You don't want to BE afraid, or you don't want people to THINK you're afraid?"

Han: "What's the difference? You are who people think you are."

George: "So it's your reputation that was at stake here?"

Han: "Yes, obviously. If people thought I was a coward, I'd be ruined."

George: "Ruined? How so? Why do you care what other people think?"

Han: "Because I care what other people think. George, how can you be so stupid?"

George: "I don't care if you think I'm stupid. But I'm trying to understand what you think because it doesn't make sense."

Han: "Of course it makes sense! You are what other people think. That's so obvious, if you don't understand it, I can't explain it."

George: "You value your reputation, don't you?"

Han: "Duh! Doesn't everybody?"

George: "Do you value your reputation more than your life?"

Han [thinking long and hard]: "Gosh, that's a tough one, George, but I guess I do. I came back, didn't I?"

END OF INTERVIEW

And that's the key. Han Solo has TWO values here, not just one. He values his life. But he also values his reputation. And those two values are in conflict. That's part of what makes Han Solo interesting. It's part of what drives the story.

Obviously, in your story you can't conduct an on-the-nose kind of interview like George did with Han. You can't make your character TELL what they value. You've got to SHOW what they value. And that's not hard to do,

because the old saying is true: Actions speak louder than words.

We know that Han values his reputation more than his life because of his action -- he came back. And we knew far earlier in the movie that Han values his reputation, because we saw his swagger, heard the bravado in his words, saw the way he talked to Princess Leia. We knew Han was putting on a cowboy front. Nobody had to tell us.

You don't have to spell this kind of thing out for the reader. Your reader will absorb it unconsciously.

But you may need to spell it all out for one very important person -- yourself. Many writers do extensive character development before they ever write a word of the story. I know writers who interview their characters in order to get to know them better. To learn their values.

Do you hold long conversations with your characters in your head? Do you hear their voices when you wake up in the middle of the night? Do you interview your characters to probe their values?

Give it a try. See if it might work for you, by George.

Part 2

Last month I wrote a column about creating characters in which I talked about values. Values are the core principles of a character -- the axioms for which a character can give no reason because they're "obvious."

Values determine a character's abstract motivations and concrete goals. Values are important because they define, ultimately, what a character will and won't do.

When a character's values are in conflict, they force the character to make a choice.

That's a key to writing great fiction. It's easy to make a decision when you only value one thing in life. We all know people who only have one criterion for making decisions. It may be their quest for money. Their hunger for fame. Their theology. Their cat. Whatever.

People like that CAN be an interesting character, IF they have some powerful opponent. Then there'll be a nice external conflict and hopefully the Good Guy will win. It's a battle of Good versus Evil, and that's always interesting.

But it's so much MORE interesting when the Good Guy has conflicting values. Then there's an internal conflict too. It becomes a story of Good versus Good. It forces the character to confront his own values. And it forces you to think about YOUR values.

I'm thinking of the movie *Chariots of Fire*. It's a story of two British runners in the 1924 Olympics. Both of them want to win, and each has an interesting story. I'm going to focus here on only one of them, Eric Liddell, because a major part of his conflict is internal -- a clash of his values -- and both of those values are good.

Eric Liddell is a conservative Scottish Christian and he loves to run. In one of the strongest scenes in the movie, he's explaining to his sister why he likes to run, even though it seems like a frivolous activity. He says, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." So that's one of his values -- Eric runs for God.

But Eric also believes that a man shouldn't race on Sunday. He's a throwback to an earlier time when many Christians observed Sunday as a Christian

Sabbath. That's pretty uncommon these days, but it was more common in 1924. Whether you agree with Eric's theology or not, you can at least understand that Eric believes absolutely that he's doing God's will by not racing on Sunday.

The internal conflict comes for Eric when he learns that he'll have to race on Sunday if he wants to run in the Olympics. He comes in for a lot of pressure from the British Olympic committee, because he's the favorite to win the gold medal. It's a matter of patriotism for them. What's the big deal, Eric? Won't it glorify God if you run on Sunday? Other Christians do it. Why can't you?

But Eric can't and he won't. For him, running and winning while violating God's law would be worse than losing. Eric has two values in conflict, but they're not equally strong. And his stronger value wins out, even when the weaker value gets a powerful push from the British Olympic committee. Eric refuses to race.

Ultimately, the committee enters him in a different event that doesn't require him to run on Sunday. It's not his best event, but he wins the gold anyway.

You've got to admire a guy like Eric because he did what he thought was right. That's always an admirable thing.

At the SAME time, it's also valid to ask whether what Eric THOUGHT was right actually WAS right.

The movie came out in 1981, at an interesting point in my own life. See, I was raised in a pretty unusual church -- the Seventh Day Adventist church. Adventists observe the Sabbath about as strictly as Eric did, but they don't observe Sunday. They observe Saturday. If you get cornered by an Adventist on this subject, and if you're honest, you will eventually admit that they are "right." The only Sabbath ever mentioned in the Bible, Old Testament or New Testament, is Saturday.

So the Adventists are "right", but . . . are they RIGHT? Because even if you establish that Saturday is the Biblical Sabbath, you still have to prove that Christians are obligated to observe it.

That's an interesting theological discussion that may interest a few of you but probably would bore most of you. I'll skip it for now.

In any event, when the movie came out in 1981, it hit a special nerve for me, because I was in graduate school at UC Berkeley, and sometimes tests came up on Saturday. In Seventh Day Adventism, it's not OK to take a test on the Sabbath. For me, that meant having to ask for a special exam on a different day. A

major hassle for everybody involved.

So Adventists really liked that movie. When I watched it, I admired Eric for doing what he thought was right. But I also had some qualms about that. Sure, it's a good thing to do what you believe to be right. But what if you what you think is "right" really isn't? What if you're just laying an extra load on yourself needlessly?

In the end, I decided that Seventh Day Adventists had it wrong. They're nice folks (except possibly when they corner you to convince you that you're wrong.) But I don't believe their theology is right.

Looking back on it now, I can see that the movie was one of the things that influenced me to ask hard questions. I could respect Eric Liddell for standing up for what he thought was right. But I also "knew" that he had things wrong. And that led me to consider the possibility that I might have them wrong too.

By the way, I don't want to suggest that you should get your theology (or philosophy or math or history) from the movies. There are a lot better resources for learning theology or philosophy or math or history.

But the power of a great story is that it can jolt you a bit. It can make you think about your own values in a new way -- from inside the skin of a character who isn't you. It can make you rethink your values.

You may end up confirming your values. You may end up changing them. But in the end, you'll know your own values better. They'll be more deeply a part of you. You will be more truly yourself.

All that from just a story! Don't ever let anyone put you down for "just telling stories." Story is one of the most powerful forces in any civilization. Part of the reason story is powerful is that story forces characters to examine their values.

In doing so, it forces us to examine our values too.

Part 3

In February and March, we talked about how values define a character. I would say that values are fundamental to a character, but they're not the only aspect to consider.

Two crucial character components are built directly on top of values: "motivation" and "goals".

These are fuzzy words, and people use them in various ways. I don't have time to waste arguing about who's using them right and who's using them wrong. I really don't care.

I'll settle for telling you how I use them. Whether you agree with my definitions or not, at least we'll be clear and you can read the rest of this article without getting confused.

When I use the word "motivation," I mean, "the abstract thing that the character wants."

When I use the word "goal," I mean, "the concrete thing that the character wants."

Here's the usual example I give. When you ask Miss America what she wants to achieve in life, she always says that she wants "World Peace." Whatever that is.

There's the problem. What do you mean by "World Peace?" How would you know if you had it? How would you go about getting it? What's the roadmap to "World Peace?"

"World Peace" is abstract. It's not easy to picture. It may even be unattainable -- nobody knows. You can think of plenty of similar examples: "Justice," or "Fame," or "Marrying the Perfect Guy."

These are slippery concepts and they may motivate your character, but they won't grab your reader's heart.

What's going to get your reader's pulse revving is a character who wants something concrete -- something specific and visualizable and attainable.

Let's look at some possible concrete goals that might work for novels.

For the politician character who wants the abstract motivation "World Peace," a reasonable goal might be "Israel and Palestine signing my ceasefire agreement."

For the lawyer character who wants the abstract motivation "Justice," a goal might be, "Getting the death penalty of my innocent client commuted before they gas him."

For the ambitious singer character who wants "Fame," a plausible goal is, "Getting onto American Idol."

For the breathless babe in a romance novel who wants "The Perfect Guy," the goal might be, "Marrying Ashley Wilkes before he marries that idiot Melanie."

Let's be clear about one thing. In many cases, achieving the goal may not actually lead to achieving the motivation.

That Mideast ceasefire agreement might well be violated within hours of signing, leaving World Peace as far away as ever.

The innocent client on Death Row might wind up with life/no-parole, leaving Justice still a mirage.

The appearance on American Idol might be nasty, brutish, and short, leaving our singer still unfamous.

Ashley might be a lot less of a prize than Rhett, leaving dear Scarlett to wonder if the Perfect Guy exists.

None of those caveats are important. The point is that your character BELIEVES that reaching the goal will be a giant leap forward in achieving the underlying motivation.

In fact, your story will never get rolling without a goal for your protagonist. Your character can have the best motivation imaginable, but none of that means dirt until that motivation is condensed down to a goal. Even if the goal is stupid or illogical, that doesn't matter.

People need goals in order to be focused. Without a goal, your character wallows in a sea of indecision. With a goal, your character has an action plan.

Let's look at an example from Frederick Forsyth's novel THE DAY OF THE JACKAL, published back in the 1960s. The backdrop is as follows. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, French nationalists were desperate to restore France to

greatness. (The value is "French greatness." The motivation is "Restore France to greatness.")

These folks were extremely angry that Charles de Gaulle had given up Algeria and they believed that France could never be great again as long as de Gaulle remained alive and his government in power. So they set a goal to kill Charles de Gaulle.

A goal like that is very concrete and specific and measurable. Either they kill de Gaulle or they don't. (Whether that would restore France to greatness is utterly beside the point. All that matters is that they believed it would.)

But there's more, because these nationalists are not the protagonists of the book. The protagonist is a man known as "the Jackal," a professional assassin. The Frenchmen hire the Jackal to kill de Gaulle.

So the Jackal's goal is identical to that of the Frenchmen. But his motivation is entirely different. The Jackal doesn't care two cents whether de Gaulle is alive or dead. The Jackal's motivation is money. He'd like to retire and live in comfort for the rest of his life. He tells the Frenchmen to come up with half a million bucks and he'll kill de Gaulle. They strike a deal, and the story is launched.

Same goal. Different motivation. (And entirely different values. The Jackal values his own comfort and safety. As an Englishman who doesn't care about politics, he places no value on French national greatness.)

As a novelist, you no doubt value excellence in your craft. Because of that, you are almost certainly motivated to "write a great story." But you'll never achieve that unless make your goal to give each character a powerful and compelling goal.

Tragically, even if you reach your goal, you may not achieve the motivation behind it. But it's a start.

Part 4

In the last few months, we talked about how values, motivations, and goals define a character in various ways.

This month, I'd like to talk about one of the most important points to keep in mind while writing any character, **ESPECIALLY** your villain. If you fail to remember this point, your character runs the risk of being a "cardboard character."

Here is the point in a nutshell: "Every character believes he or she is the hero of the story."

When I speak on how to write fiction, I tell my students that "I can prove that I'm the center of the universe."

Then I spin around in one spot and . . . the entire universe revolves around ME.

Oddly enough, however, when YOU spin around in one spot, you reach the absurd conclusion that the universe revolves around YOU.

Each of your characters believes the universe revolves around them--that the novel they are inside is their story.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE is the story of Lizzie Bennett. The entire story focuses on her.

But Mr. Darcy doesn't know that. He thinks it's HIS story. He can't imagine why Lizzie doesn't understand what a noble sacrifice he's making in offering marriage to someone so inferior in social station.

And that pesky Mr. Collins insists on thinking that it's HIS story. He's a hero, after all, coming to choose a marriage partner from the very girls who will be turned out of their estate because he stands to inherit their home when their father dies. By marrying one of the Bennett girls, he'll do the family an everlasting service, and how **COULD** they be so dull as to not see that???

Mrs. Bennett, naturally, sees herself as the center of this story. She's the one who must ensure the futures of her daughters by making sure they marry well, since they have not a penny of their own. She is tireless in pursuit of suitable suitors, despite the unbearable agony it creates for her "nerves."

As for Mr. Wickham, he thinks he's the hero of the story. He's been

treated ill by Darcy, for no good reason. Wickham is just a good red-blooded boy who likes to have a bit of fun. He has thousands of friends who see his good points. Darcy is just a wretched stick in the mud who stops at nothing to force Wickham into poverty.

The list goes on and on.

Bratty sister Lydia, OF COURSE, knows that she's the very heart and soul of the story, since it's all about her.

Mr. Bingley, if he thinks about it at all, must surely be aware that this story is his and his alone--after all, it all starts when he takes a lease on Netherfield Hall.

Lady Catherine knows that this is her story--she's the highest ranking person in the tale; her daughter has been promised to Darcy since infancy; only a conniving and ambitious woman like Elizabeth Bennett would stand in the way of The Way Things Must Be.

Take any character in the story. Each one's behavior springs from his or her belief that "This is MY story."

Unfortunately, too many stories are teeming with cardboard characters.

The definition of a cardboard character is "a character whose behavior is chosen by the author solely to make some other character's story work out in a certain way."

A cardboard villain is bad solely to screw up the life of the hero.

A cardboard clown is goofy solely to add humor to the hero's story.

A cardboard love interest is a man designed to be just right for the heroine.

Whenever you have a cardboard character, the odds are Xtremely high that you put them in to somebody else's story.

The solution is pretty simple. Ask that cardboard character what his or her story OWN story is.

Ask your cardboard villain to explain why he's the good guy and the alleged "hero" is secretly a cad. Then make sure that every action of your villain makes sense according to his measure of the world.

Ask your cardboard clown what's his deepest sorrow. Then write his every scene with full knowledge of how his stupid jokes are a mask for his secret

pain.

Ask your cardboard love interest why in the world he should be interested in your heroine, and what's wrong with her from his point of view. Then write his scenes so he's pursuing the girl of his dreams--who may or may not be your heroine.

A novel is a complex braid of a number of different characters, EACH of whom believes he or she is the center of the universe you've created.

That's why Jane Austen's characters breathe. That's why cardboard characters don't.

Part 5

In the last few months, we talked about how values, motivations, and goals define a character, and the one thing you must understand in order to write three-dimensional characters. This month we're going to talk about the process of creating characters.

This column is prompted by an email I received today from one of this e-zine's subscribers, asking about how exactly you develop characters.

Every writer is different, of course, so I can't give a set of rules that will guarantee you'll come out with interesting characters. Writing is not paint by numbers. But I can give you some general guidelines.

Personally, I think characters are completely tied up with plot. I develop my characters right alongside my storyline.

For starters, every one of my main characters will have some sort of goal that motivates them to action. In my view, if your character doesn't WANT something, then you've got a boring character that nobody is going to want to read about. Conversely, if you've got a character who really, desperately WANTS something, then that's an interesting character.

Some examples:

Can a machine be an interesting character? Yes . . . if that machine is an android who wants very badly to kill a woman named Sarah Connor before she has a son named John who will save the world from androids. That's the storyline for the robot played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in TERMINATOR.

Can a six-year-old boy be an interesting character? Yes . . . if that boy wants to get away from his sadistic older brother and go to Battle School where he has a chance to play war games with other kids and possibly become the hero who will save the earth from the invading alien "Buggers." That's the storyline for Ender Wiggin in ENDER'S GAME.

Can a witless middle-aged mother of five girls be an interesting character? Yes . . . if she's desperate to marry off those daughters before her husband dies, leaving them all penniless. That's the storyline of Mrs. Bennett, mother of Lizzie Bennett in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. (And it hardly matters that Papa Bennett is healthy as a horse. For Mama Bennett, the important thing is that

he COULD die. Hence, the need for rich husbands, and plenty of them.)

The fact is that most of us, most of the time, play by the rules and live pretty dull lives. But when a person is desperate, when their back is to the wall, when they'll do ANYTHING to get what they want or need, that's when the rules all go out the window. That's when you have a story.

Fiction is driven by people who desperately want something and will do whatever it takes to get it. So that's the first principle of creating characters.

But the second principle is that everybody is different. We have different skills, different talents, different limitations. Ender Wiggin, at six years old, can't possibly travel through time like Arnie, stealing guns, improvising explosions, and shooting up the cops. But Ender is just as lethal, in his own way, on his own turf, because Ender is a brilliant strategist and also knows how to organize teams to get the best out of his underlings.

Mrs. Bennett can't run away from her problems to go to Battle School, but she has plenty of other talents. Such as talking. And, um, talking. And (the truth comes out at last) talking. The woman is a chatterbox and a half, and all that talking only makes things worse for her poor daughters, who desperately don't need Mama messing up their chances at marriage by being a dork in public. Mrs. Bennett's role in life is to demolish her daughters' chances by trying way too hard.

Arnie's robot in TERMINATOR has little talent for small talk of the type Mrs. Bennett excels at. He has a few good lines, but his strength is physical. The guy is well-nigh unstoppable. Shoot him, stab him, burn him -- he just keeps going like the Energizer Bunny From Hell.

Plot comes when you have different characters, each of whom desperately wants something -- and those "somethings" are in conflict. Give each of these characters different skills and your story writes itself. In theory, anyway.

In practice, of course, your characters don't always spring to life in full glory. Sometimes, you've got one character and a weak plot and that's it. Then what do you do?

What you do is ask what sort of character would cause the most grief for the character you've got. That often suggests a new character with particular strengths. Now give that new character a burning desire that's totally at odds with your first character.

Now you've got two strong characters and a strong plot. Now you've got a story.

So in creating your novel, your characters define your plot, and your plot defines your characters. If you iterate between those a few times, you'll end up with several strong characters, and a dynamite plot.

The End

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