

Introduce Your Main Character

“You have to walk carefully in the beginning of love; the running across fields into your lover’s arms can only come later when you’re sure they won’t laugh if you trip.”

—Jonathan Carroll

The next most important thing your opening pages have to do is create the proper foundation for the rest of the novel. Your beginning is all about setup.

We’ll be looking at everything from revealing the story’s backdrop to bringing on the villain, starting the hero’s inner journey, writing your first line, and a ton of stuff in between.

The first component we’ll look at is how to bring your main character onstage the first time.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

How do you get to know someone? By spending time with her, of course. It’s the reason we date or go through courtship with someone: We like what we’ve seen so far, but we want to visit with that person more to see additional angles and learn more of the other person’s layers. What we find may surprise us, for good or ill. What we thought we’d seen of this person at the outset may not be true at all.

In life, sometimes we get the wrong idea about people because of how we meet them. For instance, let’s say the first time we meet a woman she’s working in the church nursery and coming a little unglued because there are nine pooppy babies and only six clean diapers. Then we come to find out later that this woman is the chair of the philosophy department at the local university, and she’s going to be on television next week debating creation/evolution with a scholar from Scotland. It will take a little head-shaking for us to get our minds around who this person is professionally.

It works the same way in fiction. We come to know a novel’s characters by spending time with them. We get first impressions of them from what we’ve seen on the page in the beginning. If the writer has done his job right, what we learn of them later serves to confirm and expand upon what we saw at first.

If the character we see later doesn’t match what we saw in his first

appearance, sometimes no amount of brain jiggling will allow us to make the shift. We'll say, "Hey, that's not who this person is. Why'd you make me think he was going to be X if he's really Y?" Readers don't always take kindly to story people acting out of character.

How you bring any of your characters onstage the first time will stay with the reader for the duration of the novel, so do it with forethought.

The single most important entrance in your book is the one in which your protagonist first takes the stage. It's amazing to me how many authors give nearly no thought to what impression they're giving readers by how they introduce their main character. We're going to learn how to do it right.

WHO IS THIS PERSON?

I'm of the opinion that all novelists are either plot-first writers or character-first writers. That is, either story ideas come to you first or characters come to mind first, begging to leap onto the page. If you're a character-first novelist, you're probably right with me when I say you've got to do your character creation work. (On the other hand, I've found that many character-firsters don't actually do their character homework, relying instead on instinct. Tsk-tsk, I say.)

If you're a plot-first novelist, you may be tempted to skip this whole section. Buy a book on character creation? Pshaw. Characters—who needs 'em? So long as I've got the hero and the girl and the sidekick and the villain, I'm golden. Oh, and José the Mexican, Gomer the grease monkey, and Smythe the uppity aristocrat. And a whole host of other stereotypes standing by ready to step onstage.

Ahem. Well, allow me to suggest that stereotypes do not good characters make. And novels with stereotypical characters—or characters who have virtually no differentiation from one another at all—are not typically published. You must figure out who your characters are.

Here's an area where the screenwriter actually gets to take a lazy path whereas the novelist has to take the way of discipline. A screenwriter can write stereotypes, but then it's up to the director, the casting director, and the actors to give depth to otherwise flat characters. The screenwriter might write a generic fop character and get away with it, because the actor—like Jeremy Piven's Versace salesman in *Rush Hour 2* or Chris Tucker's Ruby Rhod in *The Fifth Element*—will make him something so much more than just a stereotype.

But the novelist doesn't have the luxury of knowing that a gifted actor will come along and elevate the stereotype to something better fleshed out. The novelist has words on a page, and that's it. That's where the

magic must happen.

So ... no generic characters for you. No flat stereotypes. No characters who differ from one another only in terms of goals, moods, roles, and agendas.

I say all this because, if you're going to bring your characters on in ways that perfectly typify them and correctly establish reader expectations, which you are, you have to know who these story people are. How can you correctly portray a character's core characteristic if you don't know what that core characteristic is? (Hint: It's not "He wants to pick up chicks" or "She's mean.")

One of the vital components of your first fifty pages—nay, of your entire novel—is to depict your characters as believable individuals who are differentiated from every other character in the book. Do your character creation homework, and you'll be able to expertly craft an excellent introductory scene for each one.

PROLOGUE OR CHAPTER ONE?

We discuss prologues and first pages in depth in future chapters, but I need to talk about them a bit here.

How will you begin your novel? Think about this: How do you envision your page 1? Do you feel your story should begin with the main character herself, or were you thinking of an opening that would be more of an action set piece that established the villain and intrigued the reader?

The reason I ask is that it will determine how you introduce your main character. If your novel is going to begin with the hero onstage, that opening scene also has to engage the reader with something interesting happening. It's good to begin building reader connection with your hero by showing her stooping to help a lost kitten, but that's probably not going to hook your reader. So now you've got to have her stoop to help the kitten while also staving off an alien invasion.

Okay, not really. But the point is that a novel that begins with the hero on the screen has to do double duty. It's got to both hook the reader and typify the protagonist. Some stories can't bear that kind of onus, and some authors feel if they did they'd be artificially thrusting the hero into action she wouldn't really be doing. In those cases, it's better to write a prologue that features other characters, and then you can bring the hero onstage in chapter one.

An example of a movie that begins with the hero onscreen doing something interesting would be any James Bond movie. Through the action of that opening sequence, we see a bit of who this guy is and what

he's capable of. Those scenes also serve to engage the reader through action. So it is possible to do both at once. An example of a movie that begins with a prologue and then introduces the hero later would be *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (the Disney animated film), which begins with the destruction of Atlantis and only later introduces the hero, Milo Thatch.

If you decide to begin your novel with the protagonist onstage, keep in mind that you need to craft his introduction in a way that also engages reader interest. If you're going to begin with a prologue featuring other characters, your hero's introductory scene can be a bit more leisurely, and you can concentrate on making her likable and building reader connection. The kitten may safely be swooped.

CAPTURING YOUR HERO'S ESSENCE

Whether you introduce your protagonist on page 1 or after a prologue, most of the tasks are the same. Your objective for your hero's introduction has a number of parts, but the first is to convey to the reader who this person is at his core. We'll certainly learn much more about this character as the story goes on, but first impressions are vital.

Who is your hero at her core? You know this now because you've done your character homework. You know what makes her tick. You know what's heroic or likable about her. You know what her issues are. You know her temperament. Now's the time to dress that up and send it out to meet the press.

Let's say your hero is a noble but depressed man who has lost his family and now wants nothing to do with anyone else ... or does he? He thinks he just wants to be left alone to die, and he definitely doesn't want to be in a position to protect any other helpless people, because if he were any good at that, he wouldn't have lost his own family, right?

How would you illustrate that in a scene?

We already know we can't just say, "Jim was depressed because he lost his family tragically and now he wanted to be left alone," because that would be *telling*, which would get your book rejected by publishers. So how would you do it in a *showing* way?

Come on, work that part of your frontal lobe dedicated to good fiction. What scene could you create that would reveal this about such a character?

The process we're working on is twofold: 1) isolate the primary characteristic, and 2) depict that characteristic in a scene. And, obviously, the prerequisite for this is to identify your main character's primary characteristic. So what is it for your protagonist?

What if your hero were a woman so out of touch with her feminin-

ity that she fits in more with the guys than the girls, including the more negative aspects of traditional masculinity like a fierce independence that defies protocol and authority?

As you think about how to do this, you're necessarily factoring in elements we haven't gone over yet, like genre and setting and era. That's what I mean by how we could have talked about these components in any order. For now, don't let those other aspects of the story intrude. Think only of your hero's essence and how that might be illustrated in a scene. You can think later about how to plant that in your particular story world.

That implantation is actually easy once you have this part figured out. It's much harder to look at your story world and the mandates it puts on you and only then try to come up with a character's core and how to illustrate it. In writing fiction, it's almost always best to go from the theoretical to the practical rather than the other way around.

Take some time right now to figure out your hero's essential characteristic. Then take another few minutes to brainstorm four or five ways that characteristic could come out in a scene. You don't have to decide on one yet. Indeed, there are a number of other elements to consider before locking down that introductory scene. But this task—revealing her core in a scene—is the main part.

CAN'T YOU JUST PICTURE IT?

If your hero were to have his portrait made, how would he want to appear? I'm not talking about modern portraits where all you get to choose from is the black backdrop, the white backdrop, or the forest backdrop with the fencepost prop. I'm talking about old-school portraits, like those paintings done in the Renaissance, in which a person's portrait included elements that conveyed much about his passions, history, and life.



Elizabeth I of England, the Armada Portrait,
Woburn Abbey (George Gower, ca 1588)

Here's one of Queen Elizabeth I. She's arrayed in an impressive, queenly dress, and her hair's been done up for the painting. All well and good. But notice the other elements. She's got her hand on a globe. What could that mean? Something about an interest in points beyond England, certainly. Indeed, what landmass is that? Terra incognita, perhaps.

Her crown sits on a pedestal beside her. Why? Because she doesn't like to mess up her hair? Or because her personality is to set aside her station and just be Lizzie? I don't know, but it's intriguing. And out the windows over her shoulder ... wow. Well, she's big on navies, it seems. But what is it saying? Maybe it's a before-and-after story. In the beginning, she sent out her mighty navy on a global quest under a hopeful sun. But then: storms. Wrack and ruin. Did she send them to their doom? Or is this depicting her country's conquest on the high seas? No clue.

Isn't that much more interesting than just a straight-on shot conveying only her likeness?

Now we're going to paint a portrait of your main character.

If your protagonist knew she was going to have her portrait painted in the style we've seen here, what would she have in the painting? What would she be wearing? Where would she be sitting? Would she be sitting at all? What would she have her hand on? What would be out the windows? What would be on the table next to her?

This is going back to the core characteristic, but it's expanding on it. When you know who your hero is in his essence, you can figure out ways to reveal it.

Do this for your protagonist. How would he want to be depicted in

such a portrait? What elements would need to be in the image to give a snapshot of his character?

Then take the exercise a step further: Create a little movie scene that captures your hero in her element. For this, don't worry about your book's genre or setting or anything else. If she could be doing anything at all, in any time in world history (or in any otherworldly future or dimension), what would it be? This is the place to ask, "If she could drive the ultimate car, what would it be?"—even if your character will live in a time when there are no cars. Go a little crazy as you search for the best possible fit for your character.

The idea is to identify for yourself what he's really like. If this character were transported to the Twilight Zone and allowed to gravitate to the ultimate-for-him activity, what would it be?

Would he be lazing by the pool sipping a cold drink with a little umbrella in it—while dozens of rescued orphans had fun in the pool? Would she be floating in space repairing a battlecruiser in the middle of a war with the Zudokons? Would he be living high above the forest in the bole of a tree where he spends his days writing love sonnets?

What would she be doing? With whom would he be? What would she be wearing? What would he be talking or thinking about? Most important of all: Why would this be what the character chose? How is this the ultimate expression or revelation of the person's core?

When you've got this down, you're ready to bring your hero onstage for the first time.

If you're a plot-first novelist, you may be wondering why I'm "wasting" your time making you think about character stuff, but I assure you this work will pay dividends when you begin writing your novel.

Doing this work gives you a handle on who your hero really is. When she gets into a tight spot and you're not sure what she would do, come back to this little scene simulation and read it again. It will reconnect you with your character's core, and that will give you a clue on how she would respond in that situation.

Incidentally, there's much more to character creation than just this. In *Plot Versus Character*, this idealized self-portrait scene exercise is the final bit of work we do to be sure we know our character. So you'd do this plus a lot more before this. But if you're in a hurry to write or you're not yet convinced that character homework is required or if you've already done that work, this will at least help you as you begin to write your book.

UPON THIS, ALL DEPENDS

A great character introduction is essential to the success of your novel. It's on the short list of must-haves for any great work of fiction.

I mentioned Milo Thatch earlier (*Atlantis*). When we first see him, he's giving a scholarly presentation to the board of directors of the university. He's laying out his theory of where he believes Atlantis may be discovered. He's got maps and relics and illuminated manuscripts. He's enthusiastic and confident, despite his youth.

He's also not really talking to the board of directors. The lights come on, and we realize he's been talking to mannequins and skeletons in a mock audience. A call comes down for him—not to come make his presentation for real but to bang on the pipes of the boiler because it's not producing heat.

It's a terrific reveal that shows us both what he dreams of becoming and what he really is. We're instantly connected to him because he's got passion and intelligence, but he's underappreciated and kept from achieving his dreams. We want him to succeed—all because of a wonderful character introduction.

Think of the great introductions of Cinderella, Indiana Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*), R.J. (*Over the Hedge*), Mulan, Gru (*Despicable Me*), Harry Potter, and Captain Jack Sparrow. Study these, and then decide how to craft the perfect way to bring your main character onstage the first time.

INTRODUCING SECONDARY CHARACTERS

It's not only your hero who has to have a great intro. There are a handful of others whose entrance you should give thought to: your villain, your romantic interest, and any other major characters in the book.

Han Solo isn't the protagonist of *Star Wars*, but who can forget the "Sorry about the mess" intro he has in the Mos Eisley Cantina? Jon Lovitz has a knack for creating wonderful minor characters, as evidenced by his brief but brilliant roles in *The Wedding Singer*, *Three Amigos*, and more. Actually, the writers created those characters. That's your job.

In *Sneakers*, Liz (played by Mary McDonnell) is the romantic interest. The first time we meet her, she's in an elite conservatory school working with a gifted young pianist. Everything about her surroundings, job, dress, and demeanor bespeak class—quite a contrast to the ratty blue jeans and, well, sneakers of her erstwhile boyfriend.

The first time we meet Cal (Billy Zane's character in *Titanic*), who becomes the antagonist, he shows himself to be an arrogant, pompous aristocrat who treats servants as property and keeps his fiancée on a

short leash. We dislike him within the first thirty seconds he's onscreen. That's a great character introduction.

Your secondary characters don't need as thorough an introduction as your protagonist, but they do merit careful thought for how you're going to bring them onstage the first time.

REMEMBER THE IMPORTANCE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS

How will you introduce your main character? If you're starting the book with your protagonist onstage, you'll need to engage with action in addition to the other things we've talked about in this chapter. Not only will you need to reveal who your hero is at his core and how that is expressed in your specific story, you'll also need to package it in a scene that is interesting independent of anything you're doing with the main character.

So how will you do it? What's your hero's essential ingredient? We'll talk next about the other active ingredients that go into your character introduction. But by now you should be beginning to have some ideas not only for what needs to be done in that introduction but about how you might pull it off.

Think of your character introductions as short stories, little standalone short films created for the purpose of presenting your main characters to your reader. They will serve not only as introduction but as résumé and business card, brief snapshots conveying the essence of who these people are.

Most of the novelists I've worked with over the years do not naturally think to construct introductory short stories like this. They just want to get going with the main story, and they give almost no thought to how the reader will encounter the hero. But doing so with care is essential to get the protagonist "set" in the reader's mind. Watch some movies and see how the main characters are introduced. Then sit down and write a short story to introduce your hero.

Remember to show what is likable about your protagonist. That's where chapters four and five overlap—you engage your reader by introducing your hero in a way that shows what's heroic or sympathetic about her. Make us care about her.

First impressions are so powerful, especially in fiction. They shape every expectation we have about what this person is going to be like in the future. In a sense, they are deterministic of the *future*. In the character's introduction is the seed of the whole story. We see, in embryonic form, who he is, what makes him heroic, and where he is going.