

Character Traits

For four or five weeks, I was stuck in place working on a new book. I'd written about 50,000 words, so I was well into the novel, but I could not seem to come up with how the remainder of the story should proceed. I had a good idea for the end of the book, where I wanted it to land, but navigating how to get there was a problem for me.

There are many ways of writing oneself out of a hole like this. I could start with the plot. What do I want to occur when? But that approach only works if I already have a reasonable idea of what I want to happen, and although I had some thoughts, they were far from clear. Another tactic might be to think about the setting. What is going on in my characters' environment that could dictate the next steps in the story? I researched the circumstances of the book's particular time (mid-1800s), but that information yielded little help. Or I could start with the end and write backward, so to speak. But that is not how I write. I like to move forward chronologically, the way our lives proceed.

So I came back to what matters most to me. In the end, my stories always come back to my characters. If I know them well enough, they will tell me what they will do. But this time, they weren't telling me anything. Not yet. I needed to understand better the four or five important people in the book. That didn't mean I did not need to consider my vague ideas about plot or think about the setting. But knowing my characters was the essential next step.

Who are these people? What drives them? What holds them back? If I truly know these things, then I will know their actions. I put together a list of questions to think about for each of the main characters. Some of these questions are borrowed from other sources and some (mostly those related to the character's psychological makeup) are my own. Admittedly this is a long, detailed list and it will take some time to fill out, but I think it is necessary.

Here is that list:

1. Age (DOB)
2. Age at each parent's death?
3. How did parents treat them?
4. Did they have a happy childhood? Why/why not?
5. Physical appearance (ht, wt, hair, face, smile, build, habitual expression, speech, prominent physical characteristic)
6. Education and work
7. And how old is he or she mentally?
8. Personality, prominent personality trait – What word or phrase sums them up?
9. What scares them the most?
10. What are their deepest secrets?

11. What are they ashamed of?
12. How do they handle conflict/anger?
13. How do they handle anxiety?
14. What or who is getting in the way of their goals and dreams?
15. Past/present relationships? How do they affect him or her?
16. Interests – Music, religion, love, money, politics?
17. What do they care about? What are they obsessed with?
18. What is their important flaw or misconception?
19. How do they change by the end (their arc)?
20. What is the best thing that ever happened to them? The worst?
21. Most embarrassing thing that ever happened to them?
22. What does the character most want out of life?
23. What is stopping them from getting it?
24. Once they do get it, how will they react if it is taken away?
25. What are the protagonist's strengths, fears, and insecurities?
26. What are their biggest challenges?
27. Who is their nemesis, and how can they battle him or her?
28. How high are the stakes of their journey?
29. What catastrophe will occur if they fail?
30. What deep-seated lies do they tell themselves down in the core of their psyche?
How can those lies help motivate them on their journey and the risks they take,
and how can they realize by the end that they have been lying to themselves?

Clearly I have a lot of work to do to break through and move the novel ahead.