

Recognizable People

acter. Finally, you'll get to read some pieces in which the characterization is particularly vivid and compelling.

Flat vs. Round Characters

When we pick up a book of fiction or creative nonfiction to read, one of the things we're most focused on (whether we realize it or not) is character. Yes, plot is important, and so are scene and narration, and point of view, and all the other things we've been discussing in this book, but whether the characters are compelling or not is really the bottom line. Consciously or subconsciously, we have our radar switched on in order to detect signs of life. After all, characters are supposed to be human beings (mostly—we'll leave writing about animals and science fiction out for now). They are people with physical features (red hair, size nine shoes), mental talents (good at math, terrible at French), and complex emotional attributes. They have histories, pasts, memories, hopes, and dreams. Even if all of this isn't made explicit in the piece itself, readers can *feel* the presence of a real, live, breathing character on the page. Nowhere else is Hemingway's famous iceberg theory more appropriate: with characters, only 10 percent of what the author knows about the character actually appears in the story or non-fiction piece—but if he or she doesn't know the other 90 percent, then that will be apparent to the reader: the character will appear lifeless, not believable, *flat* in some way.

The first thing we therefore need to define is the difference between flat and round characters. Flat characters are also called stereotypes, and the hallmark of flat characters is that they are incapable of surprising us; they act in a prescribed way, and are utterly consistent, without complexity. Thus the loving mother, the evil stepfather, the cruel boss, the happy prostitute—these are all examples of flat characters that lack the complexity and emotional depth of the real people we know.

A round character is the opposite of this: he or she is capable of *surprising* us—with unexpected fits of anger or an uplifting sense of humor or a snide remark about a presumed friend. But a round character also *convinces* us. As E. M. Forster says, if a character never surprises us, then he or she is flat; if they surprise but do not convince us, they are only flat pretending to be round.

An example of a fully rounded character is Gurov in Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog" (pp. 284–98). Gurov surprises us because he is capable of falling in love with Anna; he tries, but finds he cannot just treat

Part 1: CREATING SURPRISING-YET-CONVINCING CHARACTERS

Getting Started

As we've said before, this book is mainly concerned with creative work that says something about the human condition—what we call character-based fiction and creative nonfiction. Characters are thus central to what we do every time we sit down and put pen to paper or begin typing on the keyboard. We want to create real people: characters that live and breathe and act in believable ways—and, most important, characters whom our readers will find worth caring about.

So, given that characters are so critical, how do we render compelling and believable characters on the page? This chapter is about just that: tips and techniques for creating characters that fulfill the dual requirement of being both surprising *and* convincing.

Character is so important to the kind of writing we're aspiring to accomplish that, really, *everything* is ultimately about character: showing and telling, dialogue, plot, concrete details . . . everything we've been discussing thus far in this book revolves around strong and compelling characters. This chapter therefore cannot hope to capture everything there is to say about characterization, but instead provides an overview of characterization that is backed up by each and every other chapter in this book.

We will start out by defining what a character is, then we will look at ways in which character is revealed, both directly and indirectly. You'll have a chance to do some exercises that help you define and reveal char-

her as another run-of-the-mill affair. Let's read the passage where Gurov realizes he has actually fallen in love with the woman with whom he thought he was just going to have a brief vacation dalliance:

Anna Sergeevna came in. She sat in the third row and when Gurov looked at her, his heart was wrung, and he realized clearly that there was now no person closer, dearer, or more important for him in the whole world; this small woman, lost in the provincial crowd, not remarkable for anything, with a vulgar lorgnette in her hand, now filled his whole life, was his grief, his joy, the only happiness he now wished for himself; and to the sounds of the bad orchestra, with its trashy local violins, he thought how beautiful she was. He thought and dreamed.

Likewise, Connie, from "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (pp. 72-86), is a round character because she is capable—as selfish and ambivalent about her family as she is—of making a sacrifice on their behalf and going with Arnold Friend so he won't carry out his threat of hurting them. Here's the passage where she makes this sacrifice:

She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited.

It sounds like having a flat character in your piece would be a bad thing, and indeed a piece of creative work would be dull and ultimately fail to succeed if all the characters were flat. To be accused of having flat characters is to be accused of having dull and predictable work—something no one wants to hear. Yet not all the characters—especially in a longer piece—need to be fully rounded. Sometimes the waiter needs to just bring the food to the table, not surprise us with his private joys and sorrows. Usually, however, we want our stories and nonfiction pieces to be populated by round characters.

Eschewing the General in Favor of the Particular

With characters as well as other aspects of creative writing, we always reject general statements in favor of ones that are particular and precise. Real people don't act in "general" ways. Although "in general" people attending funerals act sad or betrayed, and people attending weddings or christenings are generally happy, these things are not necessarily true of the *particular*. As Gustave Flaubert, writing to Guy de Maupassant, said:

When you pass a grocer seated at his shop door, a tailor smoking his pipe, a stand of hackney coaches, show me that grocer and that tailor, their attitude, their whole physical appearance, including also by a skillful description their whole moral nature, so that I cannot confound them with any other grocer or any other janitor; make me see, in one word, that a certain cab horse does not resemble the fifty others that follow or preceded it . . . there are not in the whole world two grains of sand, two specks, two hands, or two noses exactly alike.

Let's look at some examples of times that characters act in ways that are unique, and much more particular than what we'd expect if we thought of a "general" reaction to the prompting situations.

Milio heaved himself up from the sofa, ready for the drive back to New York. It is the same way he used to get off the sofa that last year he lived here. He would get up, dress for work, and not even go into the kitchen for breakfast—just sit, sometimes in his coat as he was sitting just now, and at the last minute he would push himself up and go out to the driveway, usually without a good-bye, and get in the car and drive off either very fast or very slowly. I liked it better when he made the tires spin in the gravel when he took off.

In this story, "The Cinderella Waltz" by Ann Beattie, we see the particular way that a man acts when his marriage is ending—and the very particular reaction of the narrator, the soon-to-be ex-wife (who would prefer that he show anger rather than this resigned, passive sadness). Contrast that with Andre Dubus's "A Father's Story," in which a man tries to keep the memories of his ex-wife and children alive in the house as long as possible:

There were no clothes or cosmetics, but potted plants endured my neglectful care as long as they could, and slowly died; I did not kill them on purpose, to exorcise the house of her, but I could not remember to water them. For weeks, because I did not use it much, the house was as neat as she had kept it, though dust layered the order she had made. The kitchen went first: I got the dishes in and out of the dishwasher and wiped the top of the stove, but did not return cooking spoons and pot holders to their hooks on the wall, and soon the burners and oven were caked with spillings, the refrigerator had more space and was spotted with juices. The living room and my bedroom went next; I did not go into the children's rooms except on bad nights when I went from room to room and looked and touched and smelled, so they did not lose their order until a year later when the kids came for six weeks.

And in another Ann Beattie story, "Find and Replace," we have the highly particular way that a woman acts (and decides to present herself to

the world) upon the death of her husband. In her case, we also see her characterized by her possessions, especially what she wears:

My mother's face was still quite pink. Shortly before my father's death, after she had a little skin cancer removed from above her lip, she went to the dermatologist for microdermabrasion. She was wearing the requisite hat with a wide brim and Ari Onassis sunglasses. She had on her uniform: shorts covered with a flap, so that it looked as if she were wearing a skirt, and a T-shirt embellished with sequins. Today's featured a lion with glittering black ears and, for all I knew, a correctly colored nose. Its eyes, which you might think would be sequins, were painted on. Blue.

In each of these cases, we don't see general or "expected" behavior in the situation in question; we see highly specific actions and thoughts that characterize these particular characters.

Consistency as the Hobgoblin of Characters

Once we understand about flat and round characters, it follows that one of the first things we have to say about characters is that *consistency* is not necessarily a virtue. True, we won't believe in a character whose behavior is all over the map, yet any character who fails to surprise us *at all* will also fail the test of being a believable, round character. Both are equally flawed in terms of characterization.

Think about it: Do you know of any living person who is completely consistent in his or her thoughts, words, and deeds? Who never strays from doing the expected, day after day after day? A person who is completely consistent is dead. A completely consistent character is flat.

What we are striving for, after all, is *complexity*. Human beings are indefinitely multifaceted, and behave in ways that are seemingly contradictory. A man may love his family very much, yet act in ways that put them in danger—or even harm them himself. A woman may value her job, yet continually put it in jeopardy by seemingly senseless self-destructive behaviors.

Often in a workshop there comes the phrase "not acting in character." The speaker of this phrase usually means it critically, as a bad thing, yet I've found that it can mean one of two things: either that the character is surprising the reader by something he or she is doing (which is good), or that the character is surprising us but not convincing us by that surprise (which is indeed a problem). If, for example, a seemingly hard-boiled, cynical man is suddenly capable of true love, we will invariably be surprised, whether we are convinced that this change is possible is up to the

skill of the writer. A less sophisticated reader (and critic) will be troubled by the surprising behavior; a more sophisticated reader will take a moment to judge whether that surprising behavior has been convincingly rendered.

Ways of Defining Character

As with all other aspects of writing compelling fiction and nonfiction, you can create characterizations by either showing or telling, or (what is more likely) some combination of the two. As we've talked about in Chapter 6, neither is "correct"; effective characterization can be created either way. Here are the various ways that characters can be defined and revealed: as you'll see, some of these involve straight "telling" by narrators; others can be shown, or dramatized, in scenes; and others use a combination of both showing and telling.

1. What the character looks like. This is one of the most basic ways of introducing and defining character: through description of his or her physical characteristics via straight narrative. It is rare, although not unheard of, to create compelling characterization without *some* degree of narrative description of this type. This type of characterization method can also include descriptions of a character's *environment* as well as *possessions*.

The doctor was a handsome, big-shouldered man with a tanned face. He wore a three-piece blue suit, a striped tie, and ivory cufflinks. His gray hair was combed along the sides of his head, and he looked as if he had just come from a concert.

Here, in "A Small, Good Thing" by Raymond Carver, we have a direct "telling" description of a doctor: not only what he looks like and what he is wearing, but also the aura about him; "he looked as if he had just come from a concert" is as revealing a phrase as the concrete details used to render his person on the page. Pretty straightforward.

Aged and frail, Granny is three-quarters succumbed to the mortality the ache in her bones promises her and almost ready to give in entirely. A boy came out from the village to build up her hearth for the night an hour ago and the kitchen crackles with busy firelight. She has her Bible for company, she is a pious old woman. She is propped up on several pillows in the bed set into the wall peasant-fashion, wrapped up in the patchwork quilt she made before she was married, more years ago than she cares to remember. Two china spaniels with liver-colored blotches on their coats and black noses

sit on either side of the fireplace. There is a bright rug of woven rags on the pantiles. The grandfather clock ticks away her eroding time.

Here, in "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter, we get a portrait of a character (the granny in the traditional "Little Red Riding Hood" story) that is based more on her possessions than on a physical description of the woman herself, yet it is highly effective: we can see her in her bed, we know things about her from the objects she has surrounded herself with, and she becomes a living, breathing person by the end of this brief paragraph.

A rarity for another reason—a librarian who did not look like one, who wore a Borsalino fedora, his a classic of thirty years, a Bogart raincoat, English boots John Major would covet, a black silk shirt, a vintage tie.

Never as dashing as he wished to appear, however. Slight, short, and for several years now the bronze-color curls gone gray and the romantically drooping eyelids of his youth now faded flags at half mast.

In this story, "Who Is It Can Tell Me Who I Am?" by Gina Bertault, we get another physical description, but with added complexity because the narrator tells us that the character is aging—and aging unhappily—and the imagery mirrors this mournful reality.

2. What the character says. The words that come out of a character's mouth, in dialogue, are a very powerful means of characterization. Not only *what* a character says (the content), but also the *manner* in which he or she says it, is critical. This includes the vocabulary, syntax, use or misuse of words, and general diction as well as any gesture or emotionally charged way in which a character delivers a line of dialogue. The use of subtext—what *isn't* being said, or what is being avoided—is also a rich mining ground for characterization. We discussed all of these things in depth in Chapter 8, but here are some further examples:

"I always wondered what a gold mine would look like when I saw it,"

Edna said, still laughing, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Me too," I said. "I was always curious about it."

"We're a couple of fools, aren't we, Earl? she said, unable to quit laughing completely. "We're two of a kind."

"It might be a good sign, though," I said.

"How could it be? It's not our gold mine. There aren't any drive-up windows." She was still laughing.

"We've seen it," I said, pointing. "That's it right there. It may mean we're getting closer. Some people never see it at all."

"In a pig's eye, Earl," she said. "You and me see it in a pig's eye." And she turned and got in the cab to go.

In this story, "Rock Springs" by Richard Ford, we learn about the characters not only through what they say, but how they say it. The use of gesture and particular speech syntax poignantly dramatizes the easy camaraderie that this doomed relationship possesses right before the end, and shows how the different ways they view their misfortune defines them as individual characters.

3. What the character does (how she or he acts). "Actions speak louder than words," goes the old adage, and this can be true in characterization as well as real life. How a character behaves, both alone and in response to actions from other characters, is a critical aspect of characterization. Let's look at some examples:

Wing Biddlebaum talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets, behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.

The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name. Some obscure poet of the town had thought of it. The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads.

In "Hands," by Sherwood Anderson, we get a sense of this man not only from the way he moves his hands, but from his reaction to the response his hands get from neighbors and townspeople. Then, in the following passage, from "Taking Care" by Joy Williams, we see how the tenderness and responsibility a man feels as he takes care of a baby paints a moving picture of a rich, compelling character:

Jones has the baby on his lap and he is feeding her. The evening meal is lengthy and complex. First he must give her vitamins, then, because she has a cold, a dropper of liquid aspirin. This is followed by a bottle of milk, eight ounces, and a portion of strained vegetables. He gives her a rest now so that the food can settle. On his hip, she rides through the rooms of the huge house as Jones turns lights off and on. He comes back to the table and gives her a little more milk, a half jar of strained chicken and a few spoonfuls of dessert, usually cobbler, buckle, or pudding. The baby enjoys all equally. She

is good. She eats rapidly and neatly. Sometimes she grasps the spoon, turns it around and thrusts the wrong end into her mouth. Of course there is nothing that cannot be done incorrectly. Jones adores the baby.

Finally, in this next passage, from "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" by William Gass, we get a description of a man through the eyes of his neighbor, characterized by the way he behaves as well as by his possessions:

From spring through fall, Billy collects coal and wood and puts the lumps and pieces in piles near his door, for keeping warm is his one work. I see him most often on mild days sitting on his doorsill in the sun. I notice he's squinting a little, which is perhaps the reason he doesn't cackle as I pass. His house is the size of a single garage and very old. It shed its paint with its youth and its boards are a warped and weathered gray. So is Billy. He wears a short lumpy faded black coat when it's cold, otherwise he always goes about in the same loose, grease-spotted shirt and trousers. I suspect his galoshes were yellow once, when they were new.

4. What the character thinks or feels. Depending on the point of view, you may be able to convey what your character thinks or feels directly on the page (as opposed to indirectly, through implication, by what he or she says or does). This can also be a very powerful tool for characterization, especially if a character speaks or acts in a way that is different from what he or she is really thinking or feeling.

How was she going to get everything fed?—that was her problem. The dogs had to be fed. There wasn't enough hay in the barn for the horses and the cow. If she didn't feed the chickens how could they lay eggs? Without eggs to sell how could she get things in town, things she had to have to keep the life of the farm going? Thank heaven, she did not have to feed her husband—in a certain way. That hadn't lasted long after their marriage and after the babies came. Where he went on his long trips she did not know. Sometimes he was gone from home for weeks, and after the boy grew up they went off together.

In this piece, "Death in the Woods" by Sherwood Anderson, the character's worries define her, and her thoughts betray her real feelings about her husband and family life.

She sat a long time with her coffee, waiting for minutes to pass, considering how many meals she and her mother ate alone. Similar times of day, hundreds of miles apart. Women by themselves. The last person Kate had eaten breakfast with had been someone she'd met in a bar. He was passing

through town. He liked his fried eggs gelatinized in the center, only slightly runny, and Kate had studiously looked away as he ate. The night before he'd looked down from above her as he finished and she still moved under him. "You're still wanting," he'd said. "That's nice." Mornings now, Kate saw her own face in the mirror and was glad she'd forgotten his name. When she looked at her reflection from the side, she saw a faint etching of lines beside her mouth. She hadn't slept with anyone for five weeks, and the skin beneath her eyes had taken on a creamy darkness.

Here a woman's thoughts move swiftly from eating alone, to comparisons with her mother, to a memory of a one-night stand, to regrets and longing for intimacy. In this case, it's the association of ideas that provides a strong characterization in the story "Souvenir" by Jayne Anne Phillips.

On Sunday she is ready by four-thirty. She doesn't know what the afternoon holds; there are surely no places for "high tea"—a colonial tradition—in Cedar Falls, Iowa. If he takes her back to his place, it will mean he has invited other guests. From his voice she can tell Dr. Chatterji likes to do things correctly. She has dressed herself in a peach-colored nylon georgette sari, jade drop-earrings, and a necklace. The color is good on dark skin. She is not pretty, but she does her best. Working at it is a part of self-respect. In the mid-seventies, when American women felt rather strongly about such things, Maya had been in trouble with her women's group at Druke. She was too feminine. She had tried to explain the world she came out of. Her grandmother had been married off at the age of five in a village now in Bangladesh. Her great-aunt had been burned to death over a dowry problem. She herself had been trained to speak softly, arrange flowers, sing, be pliant. If she were to seduce Ted Suminski, she thinks as she waits in the front yard for Dr. Chatterji, it would be minor heroism. She has broken with the past. But.

In this story, "The Tenant" by Bharati Mukherjee, we get a woman's thoughts about a blind date she is about to go on, and (again) the association of her ideas as they follow one upon the other, is what matters. We get a sense of who she is from observing the way she looks, to recalling that she is not pretty but "does her best," to memories of being an undergraduate in a strange world that didn't understand her culture.

Character and Plot

As we discussed in Chapter 9, plot is simply those things that happen in order to bring about a certain effect, or final outcome. Character is a big part of plot, because things that happen are usually happening to characters. There are a number of ways that characters and plot intersect.

1. Character can take action (create a plot point by acting). This is the most obvious way that character and plot relate to each other: a character does something, and the story (or creative nonfiction piece) is one step closer to completion.

I won't bore you with the details. The begging, the crawling over glass, the crying. Let's just say that after two weeks of this, of my driving out to her house, sending her letters, and calling her at all hours of the night, we put it back together. Didn't mean I ever ate with her family again or that her girlfriends were celebrating. Those *cabronas*, they were like, No, *jamas*, never. Even Magda wasn't too hot on the rapprochement at first, but I had the momentum of the past on my side. When she asked me, "Why don't you leave me alone?" I told her the truth: "It's because I love you, *mami*." "I know this sounds like a load of doo-doo, but it's true: Magda's my heart. I didn't want her to leave me; I wasn't about to start looking for a girlfriend because I'd fucked up one lousy time.

In this story, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars" by Junot Díaz, we see how the narrator's obsession with his girlfriend—and his obsessive personality generally—drive the plot forward. Likewise, in the following story, "The Rich Brother" by Tobias Wolff, the character Pete decides to take on a hitchhiker, which in turn triggers other events; in effect, his arrogance and sense of invincibility develop the story:

Pete still had it in mind to brush him off, but he didn't do that. Instead he unlocked the door for him. He wanted to see what would happen. It was an adventure, but not a dangerous adventure. The man might steal Pete's ash-tray but he wouldn't kill him. If Pete got killed on the road it would be by some spiritual person in a sweatsuit, someone with his eyes on the far horizon and a wet Tty God T-shirt in his duffel bag.

As soon as they left the parking lot the man lit a cigar. He blew a cloud of smoke over Pete's shoulder and sighed with pleasure. "Put it out," Pete told him.

"Of course," the man said. Pete looked into the rearview mirror and saw the man take another long puff before dropping the cigar out the window. "Forgive me," he said. "I should have asked. Name's Webster, by the way."

2. Character can be acted upon (by others, by God, by nature, etc.) and create further plot points by reacting. If characters can act, they can also be acted upon: things can happen to them independently of their own actions—and their reactions to those things can cause the plot to unfold even more.

I first met Malcolm at a party, a small dull awkward party after a recital at which he and one or two others had been performing. I was twenty at the time. The recital had not much interested me, as I do not care for music, and had gone through a sense of duty to my hostess who was teaching me Elizabethan literature and who had asked me during a tutorial if I would like tickets. Unable to say no, I had naturally said yes. The program consisted of music played on various ancient instruments such as viols and lutes and harpsichords, and I kept hoping that it was instructive, as it was certainly not enjoyable, or so I thought until Malcolm sang. The first song he sang did not impress me particularly—it was one of those Fa la la, Hey Nonny Nonny lyrics, and he sang it with rather a feeble plaintive charm as though he knew it balanced on the edge of foolishness. He had an interesting face, though not a noticeable one. I wouldn't have picked him out from a group of people to stare at but singled out as he was by a solo performance and the surrounding dullness of the proceedings, he repaid attention. He had a thin, sensitive girl's face; fair, rather wavy hair, with a part and a forelock; he was small and slight and had a kind of pleasing intensity about him, a nervous energy, a performer's energy. Although he looked very young, it was indelibly clear that he was not as young as he looked and that he would continue to look the same for the next fifteen years.

In this excerpt from a novel, *The Waterfall* by Margaret Drabble, we get the narrator reacting to meeting her future husband at a recital, and her rather passive attraction to him drives the plot forward. In the following extract from, "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story" by Julia Alvarez, the character's reaction to a romantic overture by a fellow student causes the plot to unfold further:

That night there was a knock on my door. I was in my nightgown already, doing our assignment, a love poem in the form of a sonnet. I'd been reading it out loud pretty dramatically, trying to get the accents right, so I felt embarrassed to be caught. I asked who it was. I didn't recognize the name. Rudy? "The guy who borrowed your pencil," the voice said through the closed door. Strange, I thought, ten-thirty at night. I hadn't yet caught on to some of the strategies. "Did I wake you up?" he wanted to know when I opened the door. "No, no," I said, laughing apologetically. This guy I had sworn never to talk to after he had embarrassed me in class, but my politeness training ran on automatic. I excused myself for not asking him in. "I'm doing my homework." That wasn't an excuse in the circles he ran in. We stood at the door for a long moment, he looking over my shoulder into my room for an invitation. "I just came to return your pencil." He held it out, a small red stub in his palm. "I just to return that?" I said, calling his bluff. He grinned, dim-

ples making parentheses at the corners of his lips as if his smile were a secret between us. "Yeah," he said, and again he had that intent look in his eye, and again he looked over my shoulder. I picked the pencil out of his palm and was glad it had been sharpened to a stub so he couldn't see my name in gold letters inscribed on the side. "Thank you," I said, shifting my weight on my feet and touching the doorknob, little moves, polite preliminaries to closing the door.

3. Character can remember things (flashbacks). One very rich source of characterization-driven plotting can be found in flashbacks, giving the reader information about what is traditionally called "backstory," or the past of the story. Flashbacks are very important to plot—which, you remember, is those events *arranged in the proper order the writer thinks best*, not necessarily chronological order. In the following passage, from Stephen Dixon's novel *Interstate*, this character has a flashback while driving that leads to him taking significant action later in the plot:

Driving home, thinking of his mother and him when he was little more than a baby, a photo. First only his mother for a moment. Doesn't know where the thought came from or why the picture popped in. But suddenly— forgets what he was thinking of just before her, probably nothing much of anything—there was her face and neck and open-collar top of the summer dress she was wearing in the photo and then the whole photo, backdrop and concrete ground and crossed knees included, her shoes and his bare feet, even the white border or frame or outline with the notched or jagged edges or whatever one calls them when they're by design kind of frayed, the style for years then, which he knows has a name because he recently read it in an article on photography but forgets or never recorded it in his head. Something he saw on the road set off the thought?

4. Character can imagine things. An often unremarked-upon aspect of plot is that plot points can be created by a character's imagining of things: either a fantasy, a daydream, a dream, or a projection.

He began to imagine various unlikely ways by which he could teach her a lesson. He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend the evening. He would be entirely justified but her blood pressure would rise to 300 . . . He imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. He toyed with that idea for a few minutes and then dropped it for a momentary vision of himself participating as a sympathizer in a sit-in demonstration. This was possible but he did not linger with it. Instead he approached the ultimate horror. He brought home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid

woman. Prepare yourself, he said. There is nothing you can do about it. This is the woman I've chosen. She's intelligent, dignified, even good, and she's suffered and she hasn't thought it *fun*. No persecute us, go ahead and persecute us. Drive her out of here, but remember you're driving me too. His eyes were narrowed and through the indignation he had generated, he saw his mother across the aisle, purple-faced, shrunken to the dwarf-like proportions of her moral nature, sitting like a mummy beneath the ridiculous banner of her hat.

In this story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor, the son's fantasies boil his thoughts into a cauldron of ill will that causes him to treat his mother even worse than he had been doing previously—and also prepare him (and the reader) for what is coming at the end of the story.

Wants and Needs

Everyone needs things: food, water, shelter. And everyone wants things: love, money, friendship, material possessions. Many writers believe that a key determinant of a good characterization is the depiction of what the character wants and needs (two different things). Indeed, you could say that this is the basis of all characterization: what a character desires is what drives him or her to act (or react, or not act), and therefore what determines the heart of a story or nonfiction piece.

Here are some examples of characters who urgently *desire* something. In the first passage, from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, it's as simple as a young girl desperately wanting a good present from a grab bag:

Having watched the older children opening their gifts, I already knew that the big gifts were not necessarily the nicest ones. One girl my age got a large coloring book of biblical characters, while a less greedy girl who selected a smaller box received a glass vial of lavender toilet water. The sound of the box was also important. A ten-year-old boy had chosen a box that jangled when he shook it. It was a tin globe of the world with a slit for inserting money. He must have thought it was full of dimes and nickels, because when he saw that it had just ten pennies, his face fell with such undisguised disappointment that his mother slapped the side of his head and led him out of the hall, apologizing to the crowd for her son who had such bad manners he couldn't appreciate such a fine gift.

As I peered into the sack, I quickly fingered the remaining presents, testing their weight, imagining what they contained. I chose a heavy compact one that was wrapped in shiny silver foil and a red satin ribbon. It was a

twelve-pack of Life Savers and I spent the rest of the party arranging and rearranging the candy tubes in the order of my favorites.

In the following story, "Friendly Skies" by T. Coraglessan Boyle, the main character is so frightened by what is happening aboard the aircraft that all she wants is to reach safe ground again. This need for safety drives her actions for the rest of the story.

She was so frightened that she could only nod, her head filled with the sucking dull hiss of the air jets and the static of the speakers. The man leaned across her and squinted through the gray aperture of the window to the wing beyond. "Fuck, that's all we need. There's no way I'm going to make my connection now."

She didn't understand. Connection? Didn't he realize they were going to die?

She braced herself and murmured a prayer. Voices rose in alarm. Her eyes felt as if they were going to implode in their sockets. But then the flames flickered and dimmed, and she felt the plane lifted up as if in the palm of some celestial hand, and for all the panic, the dimly remembered prayers, the cries and shouts, and the sudden potent reek of urine, the crisis was over almost as soon as it had begun. "I hate to do this to you, folks," the captain drawled, "but it looks like we're going to have to turn around and take her back to LAX."

Finally, in the famous story "The Metamorphosis," by Franz Kafka, we have Gregor, who has mysteriously turned into a giant cockroach, wanting, above all things, not to be a burden to his family. His obsequiousness prevails throughout the story.

It was late at night when the light finally went out in the living room, and now it was easy for Gregor to tell that his parents and his sister had stayed up so long, since, as he could distinctly hear, all three were now retching on tiptoes. Certainly no one would come in to Gregor until the morning; and so he had ample time to consider undisturbed how best to rearrange his life. But the empty high-ceilinged room in which he was forced to lie flat on the floor made him nervous, without his being able to tell why—since it was, after all, the room in which he had lived for the past five years—and turning half unconsciously and not without a slight feeling of shame, he scuttled under the couch where, although his back was a little crushed and he could not raise his head any more, he immediately felt very comfortable and was only sorry that his body was too wide to go completely under the couch.

There he stayed the whole night, which he spent partly in a sleepy trance, from which hunger pangs kept waking him with a start, partly in worries and vague hopes, all of which, however, led to the conclusion that for the

time being he would have to lie low and, by being patient and showing his family every possible consideration, help them bear the inconvenience which he simply had to cause them in his present condition.

Characters in Relationships

How characters behave and think and feel when in a relationship with other characters is a key point of characterization. Often, a character will think and act (and speak) differently depending on who else is around. Think of the way you behave when you're around your friends vs. your parents, or your teacher (if you're in school). You talk differently, you act differently, you may even think and feel differently (a reprimand from a social peer feels different from one from a boss, for example).

Here are some examples of character revealed through interaction with others.

His heart, that bloody motor, is equally old and will not do certain jobs anymore. It still floods his head with branny light. But it won't let his legs carry the weight of his body around the house. Despite my metaphors, this muscle failure is not due to his old heart, he says, but to a potassium shortage. Sitting on one pillow, leaning on three, he offers last-minute advice and makes a request.

[from "A Conversation With My Father" by Grace Paley]

We feel the affection between the father and daughter (the daughter is describing the father in this first-person story), also his need to be medically precise about things that the narrator (a writer) uses language to describe.

"Please feel the doorknob," I said. She did so without the slightest hesitation and this was a lovely gesture on her part, a thing that made me wish to rise up and embrace her, though I was very tired and did not move.

[from "A Good Scent from a Distant Mountain" by Robert Olen Butler]

Again, we get a sense of the affection between the two characters (also a father and a daughter, only this time it is the father who is the narrator), as well as a sense of how tired the aged narrator feels.

Anna was not in lilac, as Kitty had so urgently wished, but in a black, low-cut velvet gown, showing her full throat and shoulders, that looked as though they were carved in old ivory, and her rounded arms, with tiny slender wrists. The whole gown was trimmed with Venetian guipure. On her head, among her black hair—her own, with no false additions—was a little wreath of pansies, and a bouquet of the same in the black ribbon of her sash

home, a stranger in a strange land? Have you ever been curious? Grandpa took giant steps forward in time. As a boy not quite old enough to be much help in the fields, his job was looking out for Charley Rackett, his ancient, crippled grandfather, an African, a former slave. Grandpa listened to Charley Rackett's African stories and African words, then lived to see white men on the moon. I think of Grandpa high up on Bruston Hill looking over the broad vista spread out below him. He's young and alone; he sees things with his loins as much as his eyes.

This is a lovely descriptive passage of a character from the memoir *Brothers and Keepers* by John Edgar Wideman, which provides an emotional and intellectual portrait as well as a physical one of this powerful man in the writer's life.

In his middle years Hector had caught his arm, as many farmers do, in a corn picker. The arm had been so mangled at the elbow that amputation was the only medical recourse possible. Hector demanded that the surgeon give him back the arm. He preserved it with formaldehyde in a glass container, which he kept on the kitchen table. When he regained some of his strength, he put a block of walnut between his legs and, looking at the embalmed arm, attempted to create it in wood. He wanted to capture precisely each wrinkle, vein line, and fingernail. He used three blocks of wood before fashioning an arm to his satisfaction; and then he built a harness of leather and steel to fasten the wood to his own stump. But of course he could not breathe life into it; it could never become the arm that lay uselessly in the formaldehyde.

From the memoir *Court of Memory* by James McConkey, we get this vivid characterization of a man through the way he behaves after losing an arm.

Part 2: EXERCISES

Characters are the lifeblood of your work. Depicting living, breathing people on the page is one of the most important things you can do as a writer—whether you are writing fiction or nonfiction.

Exercise 1: Emptying Pockets

Goal: To learn about your character by writing down all the things that can be found on his or her person.

- What to do: 1. Pick a character and fix him/her in your mind.
2. Write a list of the things that can be found in his/her pockets, purse, or backpack (you choose).

THE MAKING OF A STORY

among white lace. Her coiffure was not striking. All that was noticeable was the little willful tendrils of her curly hair that would always break free about her neck and temples.

Kitty had been seeing Anna every day; she adored her, and had pictured her invariably in lilac. But now seeing her in black, she felt she had not fully seen Anna's charm. She saw her now as someone quite new and surprising, now she understood that Anna could not have been in lilac.

Anna turned with a soft smile of protection toward Kitty. With a flying glance, and a movement of her head, hardly perceptible, but understood by Kitty, she signified approval of Kitty's dress and looks. "You came into the room dancing," Anna said.

In this excerpt from *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, we see the protective nature of the relationship that the older woman feels for the younger, and the admiration bordering on adoration that the younger woman feels for the older.

When he had to get up to go to the bathroom he moved like a ninety-year-old. He couldn't stand straight, but was all bent out of shape, and shuffled. I helped him put on clean clothes. When he lay down on the bed again, a sound of pain came out of him, like tearing thick paper. I went around the room putting things away. He asked me to come sit by him and said I was going to drown him if I went on crying. "You'll submerge the entire North American continent," he said. I can't remember what he said, but he made me laugh finally. It is hard to remember things Simon says, and hard not to laugh when he says them. This is not merely the partiality of affection: He makes everybody laugh. I doubt that he intends to. It is just that a mathematician's mind works differently from other people's. Then when they laugh, that pleases him.

[from "The New Atlantis" by Ursula K. Le Guin]

Here we get a sense of the affection that the well man has for the sick man, how deeply he is pained by the illness, and his sense of impending loss.

Character in Creative Nonfiction

The same techniques apply to developing and revealing character in nonfiction as in fiction. Here are some examples:

Henry Wideman was a short, thick, dark man whose mahogany color passed onto Daddy, blended with the light, bright skin of John and Freeda French's daughter Bette to produce the brown we were. Do you remember anything about him, or were you too young? Have you ever wondered how the city appeared through his eyes, the eyes of a rural black boy far from

