One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia
    Marquez (translated by Gregory Rabassa, 1970)
        stands out among contemporary novels for the sustained momen-
        tum—at once viscous and brisk—of its multigenerational nar-
        rative. The rise and fall of the Buendia family are the occasions
        for numerous fantastic events.

The Black Prince (1973), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), *The
    Good Apprentice* (1985), *The Message to the Planet*
    (1989), and *The Green Knight* (1993), all by Iris
    Murdoch,
        are among the more than twenty enchanting novels by the
        Oxford philosopher who is the English-speaking world's current
        champion at handling fast-moving, large-cast plots in an atmo-
        sphere of sexy comedy and thematic depth.

W, or Memories of Childhood by Georges Perec
    (translated by David Bellos, 1988)
        intertwines two divergent plots that actually have a great deal
        to do with one another: a fantasy about a writer whisked to an
        island ruled by a tyrant, and a memoir of the writer's childhood
        as a Jew during the Holocaust.

Chapter 5

Characterization

A fictional character is a human being without a body—a person made entirely of words. Fictional characters inhabit a world of pure language or, to put it another way, pure spirit.

Fictional characters *should be* as complex as living human beings; whether they *can be* is another question. I once heard a writer I respect say that writers should aim to make their characters less complex than real people, because real people are too complicated, self-contradictory, and elusive to provide the illusion of solidity and stability that fictional characters need. Readers, this writer claimed, can only visualize simpler forms.

I almost jumped out of my skin!

It seems to me that if you aren't trying to create real people on the page, you've given up before you've started. Melville made Captain Ahab say, "Strike through the mask!" and that should be every serious writer's motto. Most people, in real life and in fiction, only show us their masks— they do not meet our highest standards—but that doesn't mean we're satisfied with the situation. Our intent is to pierce the mask of social personality and find out what is underneath. What have we learned about the character by page 200 that we would not have guessed on page 10? If the answer is just more details about the character's surface, more examples of how the character deals with specific experiences, it is not enough—at least not on the highest levels of literature. Character should stretch plot and theme; character is what *makes* plot and theme. My goal

as a writer is always to go deeper, deeper into the people I have invented; that is the top priority. I don't see the point—call this my personal prejudice—in writing without that motive. Anything else is just playing with words, showing off technique.

DISCOVERING A CHARACTER

Every character should have an inner life, even if you show little of it. In a short story, where there isn't room to actually reveal much about the main character, the work should imply that the character, whom we only meet in one or two scenes, has a past and future extending far beyond the story. A considerable part of the art of fiction consists in leaving the impression that there's more.

In order to come as close as possible to the impossible goal, the writer himself or herself should be continually discovering the character. If the writer knows everything about the character at the beginning—or to put it more accurately, if the writer knows certain things about the character at the beginning and has no intention of going beyond those things—characterization will be constricted. You should believe in your character's potential for growth. After all, you believe in your own, and your characters are part of you.

And you should see the character as a living whole, not as a collection of traits. You don't create a character by fishing around in your bag of tricks and pulling out two parts villainy, one moral twinge, a distinctive speech pattern, and a touch of charm. You don't construct characters, you create them. From their first entrance, they are alive and capable of thought, and they keep becoming more so. The times a writer has to resort to techniques of construction—to asking, "Let's see, should I give this character a limp? a habit of forgetting her clothes at the cleaners? a troubled past as an adopted child?"—are the times when he or she is stuck for inspiration and has to settle for second-best. When things are really going well, the characters come already breathing.

Of course, very few writers—if any—ever succeed at creating characters who are as complex as real people; every day we face the fact that our achievement will not match our ambition; but if you don't aim that high, your achievement will fall even lower. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "Begin with an individual and you find that have created a type; begin with a type and you find that you have created—nothing."

My characters are Louie and Stella; they are not "the pseudo-sensitive but pseudo-tough thirtyish middle-class American male" and "the pseudo-tough but pseudo-sensitive thirtyish middle-class American female." Those type-labels might help me focus on them if I ever lose sight of who

they are (just as defining myself might help me remember who I am if I ever lose sight of that), but I never accept type-labels as a complete description of Louie and Stella. They have their own individual integrity, which I am discovering in the process of writing about them. They can surprise me. What most interests me about them is not how they are true to my preconceptions, but how they aren't.

Given that characters are made of language rather than protoplasm, there are some things they don't do as well as actual human beings and some things they do better. Physical upkeep such as eating, drinking glasses of water, and going to the bathroom can be skipped altogether unless it makes a causal difference in the plot—for instance, if the glass of water has been poisoned by the heroine's rival. In addition, fictional characters have a much higher pain threshold than physical human beings—in fact, they have no pain threshold. It's very hard to write convincingly about a character's suffering of physical pain. (This doesn't mean it's uninteresting to try.) Fictional characters are continually getting shot, maimed, slashed, and doing much better afterward than a person burdened with a body would do. Fictional characters consume amounts of alcohol that would cause damage to a physical brain or liver and utter eloquent wisdom in the midst of fevered delirium.

Fictional characters have a lower threshold of psychic pain than real people, though. Just about anything makes them suffer transports of sorrow, self-doubt, introspection, or, swinging the other way, joyous celebration of the beauty of life. Any fleshbound person who felt as much emotion as a fictional character would probably not have much time to get any work done—unless he or she was a writer.

In fact, fictional characters don't work nearly as hard as people in our world; they are creatures of leisure. Ninety percent of fiction takes place in the off-hours, when the characters are sitting around chatting, establishing social relations, sizing each other up and—greatest of luxuries—learning about themselves. Whether they're wearing upper-class or lower-class costume, they don't spend many pages counting their money and paying the bills. They are going on dates, going to balls, leaving early and taking cab rides home; they are fox-hunting, hitchhiking, messing around with one another's mates, and going on vacation. As Jane Austen said, "Everything happens at parties." Work is pushed into the shadows in fiction (a condition we fleshly characters could learn from). When work settings are described, they're often window-dressing for romantic intrigue, as in the dairy scenes in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The major exception consists of the kind of work that is adventure: whale-hunting, planet-discovering, spy-chasing, and so on.

It must be fun being a fictional character. Maybe that's why I've spent so much of my life with them. Hoping it would rub off.

FUNDAMENTALS OF CHARACTERIZATION

Whether people are made of flesh or of words, we know them by:

- their names
- their physical appearance
- their personal histories
- what they say
- what others say about them
- how they act in response to specific situations
- how they act habitually
- their thoughts

These are the fundamentals of characterization.

Names

A person's name is an item of cultural information. It is a product of the person's social identity. My paternal great-grandfather's family name was Gornostysky; a generation later it was shortened to Gornosty. When my grandfather immigrated to the United States, Gornosty seemed too hard to pronounce and spell, so he changed it to Cohen, which reflected our family's descent from the priestly caste of ancient Israel, the sons of Aaron. My parents named me Richard because strong-sounding Anglo-Saxon first names were popular among American Jews of the 1950s. A generation earlier, they might have named me Irving or Milton; a generation later, when Hebrew names were again popular among Jewish-American parents, they might have named me Noah or Gideon.

Names also *might* tell you about people's individual personalities. It's often said that people grow up to fit their names. (Those who don't sometimes change their names to fit the way they have grown up.) I don't entirely buy that. When you know that a person's name is Laurie B. Clark, you know almost nothing about her. More distinctive names are likely to contain more information, or at least provide room for guesswork.

For this reason, fictional characters' names tend to be distinctive. Another reason to make your characters' names distinctive is so that readers can remember them. If your characters' names are Bill Smith and Ed Brown, readers are going to have to stop in the midst of the story and ask themselves, "Now which one was which?"

There is a place for simple names in fiction, but the best simple names are ones that become distinctive by repeated association with a memorable character. The most inspired name in English fiction is Tom Jones.

Names don't get any simpler. Under the circumstances—because of who Tom Jones is—the name comes to seem rollicking, adventurous, dashingly heroic. Somehow, it's not the same as calling a character Bill Brown or Ed Smith—I mean Bill Smith or Ed Brown. The inspiration in the name Tom Jones is in making something so simple so memorable.

Many other English novels written around the same time as *Tom Jones* have characters whose names are much less realistic, such as *Peregrine Pickle*. When I tell you that a character's name is Peregrine Pickle, you immediately guess that he is a somewhat silly fellow involved in picaresque adventures. The name serves a purpose, but it's not as deep a purpose as the purpose served by the name Tom Jones. Tom Jones—for many reasons aside from his name—is a real person; Peregrine Pickle is not.

The names of most fictional characters lie somewhere between those two extremes. Another classic title character in a book of the same era, Tristram Shandy, has a name that is not common but not impossibly ridiculous. The name has meaning: "Tristram" harks back to a medieval romantic hero and also means "sad." The name also has tone: we can guess that a book with a title character named Tristram Shandy will be a serious literary comedy.

It's not always a good idea to go overboard in giving your characters resonant names. Henry James was guilty of that, hanging names like Caspar Goodwood and Fanny Assingham on his secondary characters. Knowing Henry, I doubt he intended us to snicker. Often, writers fall into stereotypical patterns in naming characters, such as using hard k and g sounds for tough guys and soft l and s sounds for young women.

Whether or not names reflect personality in real life, they do create impressions in readers' minds. Look over your characters' names to see if you have unintentionally used a pattern that might confuse readers or create inaccurate assumptions. Do you tend to give all your female characters names that end in diminutives? Are your characters' names too obvious, too close to type—have you named your hard-boiled detective Jim Steele? Have you gone to the opposite extreme and named him Gail Bysshe Smedley IV for no reason except a cheap laugh?

Check to see that your characters' names don't clash with each other. Generally speaking, the names of all the characters in a given story should be on the same level of distinctiveness and seriousness unless there's a specific reason for different levels. Bob Smith and Montague Herskotivs don't belong in the same story unless they have very different roles—perhaps Montague is a naive rich boy who is swindled into buying land in Patagonia by the affable but mysterious Bob Smith.

Another way names in a story can clash is by being too similar. If you have called one character Jeff Johnson, you probably don't want to call his best friend Jim Jackson even if you want to be funny. (Be on the

okout for *J* names and names ending in *a*—the most overused forms in
merica today.)

Use names other writers have not used before unless your intent is to
arody or pay homage to a previous author. Henry Fleming has already
een taken (in *The Red Badge of Courage*). In paying homage to him
lemingway used the name Frederick Henry.

If you use a common name, try spelling it in one of its less common
orms, *if* you feel that suits the character's personality.

With all these issues to think about, and so many names having already
een used in fiction, it's hard to come up with new ones. I recommend
earching through baby name books for first names. For first and last
names, especially ethnic ones, try the Manhattan or Los Angeles phone
book. Movie credits, magazine mastheads, bibliographies, and sports
osters are good sources. The trick is not to use a name that's actually *in*
the source—after all, you don't want to get sued—but to invent one that
might fit into a space between two names that are. For instance, you
might find Robert Cohen and Ronald Cohen in the phone book but no
Roderick Cohen, so use that one.

When all's said and done, each writer has his or her own style in naming
characters. Tolstoy used a lot of aristocratic names that have been called
"Hollywood Russian"—dignified, sonorous appellations such as Alexei
Vronsky or Natasha Rostov. His rival, Dostoevsky, used more eccentric,
jagged-sounding names such as Nyetochka Nyezvanova or Smerdyakov,
which often have satirical meanings in Russian. From the names alone,
you can guess whose characters take more baths.

The bottom line is, a character's name should be memorable and
individual, whether it's got one syllable or five, whether it's serious or
comic, meaningful or arbitrary.

Physical Appearance

Someone ought to do a study of the way readers visualize fictional
characters. It's a clear impression composed mostly of gaps. It's a mental
image but not nearly as precise as a photograph. Perhaps it's more like the
way a blind person feels a face than like the way a sighted person sees it.
It's not so much a specific portrait as a region of resemblance. The
physical appearance of a character could be compared to the location of
an electron: impossible to pinpoint exactly, yet undeniably *there,* within
a range of probabilities that are useful for calculations.

The physical appearance of a character is often more a matter of tone,
atmosphere, emotion than of sensory detail. When I read about Hans
Castorp—who occupies seven-hundred pages of one of the greatest of all
novels, *The Magic Mountain*—I have a definite impression of him as a

physical presence lying in a hospital bed and lounging at a hotel table; but
I wouldn't recognize him if I passed him on the street.

It's important for both reader and writer to form a clear mental image
of the character, but the image can be created with very few details. Emily
Dickinson said that in order to create a prairie, all she needed was a clover,
one bee, and reverie. This principle applies to fictional characters. If you
can create a vivid picture of the character with one or two details, that's
better than half a page cataloguing the character's facial features. I'm not
going to write:

> Louie was a man of medium height, perhaps five-ten and
> three-quarters, with glossy, chestnut-brown hair parted on the
> left, two-thirds of the way down his scalp, from which an
> occasional flake of translucent yet ostentatious dandruff made
> its way toward a square, bony shoulder encased in a purple-
> and-rose paisley oxford shirt. The skull was round, the skin
> brightly tanned and clear, save for the nub of a skin tag
> embedded within the declivity of a chicken pox scar just to the
> side of his left eye: mallow-pink in color, deepening to bashful
> carnation when he picked at it. What most struck one were
> the eyebrows: inverted Vs, the hairs at their bases making a
> fringe from which a single frolicsome follicle sometimes
> detached itself and floated on the sclera of the eye, like a
> child's vinyl raft adrift on a lake. Louie's forehead was Medi-
> terranean, broad and bony, his ears finely formed, and his
> cheeks hung in sedate but athletic pouches on either side of
> his short, broad nose. His eyes glinted as luminously as a dark
> brown Buick gleaming in the sun on an August afternoon—
> say three-fifteen, a Saturday, mostly sunny with a ten percent
> chance of showers. . . .

If you retain a clear mental image of Louie from those padded phrases
and shopworn adjectives, you're a better reader than most. I'd prefer to
describe him this way:

> With his bright orange tan and pouchy cheeks, Louie looked
> like a jack-o-lantern that's still sitting on the porch a week
> after Halloween.

One sentence. One image, two details. In general, in describing
anything—a character, an object, a landscape—one detail is better than
two, if it's a detail that creates a vivid mental picture.

You would never be able to recognize a photograph of Louie based on
my one-sentence description, but you might very well have a *feeling* for

have Stella reveal information about herself bit by bit, in conversations and in scattered single lines of exposition. There, the naturalness of the presentation is the key. Characters telling about their past over coffee, or looking in the mirror and remembering their childhoods, can seem artificial; the reader is all too aware that the writer is just trying to put over some information.

Whether you include characters' histories in your finished text or not, it's probably better that you have a mental picture of what those histories are. I might never write a word about Stella's north-woods childhood, but if I know about it, it will color what I have her do and say in her New York adulthood: it will affect her speech pattern, her tastes, her values as expressed in her reactions to people. Some writers write capsule biographies of characters strictly for their notes. It's smart preparation. The danger is that it can lead to a kind of stick-figure psychologizing, in which character traits are simplistically attributed to traumas—you know, like, "Ever since that time she fell through the ice, Stella was afraid of new experiences—as if any solid ground she tried to step on might crack beneath her." This can be caused by treating the biographical notes as if they were the true locus of characterization. The characterization in the text becomes an unachieved attempt to duplicate what's been planned in the notes: "Gee, I said she fell through the ice, so I better put in a scene showing how it affected her psyche."

The characterization that counts is in the text, not the notes. If your portrayal of a character evolves past what you planned, and if that evolution invalidates a note you made for the characterization, there's no need to feel guilty. You probably made other notes that are still valid; check them to make sure you didn't leave out anything you still want to include.

The presence or absence of background information can in itself be an element of characterization. Othello tells us a good deal about his origins, his military career, and his courtship of Desdemona, and it makes us feel sympathy for him even though he commits murder; in the same play and sometimes the same scenes, we learn absolutely nothing about Iago's background, and that contributes to the depth of his enigmatic villainy. How much did Shakespeare know about Iago's past history? I wouldn't be surprised if the answer were "Nothing at all." The guy was incredibly slick. But lesser writers may have to use crutches that Shakespeare could forgo.

What They Say

More than by any other method, we get to know people by talking to them. We know them by what they say, how they say it, and what they don't say.

For the most part, people do not simply announce their character traits. People are devious, and self-disclosure is mostly a matter of indirection. If a character says, "I'm a secure, self-confident person," we

do not conclude that he's a secure, self-confident person. We might conclude that he's a person who's trying to talk himself into being secure and self-confident, and trying to talk the world into believing it. We might conclude that he's actually quite insecure and lacking in confidence.

If we want to make a character say things that reveal him as secure and self-confident, we'll have to think up something else. We'll have him say things that *sound* secure and self-confident, in both important and unimportant situations. He sounds secure and self-confident when he's facing down an enemy and when he's deciding what shirt to wear. We might even have him make a self-deprecating joke, on the theory that it takes inner self-confidence to be outwardly modest. (We might do that if we had already, by other means, established his basic security and self-confidence, or if we wanted to create an initial impression of insecurity and later overturn it.)

Sometimes, the things characters say reflect their authentic feelings, but often not. If a character says, "I like Joe even though he got a better grade than me on the test," we have to judge, on the basis of previous evidence, whether the statement is true or not. If it's true, we probably decide that the speaker is a noble, decent, generous soul: a conclusion that might have to be revised on later evidence. If we decide that the speaker is lying, that leads to a different conclusion. In characterization through dialogue, falsehoods lead to complexity.

Mostly, people reveal their personalities without intending to. If two of your characters are having a conversation and Character A continually interrupts the other with witticisms at Character B's expense and never lets a statement go by without rebutting it, that says something about Character A's personality, which she is probably not aware of.

What a character doesn't say can also provide clues. If Character B doesn't warn Character A that Character C is going to rat on her to the teacher, then we know something about Character B as well as about Character C.

Many people are reluctant to talk about things they feel deeply, whether it's love or anger or ambition or frustration. Many people feel it's impolite to say certain things, such as curse words. Many people can't apologize. Many people can't ask for help. Many people can't admit they don't understand something. There are people who can't say "I can't" and people who can't say "I can." All these traits are part of characterization.

What's more, everyone says the same things in different ways. Every human being has an individual speech style, a verbal fingerprint. The technical term for this is *idiolect:* the speech pattern of an individual at one particular period in his or her life. (Our idiolects change as we move from childhood through adolescence and adulthood, from job to job, town to town, social class to social class, and toward new knowledge.) Speech

pattern consists of vocabulary, word choice, favorite phrases, intonation, gesture, pauses, syntax, grammar. On the planet Earth, there are more than five-billion ways of saying "I can" and "I can't."

Ideally, every character has his or her own individual speech pattern. It's hard to achieve because, in the final analysis, all the characters are you. They all speak in your speech style. You can partially overcome this limitation by playing the characters' voices in your head and consciously varying them. Stretch your speech style to uncover the phrases that you haven't uttered in daily life, but have heard or thought of—or haven't even thought of until your art asked you to. A good writer is far more than a mimic, but this is where a gift for mimicry comes in handy.

Be subtle about it. Develop a stereotype alarm. If your Southern characters go around saying things like, "Ah do declare, thank yuh, ma'am, and y'all have a fahn tahm at th' bahbecue, y'heah?" the result will probably be unintentionally funny. If your characters have major social differences from others—if one is a Southern sheriff and another is a British duchess—the way to deal with it is by not settling for the obvious. Find difference within a narrower range. After you have established the broad, social definitions of your characters, work deeper down into their personal uniqueness. At a convention of five-hundred Southern sheriffs, each one will have his or her own idiolect. Although you'll only be writing about one of them, imagine him or her talking to the others; it will help you understand the character's individuality.

The Southern sheriff you write about, of course, will be the Southern sheriff who sounds most like you. There is a family resemblance among all a writer's characters. But that's not a flaw; it's part of what makes style.

What Others Say about Them

Character Q moves to a new town when her parents are transferred across the country by their corporation. The first person to befriend her in her new environment is Character P, who suggests they go out for a movie and a burger. The next day, Character P is accosted by the members of her clique, eager to know about Character Q: "What's she *like*?" Character P delivers the resounding judgment: "She's *weird.*"

Do you, as the reader, conclude that (1) Character Q is weird, (2) Character P is weird, (3) they are both weird, or (4) neither is weird?

The answer, obviously, is that you need more information. You need to know, specifically, what Character Q said or did that made Character P call her weird. You need to know what the clique's standards of weirdness are. You need to know what connotations the word *weird* holds for them: is weirdness a quality they approve of? You need to know who Character P is: how trustworthy is she, how intelligent, how conformist, how sensitive?

If Character P says, "She's *weird.* She likes classical music. And her parents won't let her get a job—they want her to study," we immediately have more information from which to evaluate both Character Q and Character P. This information, too, is provisional and subject to amendment. Later on, we might discover that Character Q has been raised in a strict upbringing from which she longs to escape; secretly, she wants to be a cheerleader. Meanwhile, Character P secretly hates her clique, but fears their disapproval; therefore, in order to seem cool, she exaggerated Character Q's weirdness.

In life and in fiction, we learn a lot about people from the things others say about them. In both contexts, we need to corroborate the testimony or we risk forming wrong conclusions based on rumor, prejudice, malice, emotionalism, or misperception.

In a way, fictional characters are like courtroom witnesses. They are under oath to describe what they know—but the jury has to determine to what extent their testimony is accurate and truthful. The way to do this is to compare one witness's version with another's. When enough facts are collected from enough viewpoints, a picture of events can be formed. The picture might have some gaps, some parts might be in clearer focus than others, but it's enough to convince a jury.

At the beginning of *Hamlet*, two sentries have seen a ghost. They tell this to their captain, Horatio, who tells it to his best friend, Hamlet. Are the sentries, nervously waiting for the ghost's reappearance, telling the truth? Did they really see something? Was what they saw a ghost? At the outset, we don't know. The sentries' actions and words tell us that they are genuinely frightened. They have no reason to lie—in fact, they could get in serious trouble for raising a false alarm. They're sincere, but whether they really saw anything or not, and what it was, is something that can only be clarified by Hamlet's later experiences.

In any case, as Shakespeare demonstrated numerous times, starting a play by having one character tell a second character about a third character can be a very effective way of stimulating an audience's interest. It gives us enough information to make us want more.

Characters are continually testifying about other characters. It is the reader's job to evaluate the testimony and the writer's job to make sure that it can be evaluated properly. Some people are more trustworthy than others. The writer provides clues to how trustworthy a particular character is through:

- *external evidence*—whether the facts bear out the character's statements, and
- *internal evidence*—whether the character's claims sound full and authentic or partial and self-serving.

But no one is completely trustworthy or completely untrustworthy. The *kind of information* and the *context* affect how we evaluate the testimony.

The most trustworthy things characters say about other characters are factual statements that don't affect our opinion of the characters. If Character P reports about Character Q, "She just moved here from across the country," there's little reason for anyone to doubt it. The factual statements of observant characters are a major source of information in fiction.

Somewhat less trustworthy are eyewitness statements that do affect our opinion of the characters. If Character P says, "She kept me waiting half an hour for no reason," the statement deserves open-minded consideration. Character P had to wait for Character Q—that much is reasonably believable. But was it really half an hour or is P exaggerating? Was there really no reason or did Character Q's parents keep her in order to ask where she was going and whom she was going with?

Less trustworthy still are evaluative statements: "She's weird." We not only don't know how to evaluate the facts, we don't know what the facts are.

Then there are statements of personal emotion: "I like her"; "I don't love him"; "I don't care if I never see him again." Sometimes these are absolutely true—but only at the moment, for time will pass and wounds will be healed and characters will form new opinions of each other. At other times, such statements are misleading even at the moment they're uttered. The person who says, "I don't care if I never see him again," is fantasizing that she will run into him around the next corner.

The subtleties of psychological fiction arise from the following truths:

- No one is objective.
- Every action has a selfish reason.
- Honest, well-intentioned people sometimes distort.
- People don't know what they themselves think and feel or why they do things, and when they know, they're hesitant to reveal it.
- People rarely find out what others really think of them, and when they do, it throws them.

Playing around with the uncertainties of perception and with imperfectly reliable opinion and gossip is one of the fun things about writing fiction, but there's been a cynical tendency in modern fiction to overdo the untrustworthiness of characters. In a contemporary novel, when we hear a character saying, "I did my job faithfully," we can bet the character is either a liar or a simpleton.

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and The Fury* and Ryunosuke Akutagawa's *Rashomon* (and the Akira Kurosawa movie based on it) are classic examples of fiction in which a group of characters alternately describe the same set of actions, so that each character gives testimony about the others. Edith Wharton and Henry James are two great American novelists who habitually use webs of gossip as a means of portraiture.

How They Act in Response to Specific Situations

Character C and Character K are having a power lunch, sipping vegetable juice and nibbling sourdough bread and trying not to get any crumbs on their pinstriped suits, when, during a discussion of their business deal, Character K makes an idle but odious joke about Character C's ethnic group. We have just learned something about Character K. In addition, we will learn something about Character C depending on whether he (1) ignores the remark, (2) punches Character K in the face in the middle of the crowded restaurant, deal or no deal, or (3) tells Character K forthrightly but calmly that the joke expresses a pernicious stereotype and has hurt his feelings.

All of us are tested from time to time, and how we respond to a test not only illustrates our character but affects it. Whether Character C chooses response (1), (2), or (3) not only shows something about him, it gives him feedback about himself. He will think about his response; he may feel proud of himself or ashamed and regretful; and this thinking will in turn affect his future behavior. It may affect his future behavior to such an extent that we feel justified in saying that it has shaped the development of his personality. Character C's choice of response also affects other characters' opinions of him—Character K and people K talks to. C will see a new reflection of himself in the way K and others treat him and gossip about him; this will affect C's future choice of response in similar situations.

And if Character C sometimes chooses response (1), sometimes response (2), and sometimes response (3), depending on how he happens to feel that day and why, and on how he calculates the effect of his response and how he feels about Character K, then C is truly a complex character. And if you can show that on the page and make it all believable and make it all fit into a story that has shape and weight and momentum, then you are a writer.

Most fiction shows characters in critical situations. This is especially true of short stories, which often take place entirely at the crisis point. We can assume that a character's behavior in a critical situation says something about his or her personality. We can't assume that his or her behavior in a critical situation is consistent with his or her everyday behavior. It may be more interesting if it isn't.

Generally speaking, even when an entire story takes place in a critical situation, we do learn something about the character that goes beyond the immediate. Perhaps there is a flashback to an earlier event, perhaps the

character recalls a previous action that didn't match a present action, perhaps the character speaks a line of seemingly offhand dialogue that hints at a broader repertoire of feelings and behaviors. A small amount of such information can go a long way. A sentence or two of background can add dimension, affecting the way readers interpret the critical situation.

How They Act Habitually

> When Stella had to be away from Louie, she would phone him every night, and they would talk—talk endlessly, it seemed, about what they had done that day and what they had seen and how they wished they were together. Then she would read him a paragraph from the copy of *Remembrance of Things Past* that she always kept in her luggage. Over the course of the years, they would read the entire work aloud to each other: over the phone, in airport terminals, in waiting rooms, in bed. Most of the time, it was Stella who read. She couldn't tell whether Louie truly enjoyed the novel—there were long minutes when she read into silence on the other end of the phone—but the fact that he listened was enough.

We have just learned something about Stella and about her relationship with Louie.

Repeated, habitual actions form a large part of how we get to know people—and ourselves—in real life and a larger part than is usually appreciated of how we get to know characters in fiction. The fact that Eddie Haskell, on *Leave It to Beaver,* is always sickeningly polite to parents and nasty to younger children is the key to his characterization. (If, in a critical situation, he acted differently, that would give him another dimension.) The fact that Othello, in Shakespeare's play, is habitually tender and loving to his young wife Desdemona, except in the critical situation, when he becomes murderously jealous, is the key to his.

Multigenerational sagas, especially ones of rural life such as Willa Cather's *O, Pioneers!* and Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil,* usually contain a great deal of habitual action punctuated by moments of crisis.

Their Thoughts

In real life, we know only our own thoughts, unless we are psychotherapists, hypnotists, priests, or the confidants of exceptionally self-revealing people. In fiction, we can know the thoughts of everyone involved in a scene, or of only some people involved, or of only one person involved, or of none of them. The writer's choice of which characters' thoughts to show, if any, and how to show them, is crucial, and it's a matter of feel

rather than of rules. I believe that concise writing is usually preferable to verbose writing and that it's usually better to convey meaning through action than through thought.

There are many works of fiction in which no characters' thoughts are revealed. There are many works of fiction narrated by first-person narrators who don't even reveal their own thoughts. If Character C punches Character K in the face, there's no need for him to add, "I hated K at that moment." It's obvious. On the other hand, if he thinks, "Oddly, I felt no personal hatred for K at that moment; I acted automatically, on principle, out of pure righteous retaliation for an insult to the honor of Ethnic Group J," that adds an extra layer to what the action alone shows and is worth including. Then again, perhaps C's lack of personal animosity toward K can be revealed through an action—perhaps, after punching K, he stretches out a hand to pick him up and says, "All right, how about that deal?" Or perhaps you want to leave C's feelings mysterious; we will have to infer, based on later scenes, the extent of personal hatred; we may never be able to settle the question firmly.

DEVELOPING INTERESTING CHARACTERS

So far, this chapter has talked about the how of characterization—how we learn about people. Frankly, I'm more interested in *what* we learn about them. If your characters are bores, what does it matter how skillfully you delineate them?

Fortunately there is no such thing as a boring person. (This belief—and it may be merely a belief—is what makes me a writer in the first place.) People who seem to be boring are only those who don't reveal themselves sufficiently. They're afraid to show themselves or they're satisfied with shallow interactions. In fiction, when characters don't reveal themselves sufficiently, it's because the writer has not seen deeply into their souls. In fiction, shallow interaction is not satisfactory.

We all know some people who, we imagine, would make particularly interesting characters. Some have led adventurous lives. Some have pioneered in their work. Some have overcome challenges or survived misfortune. Some seem especially wise or especially foolish. Some suffer from emotional problems. Some are simply eccentric. Most writers are attracted to such characters, and rightly so. All else being equal, it's desirable that your characters should have traits that are immediately, outwardly interesting. There's no denying that it's easier to write about a criminal than about a librarian.

But the librarian may be a criminal—at least in his or her own mind—and the criminal may yearn for a life of predictable calm.

If you could understand the librarian thoroughly, observe all his actions and see into his thoughts, you would find him endlessly complex. If you were able to observe all the criminal's actions and see into her thoughts, you might discover that her crimes, once you know how they were committed, were quite banal—the kind of thing you'd seen on TV a hundred times before. The really interesting things about the criminal, once you saw deeply into her, might be the unobvious things, the things that made her an ordinary person like you.

There has never been a human being whose personality was completely revealed in all its details, completely understandable to itself and others. As anthropologist Lyall Watson said, "If the brain were so simple we could understand it, we would be so simple we couldn't." What makes people interesting is the search, the attempt at revelation, the real or illusory progress.

One reason the search is always incomplete is that people change. How consistent are the people you know? How consistent are you? Human behavior is not predictable. We are fields of possibility. We shift, we are subject to vague and unforeseen influences, and even when we believe we know one another, we can surprise. Our values and goals change from year to year, from one phase of life to another; our moods change by the minute. Memory influences our behavior, but sometimes we let go of the past, rebel against it, deliberately do what it taught us not to. We belong to groups; we take part of our identities from the fact that we are male or female, young or old, factory workers or artists or teachers or whatever—but each of us is different from every other member of the group. We change over time as a response to experience: we grow. The growth is rarely a straight line; it is jagged, it surges forward, slips back, and fitfully falters toward the point it had already reached.

Most people feel they have an inner core that persists from birth to death. The neurologist Oliver Sacks, in his book *Migraine*, says our feeling of having a stable, continuous self is based on three things: the stability of our body-image (we look the same to ourselves, even as we change fashions or grow), the stability of our outward perceptions (the world looks the same, and we see it from a single point of view), and the stability of our perception of time (it keeps going forward, second after second, without a break). If any two of these factors become disordered, Sacks says, we feel our egos dissolving.

The feeling of having a stable identity may or may not be warranted, but characterization in fiction has been based on it. Too much reliance on the core, however, can make for skimpy, static characterization. A character is not an unalterable outline. Even cartoon characters, who look

exactly the same from frame to frame, occasionally have to show new sides or risk losing their audience.

There are writers' manuals that divide characters into categories, round and flat, dynamic and static. The round, dynamic ones, usually major characters, are many-sided and capable of change; the flat, static ones, usually minor characters, are relatively simple and do not change during the course of the work; each time they reappear, they are the same; their sameness, in fact, is what we recognize about them.

That kind of textbook gets me so steamed!

It tells you to aim for mediocrity. It diminishes the art of fiction.

You do not have to *try* to create a flat, static character, any more than you have to *try* to become a fallible human being. What you have to try is to become a better person; and what you have to aim for in your characters is to make them fuller, rounder, more complex people, whether they are onstage for one line or for five-hundred pages. In Shakespeare and Tolstoy, all the characters seem alive no matter how briefly we are acquainted with them. One of Tolstoy's corpses, it has been said, is more alive than the average writer's protagonist. Their life is in what Tolstoy knows about them, and the lives of the sentries in *Hamlet* are in their language. We can imagine that if we had more time to spend with them, there would be a lot to find out about them.

While keeping the sense of a central core, try also to show the mutability of human character. After C punches K, he may feel he is not the same person he was before he swung his fist. He would not have predicted that he would do it. If this new development surprises the reader *and is believable,* it is successful characterization. It is not successful characterization if it seems to have no foundation in anything Character C has thought or done before—if it surprises the reader on the basis of seeming fake.

In other words, changes in characters have a history. History can't be predicted in advance but can be understood in hindsight. We can say, "Yeah, I believe C did that because he's the kind of person who did this and that and because at the beginning of the book he said such and such." C's choices have reasons. He may have had other reasons for other options, but we can believe that he made the choice he did.

It is not necessary for a writer to spell out a character's every motivation. A story doesn't have to answer all the questions it raises, but it should raise provocative ones and should give the impression that interesting answers are possible to find.

There is always a fringe of mystery in any human being, whether in the flesh or on paper. You cannot describe a character completely no matter

how hard you strive—and therefore you might as well strive for as much as you can achieve.

WHERE TO FIND CHARACTERS

Where are characters found? Two places: out there and in here.

And they are both the same place. Search for characters in the world around you—take notes on real people; record factual details of speech, clothing, behavior; render them as faithfully as you can in print—and your characters will still only be versions of yourself. A character is not just a collection of traits, it is a representation of a mind, and the mind is yours.

This does away with the question, "Should I write about myself?" The answer is, "You can't do otherwise." Therefore, you don't have to write autobiographical fiction in order to express yourself. You will be expressing yourself just as much if you write about the imaginary lives of strangers you see on the bus or read about in the news.

There's nothing *wrong* with writing autobiographical fiction. Do it if that's your personal inclination. Writing about one's own experiences can be an especially valuable exercise for apprentices: it provides a preexisting subject on which to strengthen their skills. Among university-trained writers today, there seems to be a prejudice against autobiographical fiction: some writers seem to do contortions in order to write about anything *but* themselves. Often, the result is technically proficient fiction that lacks soul. I get the feeling that some writers have been taught, wrongly, that their own lives aren't interesting enough to write about.

Turgenev said that writers must cut the umbilical cord that connects them to their material. In other words, if you are inspired at the outset by events from your own life, you must step back and look at them with a writer's cool eye, cutting away what is merely local or incidental, adding imaginative elements, reshaping, reprocessing your fleeting and fragile life into an object with an independent, enduring existence. I try to heed that advice as much as possible, but I'm not sure I want a world in which every writer heeded it all the time. What about *Sons and Lovers*? What about *You Can't Go Home Again*? If you told D. H. Lawrence or Thomas Wolfe to cut the umbilical cord that tied them to their material, they'd laugh in your face. The whole *point* of their art was that they were tied to their material by bonds of blood that fed them and kept them alive.

I worry that too many young writers use theories such as Turgenev's as excuses to run away from themselves. American culture doesn't train us in self-examination; many of us are instinctively afraid of or embarrassed by it. I worry that contemporary American fiction gives too much credit to authorial distance and not enough to feeling. I worry that

teachers of writing, hoping for student stories in which imagination powerfully transforms facts, instead get stories that seem made-up, posed, correct, "literary" in the pejorative sense of the word.

I would rather read the unguarded, spontaneous truth of how a human being has lived and what she has felt than the trumped-up conflicts of masks, in stories that read as if they've been contrived to please an editor or a professor.

Gertrude Stein once said that the real life story of Ernest Hemingway, if he had told it honestly, would have been more interesting than any of his novels. This insight is part of what made Stein a brilliant innovator of fiction. Only an awareness of the limits of fiction can lead a writer to stretch those limits. Only an understanding of the depth and fascination of real human beings can lead a writer to invent great characters.

But you can only write down as many fictional people, and as many traits, as you can find within you. I've often thought that writing is a mild form of multiple-personality disorder: we have people in our heads, speaking in different tones and expressing opposite views and moving toward divergent goals. The more of these little folk you can find inside your head, the more characters you can create. Many good writers work with a set of five or six characters who reappear in story after story under different names, in different settings. Greater writers might have a dozen or two.

Imagine yourself leading alternate lives. Explore its branchings onto paths other than the one it actually took; see who you would have become and met. Think of the social categories you belong to, then imagine different individuals in those categories. Conversely, think of yourself belonging to different categories.

Hear voices in your head.

CHANGING REAL PEOPLE

If you write about a character who blatantly resembles you and whose experiences are your own, you will probably also be writing about real people—relatives, friends, enemies—but you will be seeing them through your own prism. *It is strongly recommended that you change the external facts about those people so that they can't be identified!* Even if they started out as real, make them fictional. Change their hair color, their jobs, their residences, their sex—change whatever you can. Of course, change their names. Perhaps you will keep a core of insight into their personalities, but because the insight now applies to two people—the fictional character and the real model—it is on its way to seeming universal. Or perhaps you'll change so many of the externals that the internal core will evolve

into something different. Voilá—you have invented a completely new character.

The surest technique for inventing characters is to create composites. You can take part of a character's personality from yourself and part from someone else. You can take the entire inner life from yourself and the externals from someone else. You can take part from one sibling or friend and part from another. You can take part from a famous person and part from a nonfamous person. You can take part from reality and part from imagination. You can build a composite character from two people, three, or more.

The creation of a composite character can often be reduced to a simple premise: "I'll use X's sweetness and Y's ambition to create Character Z." A simple grafting of X onto Y is good enough to start with. Better still, treat it flexibly: X is ambitious, too, in a different way from Y, and their two styles of ambition combine to create something new. Blurring the boundaries, you've discovered aspects of the character that weren't included in the initial premise. A composite of X and Y does not have to be a mere pasting-together of discrete traits. Think of it as creating a third individual by combining the genes of the parents.

Readers can rarely tell whether a character is based on a real person, purely invented, or a composite. The real question, of course, is whether the character is convincingly alive and interesting.

CREATING SUCCESSFUL CHARACTERS

What makes a successful fictional character? I would like to suggest a couple of guidelines:

- The reader remembers the character after finishing the story.
- The reader can extend the character beyond the story, imagining how the character would act and speak in other circumstances.

Plus a "bonus guideline," harder to meet:

- The character is still believable when acting out of character—when, in response to specific situations (which may be major challenges or small, odd moments), he or she does what wouldn't be expected, and it adds to our previous conception of the character rather than contradicting it.

How to achieve those goals? Best to create a sharp outline first and progressively shade it in. The most memorable fictional characters have strong foundations in physical appearance, speech patterns, jobs or skills,

or the basic facts of life history. Sharp outlining is the minimal criterion for good characterization. Given this foundation, the nuances of personality can be explored: unpredictable details, differences from other similar characters, inner struggles and waverings. Huck Finn's first-person adolescent voice and poor-white culture are his foundation; his ethical conflicts contribute shading, as do his personal relations with Tom Sawyer, Jim, his aunt, and his father.

Many writers establish a character's outline at the beginning and never advance beyond it. This happens when plot mechanics are favored over characterization. The writer is willing to make the characters do unbelievable things in order to give the reader a jolt. It's as if the writer checked off a series of character traits at the beginning, from a handy list, and then didn't think about it anymore. It's as if the writer kept goosing the reader forward with one of those electric-shock buzzers you can buy from a novelty store.

Good writers are always thinking about characterization. They are always trying to learn more about the people they have set in motion. They put themselves in their characters' places and ask, as the theater director Stanislavsky advised his actors to ask, "Who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going?"

Another useful set of questions to ask about a character is "How does she see herself? How do others see her?"

Planning our characterizations and seeing them through in the course of a work, we go through the same process as in getting to know our friends in real life. At first we know only a few big, superficial things—how they look, how their voices sound, what their interests are—and perhaps we have a simplistic, capsule impression of their personalities ("She's vivacious, but she has a cutting sense of humor . . ."). The more we hang around with them or analyze them in their absence, the more we find. We can never say we know them completely, but by showing us their uncertainties and uncharted feelings, they earn our love.

Do It

1. Write a one-page character sketch of yourself. Reread it and keep revising it, trying to increase its depth and truthfulness, eliminating anything that is self-serving or evasive. Show it to no one.

2. Write a character sketch describing what you would be like if you were of the opposite sex.