



GETTING TO KNOW YOU: Finding a Character's Soul

by Sylvie Kurtz

One of the most important elements of a story is a main character through whose eyes the reader will experience the story. Generally, this character is the one with the biggest problem, the character with the most to lose, because that's where the biggest emotion resides. Emotion provides the biggest experience for the reader.

A perfect character equals a boring character, so we create a flawed character. To find this flaw, look at the character's youth.

According to brain researchers, when we're young, our brains operate at a lower frequency that closely resembles a hypnotic state. That's so that we can learn quickly how to survive in the environment in which we're born. We download a tremendous amount of information in a short period of time. Think of babies and how much they learn in those first few years. We take everything literally and our parents' and caregivers' behaviors and beliefs become our own. That's also why others can easily break us. We haven't yet developed the ability to distinguish between real and perception. Imagine if, during those tender years, a parent or a trusted teacher tells you that you're stupid or that you're not good enough or that you'll never amount to anything. Those messages go straight to the subconscious that makes sure that life proves those beliefs time and again, and those beliefs become the truths that unconsciously shape behavior.

As we grow older, we become less susceptible to outside programming, but by that time, our subconscious is filled with information about how the world works. So the situation that starts the main character's flaw usually happens in the formative years (birth to twelve) and, as she grows up, other experiences "prove" that the flaw is good protection against pain.

So this pain sets up an if/then equation that unconsciously colors the way she experiences life. This equation may not sound logical to an onlooker, but logic doesn't drive the human mind. The most primitive part of the brain is pure emotion--fight or flight or freeze. Protect yourself and live. As human beings we're programmed for survival. And we respond with primal emotions. *If I tell someone what I need, then they'll abandon me, so I won't rock the boat. If I let someone get too close, they'll see I'm a coward, so I'll keep my distance. If I stay too long, then people will see I'm not a lovable person, so I'll keep moving.* This doesn't happen on a conscious level, because if it did, your main character could see the flawed logic. The only part he's probably aware of is his final action to the emotional pain--not wanting to rock the boat, keeping his distance, keeping on the move.

Breaking down the hero's background and discovering the root of his greatest fear and how it's molded his personality is the most helpful thing I've found to get to the essence of a character.

It's not easy and requires a lot of thinking, but once you know the flaw, that deep emotional core, where it came from, and how it affects your hero's view of the world and himself, motivating him believably while writing his story becomes second nature.

Watch you don't give your hero a flaw he can't overcome. For your story to have power, it needs to be within his ability to overcome his flaw.

Because most popular fiction asks that our hero be likeable--or at least identifiable--we'll also give him a redeeming quality that we'll use to get him to the end of his character arc in the story. One way to get to this redeeming quality is to ask why the other characters in your story like him in spite of his flaws. If someone else loves this guy, he can't be that bad.

Here's an example:

If a character's mother abandoned the newborn on a hospital's doorstep, and if that character spent her childhood in an orphanage, and if once she managed to find a set of parents, those parents returned her--not once, but twice--then if that character's fiancé dumped her the day before their wedding, chances are she'd have abandonment issues. These issues would translate into a fear. On an unconscious level, she may work the following equation: *If I love, then I will feel the pain of rejection, so I'll build a wall to keep people away.*

To protect herself from that pain, she'll place a shield around her, forcing others to stay at a distance. But deep down this character's need is to be loved, so the push/pull of want love/fear love creates a strong internal conflict. Somewhere as she grew up, the fear became a belief: *I'm not good enough as I am, so I'll be whatever the other person wants.* Of course, this view of life is a recipe for failure. No one can ever guess what another person wants...and that other person may not even know what he wants. This erroneous way of dealing with life shows up as a string of failed relationships.

So if I take this character with an issue of abandonment, a deep desire to be loved as she is, and a strong fear of rejection, and dump her in the middle of a situation that will shred her mask and crack her shield, and force her to risk rejection, I create a strong external conflict that echoes her internal fear and will force her to confront her view of life, her fear and, hopefully, choose to alter her ways and triumph. By giving her the redeemable quality of being able to look at a situation objectively, I give her a chance to stop and figure out that her fear is getting in her way of getting what she truly desires.

The deep motivation anchors the conflicts in an emotional thread that pulls the reader along, because, even if she knows my book will have a happy ending, she has to find out what happens, because she understands and cares (or loathes) the character.

Understanding your character's soul will allow you to create a character that lives beyond the page and stays with the reader long after 'The End.'

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