

CREATING CHARACTERS READERS CAN'T QUIT



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Hey all you writers,

I'm back with another short eBook designed to help you on your writing journey. In this book, my goal is to provide you with tools to create three dimensional characters that are believable and relatable to readers, along with creative ways to reveal aspects of your characters that will help readers bond with them.

You might think that characters like Darth Vader from *Star Wars* or Voldemort from *Harry Potter* aren't relatable to normal individuals. Trust me. You'd be wrong. Readers relate to the human aspects of fictional characters, whether that character is good, horribly evil, a robot, or an alien being. (Think of ET.) It doesn't mean readers have to 'like' the character. Only that they recognize human elements in them that make them interesting, intriguing, or even puzzling.

Don't believe me? The journal *Psychological Science* conducted a study, concluding that one reason readers enjoy villainous characters is because either reading or watching a fictional version of the villain allows the story to act as a cognitive safety net for them, meaning the reader/viewer can identify with the evil character without tainting their own self-image.

Now that we know we're all a little bit evil (Ha!), let's get busy creating some awesome characters!

Lynn



AS A WRITER, HOW SHOULD YOU DEFINE CHARACTER?

“Character is the human element of your story, the aspect that your audience actually cares about.”

-Matt Bird, author/screenwriter

Readers enjoy following certain characters for a variety of reasons. They might find them heroic, and wish they could be like them. They might relate to the character’s struggles because they’ve experienced similar struggles of their own. The reader might find the character funny, highly intelligent, quirky, or flawed in ways that keeps them coming back to see what happens next.

Whatever the reason, as humans, we are complex puzzles that often require decoders to make sense of us.

“Each person is an enigma. You’re a puzzle not only to yourself but also to everyone else, and the great mystery of our time is how we penetrate this puzzle.”

- Theodore Zeldin, author & British academic

It’s for that reason authors need to focus on creating 3-dimensional characters rather than flat, cardboard cutouts. We become bored with characters that are 1-dimensional, predictable, or lazy. Consider what actress Kate Winslet says about characters—*“I wanted to play incredibly challenging, multifaceted characters. Because we are all a puzzle.”* And when most people are faced with a puzzle, their immediate question is – “Can I solve it?”



Novels typically take readers on a journey. I don't mean an epic adventure like *Lord of the Rings*, but rather an endless variety of *character journeys* where they navigate life with all its interwoven colors and textures. This means that your first job as an author is to understand your lead character. To do that, you **MUST** understand what your main character is chasing in life and why. Otherwise, there's no reason to follow them.

*“As long as the protagonist wants something,
the audience will want something.”*
—David Mamet, playwright

Rule #1: Determine what your lead character wants more than anything else.

The desire or need that your protagonist chases doesn't have to be of heroic proportions, as in *Hunger Games* or *Star Wars*. The 'driving need' can be much simpler and yet just as important to your protagonist achieving his/ her goal. Review this partial list of potential wants/desires/needs and then think about your own story and where your lead character's need might fall on this list.

PARTIAL LIST OF POTENTIAL DRIVING NEEDS

1. To win at something important. (*Chariots of Fire*)
2. To overcome a personal shortcoming. (*The King's Speech*)
3. To stop something or someone. (*The Da Vinci Code*)
4. To escape or survive something. (*The Perfect Storm*)

5. To deliver something critical to the story. (*Outbreak*)
6. To save someone or something. (*Hunger Games*)
7. To survive. (*The Mountain Between Us*)
8. To achieve an important personal goal. (*Mulan*)
9. To forgive oneself. (*The Kite Runner*)
10. Something else.

Once you know your character's driving need, weave it into everything he/she does. In your story, it's the reason for their existence.

Rule #2: Figure out what the heck is standing in the way of your protagonist achieving their goal.

Whatever your character wants most in life (whatever it is they are chasing) is the motivation for the story. Whatever stands in their way creates conflict. And conflict is the reason we stay tuned to the story, because we want to find out what happens.

“Compelling conflict is the gas that creates and sustains narrative momentum. Without it, the story inherently runs out of steam.”

– Corey Mandell, screenwriter



One of the best ways to create a character that readers will follow is to challenge your character with either an *internal* or *external* conflict (or both)... something that will consume him if not overcome.

Corey Mandell's 10 Most Common Reasons Scripts are Rejected: (Focus on the last five in BOLD.)

1. The script has a by-the-numbers execution (paint by numbers/formula).
2. The story is too thin (20 pages worth of story spread over 100 pages).
3. The narrative falls into a repetitive pattern.
4. The story begins too late in the script.
5. **The scenes are void of meaningful conflict.**
6. **The protagonist is a standard-issue hero (not compelling).**
7. **The villains are cartoonish, evil for the sake of evil.**
8. **The character logic is muddy (characters' actions/motivations aren't clear or believable).**
9. **The female characters are underwritten.**
10. **The conflict is inconsequential (flash-in-the-pan).**

These last five points all have to do with conflict or character, which are inseparable. This tells you how important it is to focus on creating compelling characters and meaningful conflict they can work to overcome.



WHAT MAKES A CHARACTER ORDINARY OR BORING?

- They have no depth.
- They are a cliché.
- Their personality is vanilla. No flavor.
- They are lazy – the story happens to them.
- They are too familiar; we've seen them many times before.
- Their actions are predictable.

Bottom-line, don't commit one of these errors unless your character really is boring, and then you'll still need to find a way for us to love them.



HOW TO DEVELOP A CHARACTER

The idea of characterization is the information that you, as the author, develops *about* the characters to create a complete picture as to who they are, why they're in the story, and why they behave as they do.

Of course, the first thing you'll do is to fill in a basic template for your lead character (or any character). This includes things like:

- Physical appearance
- Age/Gender
- Speech patterns
- Skills
- Likes/dislikes
- Habits/Quirks
- Married/unmarried
- Job/career

In other words, add anything that fits into 'general' information about your character. This is the 'basic' stuff. Just don't stop here.

How do you create a 3-dimensional character?

Remember, I said in the beginning that we would be creating 3-dimensional characters. That's because they are far more interesting, unpredictable, and more compelling for readers to follow.

To do that, we will go beyond the basics and build in physical, emotional, and psychological wants and desires, along with real flaws and regrets that may haunt and inhibit them, giving them an opportunity to grow as a result of what happens to them in the story.

The first thing you'll do is build in a character's *backstory*.

A character's backstory is the *chronological set of events invented by the author to frame the character's life leading up to the storyline*. The backstory helps to explain *why* the character makes the decisions they do and why they behave in a certain way.

The backstory will include details that impacted the character's life in either a positive or negative way. This might include things like major wins or awards that boosted their ego or social status. It could include being bullied or abused as a child or a devastating accident that impacted them or someone else. A death in the family almost always affects a young person in ways they don't understand until maybe later in life.

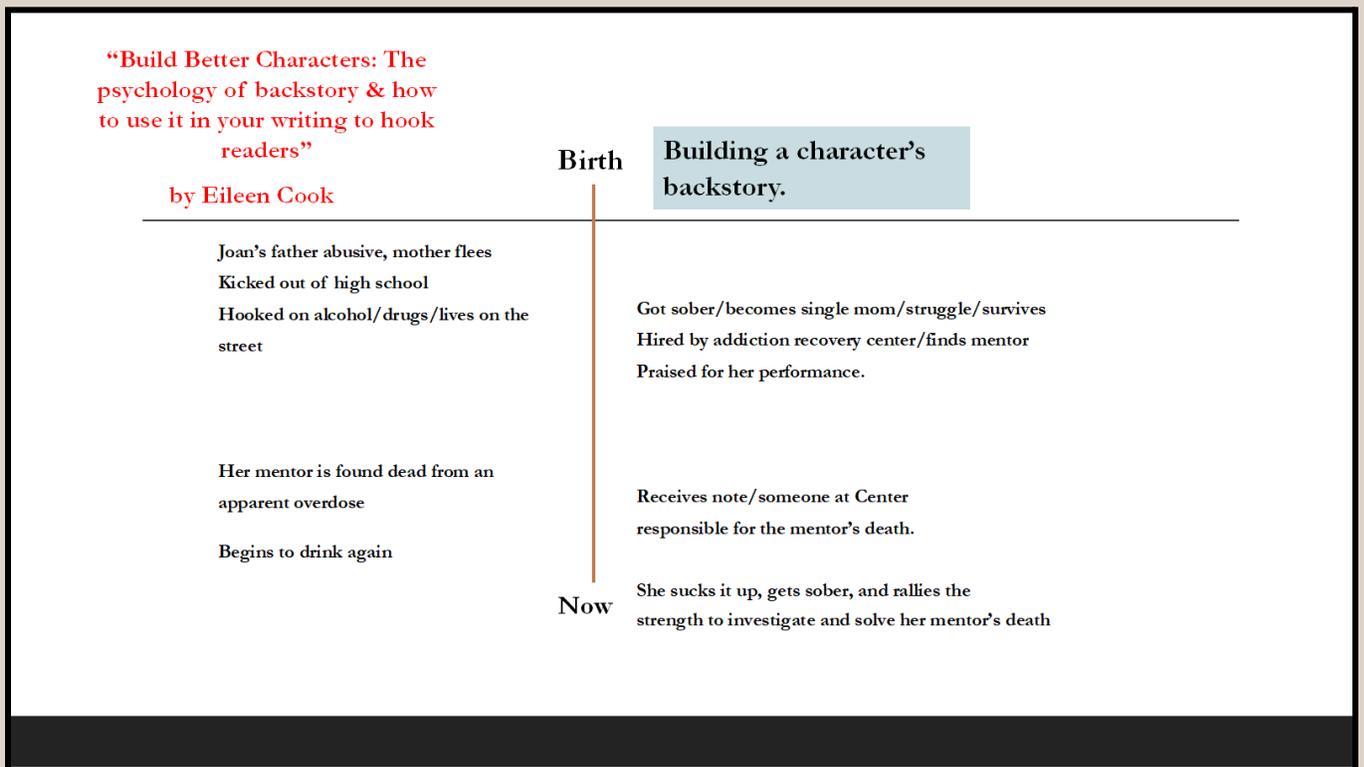
A character's backstory would also include things like addiction, PTSD, learning disabilities, or mental health issues. Think of how a close family member's mental health issues might affect your character, especially when they were young. How did they cope with it, and how does it affect them as an adult?

When creating your character's backstory, it isn't necessary to fill in every day of every year of their life. You're looking for memorable things that happened during their lifetime that molded them into who they are today.

Note: The backstory is meant to give you a frame with which to picture your character. Don't feel you have to include every single detail of their backstory in your story. For instance, in my Old Maids of Mercer Island stories, I didn't mention until book three that a major character had had a schizophrenic brother who committed suicide because until then, it wasn't relevant to the story.

Eileen Cook, who wrote *“Build Better Characters: The psychology of backstory and how to use it in your writing to hook readers,”* includes a great way to map your character’s backstory in her book. She admits she stole it from someone else, so I’m admitting that I’m stealing it from her.

Anyway, it’s a simple but effective way to create a visual timeline of the major incidents in a character’s life. See below:



To be really effective, you’d probably want to add in the year the incidents happened and/or the age of the character at that time.

So... how does a character’s backstory play out in your book? Consider a man who always taps his foot when he’s in a restaurant with anyone, and his eyes are constantly shifting around the room. What does that tell you about that character? Perhaps...

- He has a tick or he’s ADHD.
- He’s impatient and suspicious because of an incident when he was young.
- He’s strung out on drugs.



•**Or...** perhaps he's a veteran home from several tours in combat who suffers from PTSD and is always waiting for the next bomb to go off. He's wary. Hypersensitive. Jumpy.

And of those would work, but it shows you how many explanations there could be for just one quirky behavior. And there could be more.

BEYOND BACKSTORY

For a true 3-dimensional character, you'll need to go beyond their backstory. Therefore, I challenge you to dig deeper by adding to your character's psychological profile by answering at least one of the following questions:

- What gets your character out of bed every day?
- What makes them bleed emotionally?
- What makes them drool with anticipation?
- What's their deepest, darkest secret?
- What/who inspires them?
- What's broken in them?
- What does he/she do when no one is looking?
- What would make him feel like a 'fish out of water?'

I look at those questions and think that having the opportunity to be creative everyday is what gets *me* out of bed every day. Any time an animal suffers, I bleed emotionally. Julia, the lead character in my Old Maids of Mercer Island mysteries, drools with anticipation over chocolate or anything sweet. When no one is looking, she often makes snide remarks about people.

These kinds of questions really deepen your character and make them more interesting to readers. I'm sure you could come up with more questions than I have listed here. Look at your main character and consider something about them that most people can't see on the surface. Does someone popping gum make them want to shove that gum right down their throat? Are they drawn to people who can make them laugh? Do they cringe whenever someone chews with their mouth open?

Small things like these can add some great moments in your story and enhance them as a character.

Okay, you've created an intricate and plausible backstory for your protagonist and developed a couple of interesting psychological components for them. *Now what?*

While the details of a character's backstory and profile make the character interesting, just the fact that your lead character was abused as a child or lives to win the Pulitzer Prize doesn't necessarily make her compelling.

It's how you *use and reveal* that information to your audience that will help to compel readers or viewers to stay tuned.

What do I mean by 'use?' You can...

- 1. *USE* a character's *internal conflict* to enrich characterization.**
- 2. *USE* dialogue to help define your main character.**
- 3. *USE* secondary players to frame and/or reveal interesting information about your main character.**



1) What are your character's internal conflicts?

Internal conflicts are the puzzle pieces that help make up and even complicate your character's profile. Your character may or may not be aware of them, which means they might fight these demons on the surface or hidden from public view.

A character's internal conflicts can add another layer to the character's personality, and the impact of a character's

inner demons might play out as:

- Mental Health Issues/addiction
- Relationship Struggles
- Limiting Beliefs
- Childhood experiences (neglect, abuse, abandonment)
- Past Traumatic Experiences
- Self-Doubt and Low Self-Esteem
- Depression and Loneliness
- Guilt and Regret

Most writing instructors will tell you to make your main character suffer and not to let them off the hook too easily. The suffering can be a result of the external or internal conflict(s) they're fighting against.

2) How can writers use both internal and external conflict to enrich characters?

- *To create more tension:* which keeps readers turning the pages and viewers glued to the screen.
- *To increase consequences:* there must be potential consequences (stakes) to any conflict, or no one will care whether the conflict is resolved or not.
- *To enhance character development:* so that we experience their frustrations, struggles, failures, successes, and growth right along with them.



In *Lord of the Rings*, all Frodo wants to do is to dump the ring and go home. But Tolkien constantly increases the tension on his protagonist.

He introduces multiple ways to stop Frodo and test his courage, his resolve, and his belief in himself to finish the job. Through all three books, he even increases the consequences of failure. That, and the ring itself, begin to affect Frodo psychologically. Eventually, he separates himself from the others, and in the end, leaves the Shire to go live with the Elves.

3) How Does a Writer Use Internal Conflict to Enrich Their Lead Character?

The author can...

1. Hide the character's conflict(s) behind a mask.
2. Have the hero either ignore her shortcomings or fail to identify them all together.
3. Allow the hero to misdiagnose her internal conflict.

These allow your character to be vulnerable and in some cases fragile. Let's explore.



a) HIDING BEHIND A MASK

Having your lead character hide behind a mask is a great way to allow the audience in on the inner conflicts they may be dealing with, while other characters in the book may be completely unaware.

EXAMPLE: Imagine a woman who went away to college when she was young and was raped there. It destroyed her emotionally, and although she goes on with her life, she never tells anyone about the rape. Now, she's discussing her daughter's wish to go away to college and is panicked because she's secretly afraid the same thing will happen to her daughter.

How does this affect their relationship? Here's an example of how that could play out.

"Jamie, I don't think it's a good idea to go so far away to school."

"Why not, Mom? What's the big deal? You did."

"Yes, but you'll have to pay out-of-state fees. It will be far more expensive."

"I'll get scholarships. Don't worry. It'll be fine."

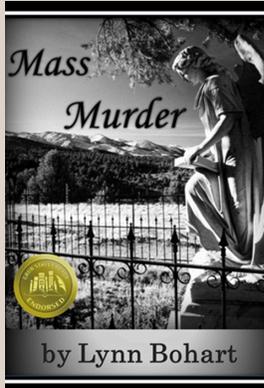
"But it also means you won't be home for birthdays and most holidays. We'll hardly ever see you."

"Mom, I'll always come home at Christmas. And with technology, we can facetime. Florida State has the program I want."

"So does WSU. You could go there and be far enough away to have your privacy but close enough to come home occasionally. And it's in-state, so it would be cheaper."

"Mom! This is something I've dreamed of my whole life. Why are you making this so difficult?"

Do you see the strain between them? They both feel it, and yet the mother hides her fear behind a mask, not willing to confess to the truth. At some point in her life, the mother will have to face her fears.



b) IGNORING THE INNER CONFLICT

What happens when your character may be aware of their inner conflict but purposely ignores it? How does that affect their relationships and their life?

EXAMPLE: From my book Mass Murder.

Set-up: Detective Giorgio Salvatori's father was a cop and died in the line of duty when Giorgio was 16. Giorgio was forced to become the man of the house and has had to be in control of his life ever since. In this scene, his wife has just told him she's pregnant with their third child. He's in the car with his brother, Rocky, on their way to a murder investigation.

"Whoa. I thought you said you were going to stop at two," Rocky said.

"We did, but I guess...we didn't. Something went wrong. It happens." Giorgio sighed deeply. "God, three kids on a detective's salary. It's tight now. I want good things for Angie. For the kids. I don't want to have to scrape all my life."

"Angie could go back to teaching."

"I don't want Angie to have to work!"

"Jesus, Jo Jo. You can't control everything. This is the twenty-first century. Women work. What's the big deal? And she loved teaching."

"The big deal is I don't want her to have to work, Rocky. And I'm not trying to control everything!" Giorgio snapped. "Look, I'd support anything Angie really wanted to do, but she doesn't really want to work. She wants to stay home with the kids. It's all about kids with Angie. Besides, this isn't what we planned!"

That last line says it all – Giorgio doesn't want to give up control. He likes to be in control, but he's ignoring it in this instance because the news about a third child has rattled him, and he doesn't quite know how to deal with it.,



c) MISDIAGNOSING THE INNER CONFLICT

Let's return to our military veteran for this one.

EXAMPLE: Let's say he is now 50-years-old, but at the age of 26, a few years after he returned home from military service, two drug addicts broke into his home and raped and murdered his wife. Although he fought back, he was wounded and knocked out.

What behavior might he exhibit because he misdiagnoses the problem? Perhaps...

Deep down, he believes it's his fault for not being able to protect his wife.

-And so he drinks heavily to make himself feel better.

He is angry at the world for what happened.

-And so he gets into a lot of arguments and fights.

He believes he's always been unlucky and that the bad luck bleeds off onto other people in his life.

-And so he isolates himself – no wife, no family, no friends.

He believes he was weak.

-And so he becomes obsessed with martial arts and MMA fighting.

Any of those would make an interesting characteristic for your protagonist and create some great conflict for him during the course of your plot.

So, you've seen how these three internal conflicts can be used to deepen your character and your story.

- 1. The woman who was raped hides her conflict behind a mask.**
- 2. Det. Salvatori ignores his deep need for control.**
- 3. The soldier keeps misdiagnosing his internal conflict.**



USE DIALOGUE TO HELP DEFINE YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS

How can dialogue help to establish your character?
Well... in all the following ways.

- a. Good dialogue provides 4 major functions:
 - It provides information
 - Advances the plot
 - Reveals emotion**
 - Exposes character**
- b. Good dialogue reveals **character values and personality.**
- c. Dialogue can also help distinguish one character from another.
- d. Dialogue can **frame your character through what other characters say about him/her.**

EXAMPLE: Mass Murder set-up: Detective Giorgio Salvatori is with his brother Rocky at the theater, having just come off stage in a play.

Here's how dialogue can reveal 'vulnerability' in a character.

"I'm glad you liked the play, Rocky. Where's Angie?"

"She's waiting for you in the lobby with the kids. Hey, Tony loved the stabbing. He wants you to show him how they did it."

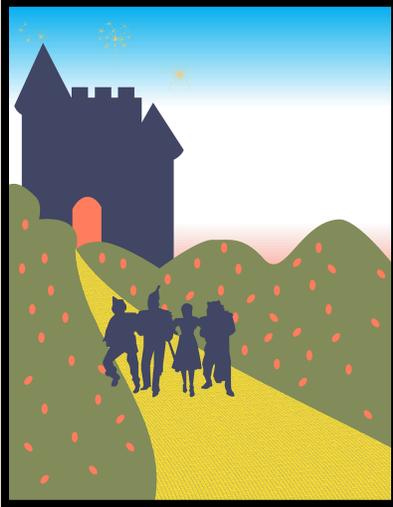
"Yeah, but what did Angie say?"

"Oh, you know Angie. She never says much, but she loved it. She loves everything you do."

"Daddy, you were wonderful," his daughter says, running up to him.

"Thanks, honey. But what'd your mom think?"

That little bit of dialogue reveals how much Giorgio depends on his wife's opinion, which is a vulnerability. This is a nice insight into his personality.



Consider the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*

He says, *“I’ll go in there for Dorothy. Wicked Witch or no Wicked Witch, guards or no guards, I’ll tear them apart. I may not come out alive, but I’m going in there. There’s only one thing I want you fellas to do... talk me out of it.”*

Here, if we didn’t already know it, through a little bit of dialogue, the Cowardly Lion shows that he’s all bluster and has no courage at all.

USING SUPPORTING CHARACTERS TO FRAME AND/OR REVEAL YOUR MAIN CHARACTER



“The glory of the protagonist is always paid for by a lot of secondary characters.”

–Tony Hoagland

Many times, a supporting character can be our favorite. That might be because they provide comic relief or provide unusual insight into the main character. If you look at Samwise Gangee in *Lord of the Rings*, he is Frodo’s constant companion, and we are more loyal to Frodo because of it. In the *National Treasure* movies, the character of Riley Poole helps to reduce tension with his comic dialogue. Dr. Watson helps to explain and even temper the character of Sherlock Holmes.

So, how do you use secondary characters in a story? You can use them to...

- Advance the plot
- Create subplots
- Help develop themes
- Set the tone of a scene
- Heighten conflict
- Reveal important information
- **Provide insight to the main character(s) and help to enrich their character development.**

That's right, you can use your secondary characters to help reveal important aspects of your main character.

Let's use my first book *Grave Doubts* as an example. Lee Vanderhaven is the main character, and her best friend Diane was found dead from an overdose of insulin. The police ruled it a suicide, but Lee is convinced it wasn't.

This is a conversation Lee has with her brother right after Diane's funeral.

"You're going to see Detective Grady because you don't think Diane killed herself. How could you? Diane was the toughest broad I ever met. I used to think she was a man with tits."

"Patrick!" Lee screamed.

"I don't mean she didn't have feelings, but she always acted with such purpose, such focus. You know what I mean? I picture people who kill themselves as being, I don't know, kind of lost. Like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Lost, you know, when was the last time you had a date?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"When was the last time you took a vacation?"

“Who the hell cares?”

“When was the last time you did anything for yourself?”

In this exchange, we learn something about Lee that she would have never revealed herself. Because she would never reveal it herself, I used a secondary character to give the reader that insight.

Supporting characters are especially good at revealing the main character’s shortcomings and vulnerabilities.

A WORD ABOUT ANTAGONISTS (OR THE STORY VILLAINS)

These are the people (or organizations) we love to hate. But how should you develop your antagonist? Don’t skimp on the details. Make them as real as possible, with the same kind of vulnerabilities your protagonist has—just harder to find and obliterate.

And don’t forget, the antagonist:

- exists to change the trajectory of the plot, complicate matters, and work against your protagonist.
- doesn’t necessarily know they are the antagonist. They may firmly believe they are the good guy, doing things for the right reason.
- has wants, needs and desires, just like everyone else. Ask yourself what your antagonist believes. How do they see the world? How do they view the protagonist and the goal(s) he/she has set?

Think about some of your favorite villains. Darth Vader? Voldemort? Cruella De Vil? Wicked Witch of the West? Sherlock Holmes’ Moriarty?

What made them so compelling?

“You don’t really understand an antagonist until you understand why he’s a protagonist in his own version of the world.”

– John Rogers

A WORD ABOUT HOW ACTORS APPROACH A CHARACTER

You've always heard that when actors approach a character, they look for the character's 'motivation.' Well, it's true. An actor will search the script for the inner motivation that drives the character to behave the way they do. In the absence of this information, they will create their own scenarios from which to draw.

Why is this important?

If actors are going to look for those character subtleties, then readers will, too. And if they're not there, readers might just quit the story.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT MOTIVATION VS DRIVING FORCE

There is a difference between motivation and driving force. You might be motivated to eat better if you want to lose weight. But if your mother died young from obesity and heart disease, that may be the driving force that leads you to a healthier lifestyle. The driving force is stronger. Let's look at a couple of fictional characters.

John McClane, the Bruce Willis character in *Die Hard*, is a cop and naturally motivated to stop the bad guys. In this movie, however, his driving force is that his wife is being held hostage along with a couple hundred other people. Therefore, he has to stop the bad guys and save his wife.

In *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's motivation is to destroy the ring because it's evil. His driving force, however, is to save his home because he knows the ring has the power to destroy all of Middle Earth.

In my book *No Place Like Home For a Murder*, Julia Applegate's motivation to solve the murder is to exonerate a friend who has been accused of the crime. But her driving need is really a deep need for justice. To her, wrong can't win.

The driving force changes the intensity of your character's goal and is a far more compelling reason for readers to then follow your character(s).

YOUR TAKEAWAYS

1. You have learned about your main character's driving need and the conflict that inhibits them.
2. You've learned how to create 3-dimensional characters by using backstory, psychological profile information, and individual emotional needs.
3. You've learned how to challenge the character's inner conflict(s) and/or belief system to add depth and richness to the story by having them hide behind a mask, ignore, or misdiagnose their shortcomings .
4. You've seen how dialogue can be used for more than just basic information. It can be used to reveal and enrich the reader's understanding of your characters.
5. You've seen how secondary characters can be used to help reveal important aspects about your lead characters your readers wouldn't learn any other way.



After retiring from a 35+ year career in the nonprofit world, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company, Lil Dog Communications, and now writes for clients all over the world. She holds a master’s degree in theater, has taught “Crafting the Story” through Green River College for 10+ years, and has written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter.

Currently, she has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and now three nonfiction books on Amazon, along with several books on writing offered through her website.

As a mystery and true crime aficionado, she has redesigned her author website into ***The No Alibi Zone*** to showcase criminal investigations. Her bi-monthly newsletter called “Let’s Talk About Murder,” includes blog posts and interviews with people who talk about, write about, and investigate crime. You can sign up to receive the newsletter for free by going here on her website: [Sign up here](#).

If you’re interested in book coaching services, you can reach out to Lynn here: Lildog67@icloud.com. Or visit her website at www.lynnbohart-author.com.

Would you like to pick up one of the companion books in this series? Click [HERE](#).

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[Murder in the Past Tense](#)

[The Essence of Murder](#)

Old Maids of Mercer Island Series

[Inn Keeping with Murder](#)

[A Candidate for Murder](#)

[A History of Murder](#)

[All Roads Lead to Murder](#)

[The Key to Murder](#)

[No Place Like Home for a Murder](#)

The Unstoppables

[Case of the Missing Will \(YA book\)](#)

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