Section 11, Master Class: Creating 3-Dimensional, Non-Stereotypical, Memorable Characters

Write-by-the-Lake Writer’s Workshop & Retreat

June 16-20, 2014

9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day

Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

UW-Madison Continuing Studies & UW-Madison Dept. of English

Instructor: Marilyn R. Atlas

How and why does a viewer or reader become intrigued and invested in the life of a memorable character?

What makes us remember a character?

What constitutes three-dimensional, memorable characters? It is a conscious interweaving of characters’ thoughts, wants, goals, secrets, flaws, and delusions.

For a character to move us he must move the plot forward in a true way that is consistent with his DNA. We will discuss several facets of the “evolution of personality” that are present in the best screen and television examples.

The instructor will be giving handouts and writer prompts. Students should be familiar with popular films/TV shows that will be suggested by the instructor in advance of the first class.

Marilyn R. Atlas, Marilyn Atlas Management

Marilyn is equally at home in the worlds of film, television, and live theater. Among her film credits are Real Women Have Curves for HBO—which won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival—A Certain Desire, starring Sam Waterston, and Brides March for Lifetime Television. Additionally, she produced the award-winning play, To Gillian on her 37th Birthday. She is scheduled to begin production in 2013 on a new play in San Antonio and is working with a first time YA novelist to bring their book to the screen. She is featured in the book
Write Now! by Penguin/Tarcher Press, and is co-authoring a book on character. Committed to projects that reflect diversity, Marilyn has been a constant presence at the National Association for Latino Independent Producers writer and producer conferences, as well as at various industry events, film festivals, and schools across the country.

SYLLABUS

DAY ONE:

What makes characters memorable… and why?

I. Discussion of stereotypical, clichéd characters vs. memorable characters
   a. Illustrations through specific examples from film and television (Jessa from Girls, Tony Stark, The Wire, The Good Wife, Breaking Bad, Mad Men, 500 Days of Summer, Thelma and Louise)

Discussion of how to achieve three-dimensional characters
   a. Enneagrams – 9 Types
   b. Myer-briggs personality type
   c. Archetypes
   d. Astrology
   e. Numerology
   f. Animal metaphor -- character exercise

In order for a character to be three-dimensional, he or she must have many traits or qualities -- and these traits have to counterbalance one another to make some kind of rational whole.

How to view your character from the following standpoints:
   a. Physiological
   b. Psychological
   c. Sociological
   d. Importance of duality in memorable characters
   e. Avoid writing characters who behave in too predictable a manner
   f. Class writes stereotypical-character scene -- group exercise
   g. Homework: Rewrite as 3-dimensional -- exercise

DAY TWO:

Are you writing clichés? Take control and make braver choices!
II. Discussion and exercises to get you into your creative space

Describing the state of mind of a writer

a. Seeking, questioning, pushing
b. What it feels like not to make safe choices
c. Trusting your gut, but not always following a plan
d. Skewing a scene to make it more purposefully awkward, extreme, or painful
e. Re-working one of your scenes, entering new territory -- exercise
f. How to avoid coming to conclusions for your character
g. Letting your character behave in a seemingly irrational way
h. Revealing a secret want, a secret even from you
i. Fixing stereotypical scene from yesterday -- exercise

If done well, how are characters introduced tells us something about who they are:

a. Marilyn screens scenes from different movies
b. Character intros are condensed portraits of their function in a movie
c. The pacing of this first scene fits the genre of the piece
d. We learn more than what they do or who they care about, we pick up on something essential
e. Homework: Create a bio for your character -- exercise

DAY THREE:

How do you surprise your audience from the very beginning?

III. Cultural coding

a. Movies or television shows that trade in cultural coding are cited
b. Scene from Crash discussed
c. How to pivot from a character’s first impression
d. Relationship of the viewer or reader to the reveal… playing off audience expectations because of genre and character archetype
e. The character walking/talking/interacting comes to expand our understanding, turning it on its axis

How do you start to see your character as a person with quirks and inconsistencies?

IV. Write what you know – and what you don’t
DAY FOUR:

*How do you learn what really drives your character?*

V. Discussion of “want” vs. “need”

   a. Understanding the character’s essential must-have need, which underpins his stated desires
   b. Determining what is rooted in personality
   c. Determining what is simply based on a social, professional, or relationship role?
   d. How to put stresses on the external goal and internal need
   e. Want, desire, status quo method of going after goal
   f. The need to change fundamentally in outward approach to pursue and achieve that goal
   g. Discussion of handout for students’ projects re: character, dialogue, marketability, etc.
   h. Outlining the 3 things students want to accomplish in rewriting 1 scene: a plot point, a change in the relationship in the characters (subtle or major), something else building on or developing (theme/subtext/back story), etc. -- exercise
   i. Rewriting a scene -- a work of theirs – exercise. Read to class.

DAY FIVE:

*How do you hint at the character’s past setbacks?*

VI. Discussion of the importance of the wound… for all characters

   a. Discussion of characters’ wounds in books and television
   b. The 5 Fs
   c. Trauma results in behavior that is continually expressed in tense situations, and unconsciously in daily mundane situations.

   *How do you create and hint at ongoing interior conflict for the character?*
VII. Subtext: how to avoid “writing on the nose”

a. Discussion of what subtext is
b. Showing and reading a scene from American Beauty
c. How does subtext give us clues to who characters are?
d. What subtext hides: pain, embarrassment, hatred, love, guilt, doubt, fear, bravery
e. Good and bad examples of subtext
f. Subtext can be hopeful, not all instances of nuanced information is about the negative
g. Avoiding linear and obvious dialogue
h. Homework: taking 5 characters in mainstream movies/TV shows who offer a rich source of subtext, i.e. The Hurt Locker, Blue Jasmine, etc., and giving examples of subtext. Then, take a scene from your own work, showing more subtext and/or having something that reveals an important thematic thread.

*How do you balance clarity and subtlety in drawing in an audience to your character?*

VIII. The interactivity of subtext

a. Subtext is mostly a conversation between writer and audience
b. Subtext rewards an attentive audience
c. The audience knows something before the character does
d. The substance of the subtext eventually takes a character by violent surprise, though the clues were always there

**Credit Option:** Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.