

How to Create Characters?

Resources for Writers from Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock

Author Discussion with Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock

LWM: When I start with a main character, I know she has one thing she wants badly. For example: Alia wants to be a warrior; Margot wants to feel that she belongs; and Lyla wants to go to university so she won't always be poor. I also know that my character sees something standing in her way, so she isn't able to easily get what she wants. Alia hasn't impressed the warrior women with her skills. In fact, she fears her skills aren't good enough to impress them and she doesn't have much time to train and further develop her skills. Margot thinks she can't find the place where she belongs unless she leaves her home, but she doesn't have the money or resources to leave. Lyla doesn't have gold to pay for university, and she isn't sure how to impress a mage who does. What my characters want most and what they see as preventing them from getting what they want tells me a lot about who they are.

DW: Let me go back a step, because my characters never start with such a clear desire/goal and problem. Usually I have more of a situation idea first and have to find a character to fit into it. Sometimes I have a sudden glimpse of a person, usually doing something; for example, I was on a long hike in the White Mountains when I had a sudden image of a guy selling hot dogs from a wagon on a street corner (I must have been hungry). "Who is this guy?" That's the question that led to a one-act play called Red Hots. Carver started off like that: I wanted to write about a

kid who had a talent, like wood carving...but even before that I had had the idea of a boy, out fishing, who tangled a floating branch in his line and, lo and behold, it turned out to be a wand. When the time came to turn this into a real story, I had to ask, "Who is this guy?" I combined the wand with the wood carving and then went deeper, to ask what he really wanted and, as you point out, why he couldn't get it. So you're absolutely right that the person and the problem are the key to the story. But I don't want to give any aspiring writers the idea that they spring full blown and blowing from my mind. How do you get to the desire/problem? Do you "interrogate the character", as Orson Scott Card would say, or do you write a biography or a list of characteristics?

LWM: I don't know how I get to characters' central desires/problems. For me, that's simply the start of the whole process -- the first thing that comes to me about characters and stories. I do get images like you do, but until that characters' central desires/problems come to me, the images just float aimlessly around in my head. I used to write biographies and lists of characteristics, but now I mostly begin by writing scenes. Sometimes these scenes end up in the actual story, and sometimes they don't: I guess the process is like compiling snapshot moments from characters' lives, but instead of creating photos or pictures, I write out the moments with words. I use this process for creating all my characters. Do you have a different process for creating secondary characters? Or do you use the same process for creating all your characters?

DW: I use the same process for all of my characters, with the exception of the spear carriers -- the people who only appear in order to deliver a message or die in a battle. I like to give them characteristics, but there's no need to give them depth of character. In fact, if you spend too much time on these functionaries, you risk fooling your reader into thinking they are important. The secondary characters -- the parents, sidekicks, stepmothers, villains, and others who play important roles -- require the same attention to wants, needs, likes, looks, frustrations as the main character, but not so much that they become a focus. In the first draft of Sky Carver, I spent far too much time on Raven's relationship with her mother and with her disgust for the conditions in Dunsow. My editor pointed out that I was losing the focus on Carver's story, so I cut those out. I didn't actually use them in Raven, but they certainly helped to develop that story. The point about process though is that I go through the same sort of questioning process: Who are these people? What do they want? Why can't they get it? But, because I know they are supporting cast, I tone down the answers. I also find that my characters grow and develop while I'm writing the story, and sometimes I have to change a scene because they refuse to do the action I had originally envisioned. It's just not something this richer, more complete character would do. Does that happen to you?

LWM: Absolutely. Which I think is a very great thing. Every character has a whole lifetime of stories...even if these stories don't fit into one novel.

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Writing Activities

We Are What We Do – Write a short scene in which you describe your character through action more than looks. You can throw in a habitual garment or mention a single physical characteristic, but stick to habitual actions and phrases while your character enters a room, plays a sport, greets a friend or similar. Remember, unless your character has a hunchback or some other feature that truly distinguishes them, what they do is far more important than what they look like.

Draw Your Character's Avatar – People tend to make their avatars a bit idealized; for example, skinnier than they really are or better guitar players. Think a bit on what your character wants to look like but doesn't, or wants to do well but can't. Then draw your character's idealized avatar. If your character lives long ago and/or far away and wouldn't design an avatar, create an idealized portrait of your character.

Treasure Box – Most people have a collection of treasures, things they've picked up in their travels. These treasures remind them of important people or events in their lives. Construct a treasure box and decorate it the way you think your character would. Consider what items your character would put in the box and why. Then draw or collect these items to put in the treasure box.

Resources for Creating Characters

Elementary School

- “What a Character” and “Exclusive Interview with Your Character” in The American Girl Library's [Writing Smarts](#).
- Eileen Christelow's [What Do Authors Do?](#)

Middle School

- Marion Dane Bauer's “Character...The Key to Good Stories” and “Bringing Characters to Life” in [What's Your Story: A Young Person's Guide to Writing Fiction](#).
- Gail Carson Levine's “Character Helper” in [Writing Magic](#).

High School

- Orson Scott Card's [Character and Viewpoint](#).
- Diana Wynne Jones's “Heroes” at <http://www.leemac.freemove.co.uk/heroes.htm>
- Patricia C. Wrede's “Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions” at <http://www.sfga.org/writing/worldbuilding1.htm>

Advanced/Adult Content – everything listed above, plus –

- Robert Olen Butler's “Yearning” in [From Where You Dream](#).
- E.M. Forster's “People” and “People (continued)” in [Aspects of the Novel](#).
- Anne Lamott's “Character” in [Bird by Bird](#).

Author Bios

Laura Williams McCaffrey is a full-time writer and writing teacher. Her forthcoming novel is a dystopic fantasy for teens. She's the author of two other YA fantasy novels, [Water Shaper](#) (*NYPL Books for the Teen Age list 2007*) and [Alia Waking](#) (*IRA Notable Book*). Laura is on the faculty at Solstice, the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College. Additionally, she teaches writing at Pacem Learning Community, a learning center for homeschoolers, and is regularly a writer-in-residence at schools and writing camps.

Dean Whitlock is a military brat who likes to think that living in so many different places naturally drove him into a fantasy world. Now he does most of his traveling through his stories (but only for want of money and time!). He is the author of two YA novels ([Sky Carver](#) and [Raven](#), both from Clarion Books), three handfuls of short stories, and several plays and murder mystery events. He also visits schools to read and teach whenever he can. He believes that imagination is the key difference between humans and other animals, because his students can always envision such wonderful stories, no matter what grade they're in or how much they know about commas.

For more information or resources, visit:
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