

“An Affection for Flawed Characters”

San Diego Book Review, November 1, 2015

A good story is all about character. And plot is also character. Even action-thrillers are driven by a hero or heroine. As a novelist, I always aim for intriguing characters who stand out from the page, fully formed, coming so alive the reader understands them, may love them, sometimes hate them, or sometimes both. The more complex the motivation, the more freedom I have to reveal each character had something that could have been appealing, could have made them a better person, given the right circumstances. I have a deep affection for flawed characters. That does not mean I want to be their friend.

The most daunting feat for me, in writing a novel, is the psychology of the characters, to make them understandable so that the reader can connect with each of them. Begin with a stereotype and you have nothing-- a cartoon. Begin with a richly-drawn, three-dimensional character and you will reveal someone universal. Characters must be authentic. Real. And that means imperfect.

Character flaws, --blind spots—can explain the changes that take place later on as the plot unfolds. The double-bind dilemma: when the flaws become a catalyst for survival and change, when the main character must face her demons. Characters who don't keep promises or who are self-absorbed and vain,-- “I told you so” friends,-- here's where the novelist's double vision comes in. I can write from within the

character's viewpoint, sympathizing with (or at least understanding) her, while at the same time being perfectly aware of what outside readers think of her. I get to see both points of view: the character's and the reader's!

Conflicts arise. There's free will to make positive –or negative-- choices. Stuff happens. For a reason. We want a protagonist who takes charge of his or her life, and ends the story in a better place. The flawed character can be unappealing, but in the hero, those flaws can become strengths. However, these types of protagonists—anti-heroes-- require caution. A good example of a cautionary tale is Walter White, the anti-hero in the television series “Breaking Bad”, who teeters at the edge of revulsion from the viewer. Despising his ruthless behavior, the viewer should still be able to understand the intentions he had, even though misdirected. Life teaches lessons. Conflicts can be resolved.

In *Things Unsaid*, my clueless main character, Jules Foster, has to have more beneath the surface than what we first see. A brief scene can reveal her in a positive light, and this is essential to understanding her view of her family. As an author, I want to give the reader a glimpse into all the characters' souls so the reader begins to understand their poor decisions, hostile behavior, sour relationships. The “why” of who they are. Without the WHY, a reader is unable to connect, on a deeper level, with either the protagonist or those opposing her. In analyzing flawed characters, I hope the reader asks: “What blindsides me?”

Contrasts between positive and negative traits work best when they're not absolutes, but fluid and impermanent. Once I conceptualize the flaw, I think of each character's compensating positive traits. The weaknesses I find most fun to discover and write about are character traits that are not inherently negative. And, if all else fails, I can always resort to a love of animals. But, I never had to use that one in *Things Unsaid!*

So, for Aida, the main antagonist in the narrative, she became narcissistic because of broken dreams. The reader hopefully sees at least a glimmer of the person she could have been. The past is not an excuse for her behavior, but it is a window to understanding why she is the person she has become.

We all make mistakes. Surely everyone can name at least one thing in their lives they regret bitterly and wish had never happened, and which was their fault, as opposed to someone else's. I want to write in such a way that all the characters are revealed in an entirely new light at some point in their lives, surprising the reader who expected a different turn of events.