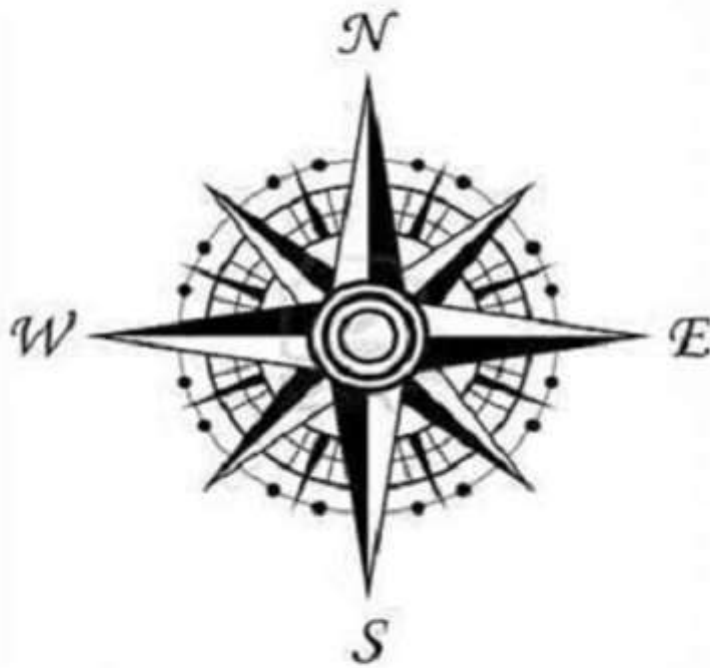


The Character Interview



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The Story Within Booklet Series

THE CHARACTER INTERVIEW

The trick to creating real characters is: **Imagining them already real.** *You* know they don't exist, that you are making them up-- but if you ever get too certain of that, you'll lose the magic of creation. Think of the characters as unique, multifaceted people that *you* know only a bit about, and set out to discover everything else.

If these characters were really real, you'd get acquainted in a variety of way, chief among them observation and conversation--watching and interviewing. I'm going to ask you to use these two techniques to discover -- to uncover-- one of your characters.

In this booklet, there are three different interviews:

Interview 1: Character/Plot Coherence, which looks at the requirements the plot places on the character. This is especially helpful if you're starting with a plot idea and need a character to fulfill it.

Interview 2: Character In-depth, which examines in depth the values, perceptions, and skills of the character. This is especially helpful if you have a character in hand but want more information so *you* can build a plot.

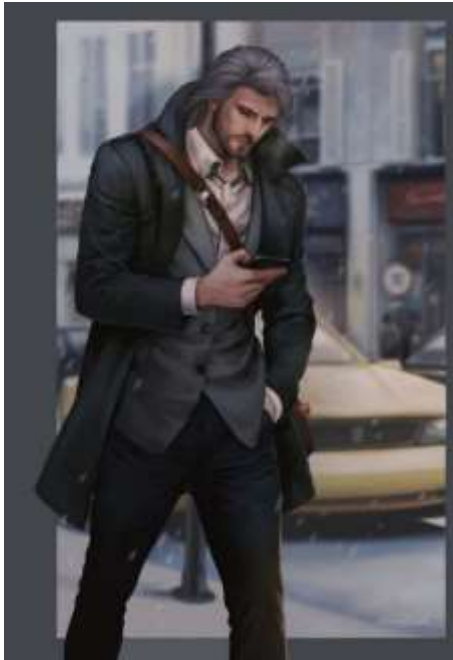
Interview 3: Family Dynamics, which builds some backstory for your character. This helps to provide a textured past and some understanding of how the character relates to others. If you are writing a family drama or saga, you might need this backstory to develop the interactions between the characters.

I also include an example of a self-designed interview. Once you know your character well, you might need to discover character attitudes, responses, and values specific to your plot. That's when you can direct your own interrogation, designed for this particular character, complete with follow-up questions and cross-examination. (Yes, sometimes your own character is a hostile witness!)

So... choose a character you want to become better acquainted with. Make it a major character-- the hero, the heroine, or the villain --- someone who has an essential effect on the plot. Work with that one character first, then apply this technique to others later if you like.

The interviews don't require much of you. Consider yourself the typist, and type what's being dictated to you by the character in your mind. Oh, yeah, I'm not *nuts*. I know the character doesn't really exist, that you're making it all up. But you already have the outline, and the substance is hidden up there in your subconscious. Free-writing will bring out what your mind has already made of this character, and also spark it to develop more.

I recommend **free-writing** as one of the best ways to tap into your subconscious and break writer's block. It's easy to do. To free-write, just set a timer for three or five or ten minutes, copy down a prompt or a question, and then write freely about it. Editing isn't allowed; neither is writer's block. If you can't think of anything to say, write the last word over and over until you get inspired. Don't worry! It never takes long. Remember to transcribe whatever your subconscious sends you, without regard for spelling, grammar, or organization. Often it's the digressions from the subject that provide the most fascinating insights. When the timer rings, you must stop-- unless, of course, you're so inspired you want to continue!



CHARACTER = PLOT

First off, I want to make clear that I don't believe in formulas for characters. The hero is the hero because he is the male lead who at some point in the book does something heroic, not because he can be described with some combination of adjectives that are supposed to add up to "hero." The heroine is the female lead who also does something heroic. She doesn't have to be feisty or big-breasted. And a villain doesn't have to be the embodiment of evil, just the character who is determined to keep the protagonist from doing what they need to do to achieve what they want.

Hero, heroine, villain. These are *roles*, not characters. The characters inhabit the role, but are not defined by it. The villain in one plot can be the hero in another— Patricia Veryan and Georgette Heyer had fun doing that, teaching the villain in Book 1 the humility and caring he needs to be the hero in Book 2. The whole point is for them to grow and change because of their experiences in the plot. Roles don't change much— characters do.

That's the most important lesson. Your character has to fit this plot, and this plot has to fit this character. To make this story unique, you have to make it able to happen only to this character and because of this character. That means this character has to be a unique person, not just a role. I hope you'll resolve right now, just for this exercise, to avoid the trap of the "generic hero" or "generic heroine". All heroes aren't arrogant; all heroines aren't spunky. If your character happens to be those, fine, but make sure those qualities are going to drive the plot in the ways you want it to go.

Just to illustrate, I'm going to use that adjective I've actually banned from descriptions of heroes in romance novels.

Arrogant. That's a word that describes many romantic and adventurous heroes, right? So, let's skip the shorthand. What does arrogant mean? You know how I describe the arrogant hero? A man who thinks it's his god-given right to leave the toilet seat up.

Now that's fine for some plots. But I can tell you a popular plot that begs for an un-arrogant hero. Espionage. Spies can't call attention to themselves. They must be observers, hiding in the shadows, analyzing the behavior of others. An arrogant man would never succeed as a spy. If he's arrogant, he is unlikely to be considering other people's psychology at all. They exist, in one way or another, to people his world. A spy, however, exists in someone else's world. He can't have an obvious effect on that world, or he will be discovered. He must remain the outsider— not only that, the secret outsider. You put an arrogant man in a spy plot, and try to remain true to the character, and you'll end up with Inspector Clouseau. A bumbling, unsuccessful spy, always drawing attention to himself.

A romantic plot which begs for an un-arrogant hero is one with a deeply troubled heroine. If she has been abused in the past by men, she knows all about arrogance. Not all arrogant men



are abusers, of course. But most abusers are arrogant, in that they think they have no duty to consider the desires or needs of other people. A woman who has felt the rough side of that attribute needs something that an arrogant man is going to find it very hard to give-- caring. Selfless devotion. Tenderness. Now the arrogant hero can be brought to caring and devotion, but the abused heroine, if she's smart, won't wait around to teach him. She hurts too much already. She'll find some guy who has already learned to consider others.



My point is that generic characters lead to generic plots, or they don't lead to their plots at all. You'll end up with an implausible story that has an arrogant spy swaggering around calling attention to himself and somehow still succeeding at espionage. (Hmrrn, sounds like Bond. James Bond.) Or with an improbable romance between a woman who needs love and a man who's unwilling to give it.

That's where the Character/Plot Interactions Interview can be useful. It focuses on what this character needs to fit into this plot, keeping them in constant interaction. The plot happens partly because of who this character is, and the events of the plot change the character, even as they are being shaped by the character's actions.

Don't feel you have to answer every question, or stop with just the simplest of answers. That's why you're free-writing. If you need to, explore-- with more questions-- the implications of the answers. You might ask these further questions: "How?" "Why?" and "What next?"



INTERVIEW 1: CHARACTER-PLOT COHERENCE

The secret to character-plot coherence is to make sure the story can happen this way only with this intersection of protagonist and event. The protagonist's actions and reactions are the driving force of the plot, and the events precipitated change him/her in some way.

This is not the only or the best way to write every story. Disaster movies, for example, are built on the premise that human beings caught up in catastrophe have little effect; that's why they have big casts of helpless characters. But protagonist-based stories, especially those in the popular fiction genres, can often benefit from the fitting of the events of the plot to the unique qualities of the main character(s). Indeed, that the main character should affect and be affected by the plot events is central to classical and Shakespearian drama. Try to imagine the play **Hamlet** with another character in the title role. It would turn out very differently, wouldn't it?

The key is identifying what is unique about this protagonist, both in relation to the story (Hamlet is the son of the murdered king) and to the rest of the world (Hamlet alone is committed to discovering the truth), and using those qualities to direct the plot. At the same time, you must decide what consequences the resulting events will have on the protagonist-- *not* on you or the average person, but the person with these unique qualities.

As you're answering these questions, be alert to possible plot events revealed by the answers. For example, if you answer "kill" to the question, "What is she unwilling to do to attain this goal?" then you might consider confronting her with just that dilemma in your story (kill or lose the goal), to show her determining what her primary values really are. Or maybe if you don't want her to have to kill, you might have something lesser, like "ask my father for help," that she can't imagine doing.

Interview 1 Questions

1. Why is this character in this story? Why this character? What about this character uniquely qualifies him or her to be the protagonist (or antagonist) of *this* story?

Note: Beware of the "Everyman" protagonist-- if anyone could star in this story, you're going to have a hard time individualizing the protagonist, or showing changes in reaction to the experience.

Plot Possibility: See if you can make this unique qualification show up early, so that it's available when the plot problem or story question arrives.

Examples:

- Mary is a daydreamer gazing out the classroom window and so is the only kid to see the aliens land on the playground.
- Daniel, an accountant, is the father of the kidnapped child.
- Charity is the most capable young lady in the parish, so naturally she's the one organizing the Midsummer festival.



2. How does the protagonist enter the story? Can you make it fit the "unique qualification" you identified above? Does the plot choose the protagonist or vice versa?

Plot Possibility: Starting the story when the protagonist "meets" the plot can hook the reader right away. Don't waste too much time on set-up-- you can always backtrack and explain later why the protagonist is the right person at the right time.

Examples:

- Charity knows if the festival preparations are left to a lesser sort, it won't earn much money for the Church Fund and her family will have to make up the difference. So she chooses to start the events that will make up the story.
- But the plot chooses Daniel-- he certainly didn't choose to have his son kidnapped.

3. What is the protagonist's goal at the start of the book? What is s/he willing to do for it? What is s/he unwilling to do?

Plot Possibility: What they're willing to do to achieve this goal can provide scenes of action (psychological and/or physical). What they're *unwilling* to do provides conflict. For example, the prisoner is willing to dig a tunnel with his dinner spoon, but unwilling to kill a guard. So what happens when the guard discovers his painstakingly dug tunnel?

Remember that the protagonist's goal is not necessarily the story's goal, and the achievement or failure to achieve that goal doesn't mean the protagonist can't achieve something else. The rebel might not accomplish her coup, but she might in the process of trying moderate the regime's worst abuses, or solve a murder, or fall in love. A particularly wrenching climax might require the protagonist to sacrifice her goal for a greater good.

Examples:

Often goals are obvious:

- Charity wants a successful festival.
- Daniel wants his son back.
- Mary wants to hide the aliens.
- A prisoner wants to escape from prison.
- A rebel wants to cause the overthrow of the government.

Sometimes the protagonist's goal is less tangible:

- A woman wants her father's approval.
- A man wants to prove himself.

Plot Possibility: Consider also that the protagonist might have a hidden agenda even s/he doesn't recognize.

Examples:

- Charity longs for excitement in a life full of routine if worthy tasks.
- Daniel wants to forget his wild wicked past and be respectable and law-abiding.
- Mary wants to be taken seriously.

This "internal goal" can be accomplished with or without accomplishing the "external goal." In fact, the story goal might be the accomplishment of that internal goal.

Plot Possibility: Of course, you can make this internal goal more intriguing if **it** has some other link to the other story aspects. How does it fit in with the unique qualification?

Examples:

- The scorn Mary has garnered for her dreaminess has created her need to be taken seriously. What if the internal goal is in conflict with the external goal? What happens if her need to be taken seriously means she has to reveal, not hide, the aliens?
- Charity wants excitement, but her whole job is geared toward avoiding mistakes and calamities and making her world as peaceful as possible.
- Daniel needs the help of his previous felonious friends to find his kidnapped son.

4. What quality sets this protagonist apart from anyone else?

Plot Possibility: If this is the hero or heroine, make this a basically admirable quality, like skill at some job or creativity or strength or a powerful passion/obsession for something worthwhile (art, success, ending hunger).

Examples:

- Charity is a manager, who manages people as well as events.
- Mary's the imaginative sort-- a daydreamer-- and so she is able to believe in aliens no matter how ludicrous it seems.

Plot Possibility: If your character has to be dragged into the plot, like Daniel, give him a quality that will make him less the victim and more the *cause* of events.

Example: Daniel has learned how to concentrate his anger-- he's chillingly efficient in his rage, the result of his youthful training as a member of a paramilitary motorcycle gang. (Hey, I just made that up! Good idea, huh?)



5. How can this same quality get the protagonist into trouble? How can it trip the character up during the course of the story?

Plot Possibility: Aristotle said tragedies require tragic heroes to have a tragic flaw. (I'm oversimplifying madly here.) The most coherent kind of tragic flaw is the obverse of the heroic quality: That which makes the hero great also brings on the downfall. So look at that heroic dimension of your character, and imagine how it might cause major problems in the plot.

Examples:

- Daniel's quality-- that concentrated rage-- can be used to cause the "plot problem." Say that before the story opens, a crooked corporate president asked him to cook the books, thinking that Daniel's checkered past in the Heck's Angels meant he was a felon at heart. Furious at what he considered an assault on his professional honor, Daniel played along with the client, while coolly assembling a locktight case that the president was cheating the stockholders. The president gets revenge by kidnapping Daniel's child.
- Charity's well-intended manipulation of her subordinates infuriates one, and leads him to plot against her.

6. What other effects might this quality have on the protagonist's life?

Plot Possibility: This is a good way to intersect with a subplot, especially those involving secondary characters. Does this quality cause trouble or make friends or generate income for the character in "real life"?

Examples:

- Mary's imagination has gotten her in lots of trouble with her rational parents, who see her flights of fancy as signs of mental instability. Enlisting them as allies in her quest to find and rescue the aliens (they've been confiscated by the Air Force) helps resolve the subplot of their troubled relationship.
- Charity thinks only other people ask for help— she doesn't need any. So when she finds out her brother has been gambling on the Midsummer games, she decides to take care of it herself.
- Daniel's cool intense approach to life has always put a barrier between him and his son. Perhaps he stays remote because he fears someday he will turn that icy fury against the boy. Risking all to foil the kidnapping can convince them both that Daniel really loves his son.



7. What other talents, gifts, or qualities can help the protagonist overcome the obstacles ahead?

Plot Possibility: This is where the character's history comes in handy. Look into the backstory for possible allies, skills, and knowledge that the protagonist already has. (You can always add backstory if you don't have it in there already!)

Examples:

- Daniel's motorcycle gang past gives him access to a very ruthless bunch of buddies. And surely the story cries out for a wild motorcycle chase through the desert, with the kid clinging to Daniel for dear life.
- Mary, a fourth-grader, can fit into places no adult can go, so she can circumvent base security by squeezing through the ventilation tunnels. Her techno-nerd parents have always provided her with state-of-the-art computer equipment and training, so she can log onto the general's desktop system and find the aliens' file.

8. Keep in mind the special quality/tragic flaw you've identified. How can that be used in a climactic scene where the goal is achieved or sacrificed or abandoned?

Plot Possibility: It helps to build a deadline into the plot, to add drama and urgency and to force the characters to deal with internal conflicts they've avoided so far.

Examples:

- Daniel's son will be killed in 24 hours.
- Mary's aliens will be dissected unless she can free them.
- The Midsummer festival must happen Friday no matter how messed up Charity's personal life has gotten in the meantime.

Plot Possibility: As the deadline approaches, see if the flaw can bring on the black moment, when all seems lost and the cause hopeless.

Examples:

- In a rage, Daniel kills a thug, only to realize that this man held the clue to the son's whereabouts.
- Charity's manipulated enemy exposes a secret of hers to the whole church, causing her removal as Midsummer organizer and the loss of the approval she has always needed.

Plot Possibility: After the black moment, however, the protagonist can reach deep down inside and come up with the resources needed to recover.

Examples:

- Mary's imagination helps her speculate successfully where a terrified alien might hide.
- Daniel uses his accounting skills to track down the villain through credit-card records.

Plot Possibility: The act of achievement of the goal can become the climax of the plot.

Example: Daniel breaking into the villain's desert hideout and rescuing his son, then escaping on the motorcycle, will be the culmination of all the tension-building events.



9. How are the events of the plot going to change the protagonist? What has s/he learned during the obstacle course? What was accomplished? How has life changed?

Plot Possibility: Some novels end right after the climax-- Daniel could escape with his son and ride off into the sunset. But the reader, after seeing the fictional world tossed topsy-turvy, likes to see it restored to some measure of equilibrium after all the excitement is over. The resolution ties up any remaining subplot strands, and shows how the protagonist and the world have changed.

Examples:

- Daniel, for example, still has to resolve the tension between him and his son, thus showing that the events of the story have had real effect on him. Now he's able to trust himself and his emotions more, and his son knows that he is loved. No doubt they will still have problems, but the major issue between them-- Daniel's deliberate distancing-- has been settled.
- Mary returns to fourth grade, a heroine now to her fellow students and her parents because of her connection to aliens.

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Plot Possibility: If the goal is sacrificed or lost, the moment of realization or decision can provide the emotional resolution of the book.

Example: Charity realizes that her disgrace is actually a liberation from her chain of duties. She makes the decision to cut those chains which bind her to the village, allowing her to accept the love of a wandering man.

Plot Possibility: Thus the distinctive quality comes into play in the resolution too. The protagonist must deal with it in a way consistent with what has happened in the story: Daniel (chilling rage) and Charity (managerial skills) will restrict its use, while Mary (imaginativeness) will glory in it.



PLEASE NOTE:

Writing guidelines, followed too faithfully, are always in danger of producing mechanistic stories: "Choose one special quality, one goal, three obstacles, and one decision, mix well, and bake at 350°." But coherent plotting will work well only if your protagonist has the potential to be a fully-formed human being, with qualities consistent and inconsistent with the special quality, a life beyond the events of the plot, and an openness to experience and change. That's a creation requiring a magic stronger than can be provided by any guidelines.

But if you have a human being, or at least a potential human being, in the driver's seat of your story, you can use the interaction of character and plot to develop each of them. Just keep asking: What sort of person would get involved in events like this? Having become involved, what would this person do?

How would those actions change the trajectory of the events? Then what changes or choices does this person have to make?

CHARACTER FROM INSIDE-OUT INTERVIEW

It's not enough that this character fits this plot. You still need to know more about who s/he is, and what that life is like, and what internal problems s/he might have to overcome.

That's where the in-depth interview comes in. Now you take off the hat of "author" and put on the one that says "character". Here's where you get to become your character. To get maximum subconscious effect, write in the person of your character. That's why I direct the questions to "you," meaning the character: so you the author can take on the voice of the character. You might be surprised at what the character will say if you act as a channel. I've found characters "telling" me events that I had not, up till that time, even imagined for them. I've also have found myself transferring whole interview answers verbatim into the dialogue and narrative of a book. Be open to this identity-takeover. You the author can always regain control later. (Trust me on this. I haven't lost anyone yet.)

Choose the questions that most intrigue you, but let the character guide the answers. See if you can write in character voice, rather than your own. If your character is a hardened, efficient cop, go with his clipped sentences and occasional police-jargon. You'll learn a great deal this way about how to portray his dialogue later.



FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Always keep in mind the lesser-included questions which link this character aspect to past and future:

- How did you get to be this way? (**How?**)
- Why do you stay this way? (**Why?**)
- What happens because of this? (**What next?**)

These might give you areas to explore in your free-writing. "How?" asks what inherited or environmental factors, or choices, or circumstances, led to this coming about. So if your hero loves easily, you might answer that he is the child of doting parents, and the only brother of five adoring sisters... or that he was so deprived of love he grabs it whenever he can get it. See, same aspect, completely different cause.

"Why?" considers why the character hasn't changed this behavior or attitude or quality. Does he still love easily because he's never been hurt by love? Or because he's gets masochistic pleasure from proving yet again that loved ones always betray? Or what? And then, "What next?" generates ideas on what might happen during this story because of this aspect. Look for what's going to change-- that's what fiction's about, change. If he's never been hurt by love, would you say it's time he found that love isn't always an unmixed pleasure? If he's always been hurt, maybe it's time for him to learn new ways of loving.

Two things to keep in mind: Avoid the generic. Don't say, "My hero's arrogant because heroes are supposed to be arrogant." If you must have an arrogant hero, give him a better reason than that. And Look for trouble. You'll probably see a pattern in these questions-- I look for trouble spots, dilemmas, conflicts, secrets, lies, attitudes that set the character at odds with the world. That's where stories start. I also try-- to concentrate on behavior as much as trait, because behavior-- action-- is how we can show the character's personality interacting with the plot. Think of the cause-effect dynamic as a spur to action.

Okay, then, here are many questions that will help you discover your character from the inside-out, or from the outside-in... anyway, all the way through. I address the questions to "you" to avoid the gender-specific pronoun; I am, of course, referring to the character, not the writer.

Some of the questions will not apply to your character, but you might consider them anyway. For example, if your character has no secrets, that's intriguing on its own merits. Why not? Is she just the world's most honest person? Or is she so lacking an inner life that she's basically transparent? Or is there, just suppose, some secret she's keeping from her creator... and maybe from herself?

INTERVIEW 2: CHARACTER IN DEPTH

Remember to answer the questions in the voice of the character. That is, "you" refers to the character, not the author. I've added example answers for a few of the questions so you can get some sense of the process.

REQUIREMENTS-- YOU IN THE PLOT:

1. What does the plot require you to be? (i.e., six years old, an archaeologist, a New Yorker) How does this requirement limit you? Why do you continue to be this even if it limits you?

Plot Possibility: Look at the requirements, apply it to your character, and see where it leads: Right to conflict. My spy heroine is an orphan. She has to be, because I don't want anyone to notice when she disappears to go off and be a spy. But see how closely the profile of an orphan can fit the spy. Successful orphans -- I mean those who survive more or less intact-- are used to being alone. (I'll let her take over here.)

Example: *Orphans don't trust fate. I've learned to be watchful, because no one can be trusted to do right by me. I learned to mold their behavior to fit the circumstances, because no one loves me unconditionally-- I always had to earn every scrap of consideration. I'm not part of a family, so I have learned to exist on the fringes of groups, without any real connections.*

That kind of answers the next question: Why are you still a spy? Well, because I need a job. I have to do something, and this fits in with my personality, I guess. I could probably take one of those career guidance tests and score highest on the secret agent category. I like adventure; I feel more a part of the country when I'm fighting for it; I want to defeat bad guys; I'm secretive. Whatever. It's just who I am.



2. What physical attributes does the plot require of you? (i.e., tree-climbing ability, a birthmarked thigh, an expressive face)

Plot Possibility: Keeping your story requirements in mind, write down a few things you observe about this character's physical being. You don't have to describe her hair color or his eyes, unless those are somehow important. Think about what makes this person fit this plot. For example, how much physical competence is needed? If your heroine's going to have to dance till 2 am, she better have great stamina, right? If the hero's got to scale a wall, he'd better be pretty lithe. Don't forget to account for how he got to be this way. If he's got some desk job, you might want it to be in a company that has a workout room, so he can pump iron on his lunch hour.

Also, how physically attractive is this character? Keep in mind that just because this is a romantic hero, he doesn't have to look like Chris Hemsworth. And just because he's a villain he doesn't have to resemble a snake. That's generic. What works for your story?

Example: *A spy needs to blend in, needs to be ethnically neutral. That's me. I have brown hair, hazel eyes that can be brown or green depending on what shade of eyeshadow I apply. I usually look like a regular person—I'm not dropdead gorgeous, or memorably ugly. No one takes much notice of me. No one recognizes me when I'm in disguise. Not even my lover, when I'm spying on him.* (Now there's some romantic conflict.)

Plot Possibility: Now remember, consider the implications. What does it do to her life that she looks this way? Beautiful women, believe it or not, don't have an easy time of it. Not that I know personally! But insecurity often goes hand in hand with beauty, because— well, you can guess. Do my friends really like me, or.... If you've got a beautiful heroine, what effect has that had? Spoiled her? Isolated her? There's some internal conflict right there.

Example: *Sometimes when I have to be gorgeous, I can do that. It's all attitude and make-up, you know. But I know it's not really me. I scrub off the blush and I'm no one special anymore. I wonder if really beautiful women think that, when they look in the mirror—"Now that no one notices me, I'm nothing special."*



3. What talent or skill will you need to have to survive this plot? (an incisive mind, sharpshooting, charm, auto mechanics) How did you acquire this? How do you use it?

Plot Possibility: Make sure the skill comes into play in some crucial scene— but prepare for it too. Don't have him pull "sewing" out of his hat at the last minute. "Oh, by the way, did I tell you I was a great tailor?" Mention it casually early on. "I can sew that button on for you. Oh, yeah, I know it's weird— a man who can sew. But I'm a sailor, and I'm always having to fix the sails."

Example: *Special talents? Well, I speak several languages, because I moved a lot as a kid- different foster homes- and I pick up accents easily. So my boss sends me in as a native whenever he can. I infiltrate groups. I blend in pretty well.*

4. What is your quest? What do you hope to accomplish, find, or become during the course of this book? Why? What outside obstacle might prevent this? What inside yourself will get in the way? What will have to happen for you to overcome these obstacles? What will happen if you can't?

Plot Possibility: The quest or mission or goal is a great motivator of action. It doesn't have to be obsessive, just meaningful to the character. Characters with quests are more active and more interesting than those just living their routine life. It can drag or drive the character into the plot, and also be something sacrificed in the end for the greater good.

Example: *I've kind of got caught up. I think, in my boss's quest. He's got a rival on the other side. I think they used to be friends, but now they hate each other. So it's spymaster vs. spymaster. My boss values me because I've fooled the other guy so often. But as for a quest of my own... oh, they killed my husband, you know. He was just a boy. In the army- not a spy. They didn't kill him like a soldier is killed. He was tortured. We had a fight before he left that day he was captured. This other guy— the rival spymaster- he had something to do with it. So I guess I'd like revenge. Or something. I don't know. It's all been years. Sometimes I don't even*

remember what Jerry - my husband- looked like. Sometimes I think it's all futile and I've wasted my life. I could be married again and have a child or two. Instead, I'm chasing around Budapest picking up messages taped to the underside of church pews. This ... this discontent is going to get me killed someday. You watch. I'll be depressed and I won't be watching out and... BOOM.



PERCEPTION-- YOU IN YOUR MIND:

5. How do you learn best? Observation? Participation? Trial and error? Cogitation? Consulting experts? Writing?

6. How open are you to new ideas and information? Do you change your mind frequently, based on what people have told you? Are you a traditionalist, deciding on the basis of "what's always been"? If someone is arguing with you, are you more likely to change your mind or dig in your heels? What if the arguer is right?

7. When you walk into a party, what do you notice first? The mood? The people? The decorating? The things needing to be fixed? The background music? The food on the buffet table? Whether you fit in?

8. Is one sense more highly developed than another? For instance, do you tend to take in the world primarily through vision? "I'll believe that when I see it!" Or are you more audial? Do you determine if a person is lying by the tone of voice? Do you love to talk on the phone? Don't forget the sixth sense-- intuition. Is your character very visual? Very touchy-feel? What effect does that have on the way the character interacts with the environment? Is she always watching people's eyes to discover what they're thinking? Does he like to work with his hands because solid things make him feel more rooted?

Plot Possibility: This aspect can give you all sorts of plot leads-- a visual person might need to learn that appearances can be deceiving, an audial person might learn about a murder because she's been eavesdropping. Remember also that an artist's narration of a scene will use very different terms than a musician's will.

Examples: *Spies have to have sharp ears. I do a lot of eavesdropping. I sometimes work as a maid at a diplomatic party. No one notices me, but I hang around holding a tray of drinks and' listening hard.*



9. Do you usually notice problems around you? What is your response? Do you write an angry letter to the editor? shrug and move on? analyze what's wrong and how to fix it? take it as evidence that the world is falling apart? What about problems within yourself?

Plot Possibility: Here's another way to get the character into the story. She notices a problem of some kind and decides to solve it. She runs for mayor, or she decides to solve the mystery.... but remember, this way of dealing with problems ought to be more or less consistent through the book, and also get her in trouble at some point. If she's a meddler, have her meddle with the wrong person. If she's an analyst, have her meticulously analyze all the data and realize it adds up to her husband as the murderer. Make that way of solving problems matter in the story and provide conflict.

Example: *I am supposed to be on my own, pretty much. I can call in reserves if I need them, but that's discouraged. Too much money and danger. So I try to fix problems by myself. Sometimes I get in way too deep. Once I was in the house where the emperor was staying, and he left unexpectedly early one morning, and I got caught trying to follow him. I had to pretend I worshipped him and wanted to be his slave or something. That got scary, because then he wanted to... meet me. But I'm small, and I managed to wriggle out of the window in the room they were holding me. So how do I solve problems? I guess I try to lie my way out of it, and if that doesn't work, I run. No brute force involved.*

10. Would you say you were an optimist or a pessimist? Would your friends agree? How would you react if your life suddenly took a turn for the worse? Are you prepared for that? Do you notice when your life is going well? Does that make you happy?

11. Are you more interested in the past or the future, or do you live in the now? Are you one to keep holiday traditions? Do you reminisce about days gone by? Are you sentimental about objects, like your mother's handmirror or your first baseball glove? How hard would it be to move from your present home? How long would you keep in touch with your friends back in the old town? How long would it take you to make new friends?



12. How do you decide if you can trust someone? Experience with others? with this person? First impressions? Intuition? Do you test the person somehow? Or are you just generally disposed to trust or not to trust?

Plot Possibility: Trust is a book-worthy theme. If your character is quite trusting, he's likely to trust the wrong person. If she doesn't trust anyone, she ought to be forced into an alliance where to save herself, she must trust. That is, this is a good issue for a reversal. But set it up early-- show her cautious and wary in the book's opening, and give her good reason why she shouldn't trust, but then put her in a situation where she has to trust.

Example: *I guess you could say I'm too trusting. Not in general. I don't trust much of anyone outside. But I'm too trusting of Lear. That's my boss. Everyone says I trust him too much. Even he says that. I guess that's one reason I trust him. He's always honest about how much he lies to me. He... he really knows what a total liar he is, and what a scoundrel, and he doesn't hide it. He tells me no one in her right mind would trust him. That always makes me feel better. He's not trying to put one over on me. I think... I think he cares for me. I mean, I think he's watching out for me. I know I'm just an agent, just another tool. But he takes care of his own. He won't let me down. I know if I get too bad stuck, he'll come in and get me. At least, I hope he will. He tells me not to count on it.*



SELF-CONCEPT-- YOU IN YOURSELF:

13. A casual acquaintance describes your personality. How would the description be wrong? Why? What if your mother was doing the describing? Your spouse?

14. How well do you know yourself? How well do you want to know yourself? Do you like to analyze yourself? Do you usually know what motivates you to do things? What do you do that you consider "out of character" for you? When you do that, what do you think of yourself?

15. In what situation is your self-esteem most at risk? When is it most enhanced? For example, does asking for help make you feel like a beggar? Does giving help make you feel like an angel? When someone insults you, what do you do?

16. In what situation are you most afraid? Most brave? When are you likely to behave in a way you would describe as cowardly? How would you deal with thinking yourself a coward? In what situation would you behave with disregard for your own safety?

17. What are you keeping secret? Who is it secret from? Yourself? How long has it been a secret? What do you think will happen if it becomes known? What really will happen if it becomes known?

18. What are you lying about, if only to yourself? Are you good at deception? How about self-deception? Why are you lying? Who doesn't fall for it? What will happen if the truth gets out?

Plot Possibility: Secrets, lies, hidden things are all resonant with plot possibilities. If there's a secret, it has to be revealed at some point. A secret you're keeping from yourself-- about a childhood trauma, about the love you feel for someone, about your own failings-- is going to fester until it explodes. When does it explode? What happens then?

Example: *I always lie to myself. It's how I keep sane. But I always know when I'm lying. Like I tell myself my fellow agents are my brothers and sisters, you know? That we are kind of a family. And that Lear is our father. But I know that's a lie. I just need to tell it to myself when I'm all alone. It's comforting, even if I know it's not true. It's like a story I tell myself. Once upon a time there was a sad little girl, but then she went home and her family was there and she wasn't sad anymore. Tony-- my lover-- gets angry at that. He keeps wanting to prove to me that it's a lie. He doesn't understand that I already know that, but I still need it anyway.*

19. What is your special power? It doesn't have to be supernatural. What ability/skill/talent/sensitivity/value/belief sets you apart from others? What do you do with this power? How does it get you into trouble? How does it get you out of trouble?



CONJUNCTIONS-- YOU IN THE WORLD:

20. Do you live in the right world? I mean, are you at home in your boarding school/big city/16th Century Italian village? If you fit in, what would you do if something happened to make you leave, or to make you unfit? If you don't fit in, why do you stay? Is there a right world for you, or do you think you will always be an outsider?

How necessary are you to your world? What would you do if you couldn't leave? What would you have to change, in the world or in yourself, to fit?

Plot Possibility: A misfit with the setting is always a good conflict, as it will force either leaving the setting or learning to fit in (or, I suppose, changing the setting to fit you). Someone who fits too well (the local mayor, for example) might long for escape also, to a place where no one knows him or expects anything of him.

Example: *I guess I fit in everywhere. I mean, that's my job. To look like a native. To act like a native. To sound like a native. So the world is my home. I don't have anywhere I actually live though. I keep some stuff at the boss's house in Paris. But I don't live there. I don't even stay there when I'm in Paris. I just go get whatever I need from the closet and leave. I think I'm just an outsider. I don't imagine I'll ever stay in one place. I don't even think I want to. I think.... I think maybe the best I can do is to have friends in places and go visit them once in awhile. Or have a man who would wander with me.*

21. Is this the right time for you? Or were you born too late or too soon? Can you keep up with the pace of the time you live in? Are the things valued in this time of value to you? Are you satisfied with your world's technology and knowledge? Do you read history or science fiction? If a time-travel journey was offered to you, would you take it? Where/when?

22. What is your role in this setting? Native? Alien? Saint? Loser? Secret rebel? Mover and shaker? Nobody? Do you want your role to change? Is it easy to change roles in this world? What happens then?

23. What characteristic action or attitude always gets you in trouble? Why do you keep doing it? What do you do to get out of trouble?

24. What personal value is at odds with the society's values? Are you open about it? (For example, an Amish person wears the plain clothes.) How does that get you in trouble? If you keep it hidden, does your conscience bother you? How much longer can you hide it? What will you do if you must choose between this value and your life in this society?

CONNECTIONS-- YOU IN OTHERS:

25. Are you easy to get to know? Do you want to be? Do others think you're easy to know? Are you likely to let people get to know you? Are you easy to understand?

26. What's your initial reaction to a stranger? Potential friend? Potential enemy? Rival? Someone to charm? To deceive?

27. How are you different when you're with your family? What role do you play in the family? Does it still fit? What would happen if you stopped?

28. Did you have a happy childhood? How has that affected your adulthood?

29. Were you anyone's favorite when you were a child? Why or why not? What happened because of this?

30. Did you turn out the way you expected? The way your parents predicted?

31. Do you love easily? Why or why not? How does that mess up your life? Do you fall in love, or is it a gradual process? Do you notice it's happening? Do you try to stop it?

32. Are you easy to love? Why or why not? How does that mess up your life? When someone falls in love with you, what do you do?

33. What's your blind spot? What person, idea, institution, do you delude yourself about? How does this endanger you?

34. Do you trust most people? Or do you reserve judgment until they pass some test? When were you wrong about whether someone was trustworthy?

35. Whom have you betrayed lately? Did you mean to? What happened? Did you try to make amends?

36. Who has betrayed you lately? Did you expect it? What did it do to you? Is anyone likely to betray you in the future? What will you prevent it?

Plot Possibility: Betrayal is the obverse of trust, and is another book-worthy issue. If there's a betrayal within the story, there must be consequences, both actual and emotional. It changes the texture of the story by introducing deception, caution, and anger. The betrayer has a journey to make (to confession and repentance) and the betrayed also must grow beyond the injury and into acceptance. This gives some structure to your story-- a place for your characters to go.

Example: *Oh, betrayal is too strong a word. I mean, we're living on the edges. We're always doing things that aren't quite right. Expedience means sometimes we have to hurt each other. But we don't bother to get hurt. Lear's betrayed me, I guess you could say. He once left me behind the lines for three months, without a word, without any funds or help, because I'd gotten him angry. I learned my lesson. Is that a betrayal? I don't know. Tony too-- my lover. He's always leaving me. But he'd tell you I'm always leaving him. We're too much alike. We are too wary of each other. I guess he hasn't betrayed me-- I've never let him that close.*



INTERVIEW 3: FAMILY DYNAMICS

The aim of this strategy is to help you create the emotional plot by developing the characters fully. Family systems theory-- that childhood family dynamics influence adult choices-- is one base of this strategy. But another base is the understanding that adult choices are also affected by the self. I choose my own path, be it right or wrong, and I can choose another path if I please. My options are limited by circumstances, and my rationality by my history. But only I can choose, and declining to choose, letting events guide me, is a choice in itself. One choice is to learn how heavily I am influenced by my past.

Thus the character's self-knowledge is explored in this interview. How aware is she of her role in the family, and how it might be affecting her today?

Yet another base-- this is a pyramid-- is the fiction we create of our lives. As fiction writers, we should see this remarkable human ability as a gift, however troublesome. Often a fiction is more true than the truth. For example, Catherine in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* sees herself as a Gothic heroine, threatened by a villainous host (the father of the man she loves). Critics laugh at her self-dramatization, and yet her perception is true-- General Tilney perhaps did not murder his wife, but his cruelty to the various lovers in the house show how little he values tender emotions and tender people. Catherine is right about the big picture, if wrong on details.

So this interview asks you to explore the secrets, lies, and myths of your characters and their families. The lies they tell, the secrets they keep, give clues to their real needs. As we learn to know our friends over the course of time, so our characters reveal themselves to us, with their pasts intact and still influential, if distorted by memory; with their futures a mist of dreams and goals; with their vulnerabilities and powers, their guilt and pride, the secrets they can tell us but not themselves.

YOUR CHARACTER IN FOCUS

1. Describe your character's looks, especially keynote features (that you will refer to in the book). How does your character's appearance reflect the deeper self?

Example: *Ariel is small and quick, always in motion so she's almost a blur. She looks younger than her real age. All of this reflects her desire to stay secret, to hide her true self from the world.*

2. Describe your character's projected personality-- the self shown to the world.

Example: *Ariel wants the world not to notice her. Even for a spy, she is self-effacing. She's never the princess, always the maid, one of those invisible servants who wear uniforms so they all look alike. She wants to be unnoticed.*



3. Describe your character's perceived personality-- how he/she sees him/herself.

Example: *Ariel sees herself as dangerous. She thinks anyone who gets close to her is taking a risk, whether they know it or not. She feels a deep guilt for some of her actions, and is sure that if other people knew, they'd hate her.*

4. Now describe your character's actual personality as you the creator see it.

Example: *Ariel is a lost soul. She is in the spy service because it gives her a place, an identity. But that identity requires her to be homeless and nameless. Whatever she truly longs for (like a home and family), she denies herself because she doesn't think she deserves it.*

5. If there are disparities in these selves (projected, perceived, actual), what accounts for them? What problems do these disparities cause in your character's life?

Example: *Ariel was abandoned in childhood and grew up without any real anchor in her life. She learned to be adaptive, to become what is necessary, to survive. So she's resourceful and resilient. There is a real person in her, but she thinks she's an empty shell.*

6. What is the keynote feature or theme to your character's personality-- the one that is going to be highlighted in this story? Impetuosity, cool under fire, risktaking, idealism, modesty, serenity? How is this shown in your character's motions and behavior? How does this feature drive your character's actions and thus the plot?

7. What is your character's greatest talent? How does it enhance your character's life? How does it influence the plot?

8. What does your character secretly love about him/herself? What one aspect is your character most proud of?

9. What is your character's secret? Does your character know it consciously? What does the secret signify? If your character has none, why?

10. How important is friendship to your character? How can your character's friendships be categorized? Brief but intense? One best friend and a horde of hangers-on? What role does your character usually play **in** the friendships? How is this limiting?

11. What would your character change about him/herself if your character got the chance?

12. How much control does your character have over his/her own life? How much does your character want? What conflicts does this cause?

13. What in your character's life has caused guilt? How does your character deal with guilt?

14. How self-aware is your character? What doesn't your character understand about him/herself?

15. What excites your character's sympathy? Anger? Unease?

16. Summarize quickly the major events of your character's life up to the opening of the story. Just list them. Be thinking of how they affect your character's personality.

FAMILY

Parents: (Ask these next questions of both father and mother.)

17. Is parent alive at the time of the story? If not, how and when did he/she die? What was your character's reaction?

18. Did he/she love your character? If yes, how did s/he show it? Was this mostly a damaging or a sustaining love? What problems has this love caused in your character's life? If no, what has this caused your character to do?

19. What was your character's role in parent's life? The apple of their eye? The disappointment? One of a number of little nuisances?

20. Does your character admire and respect parent? Does your character love him/her? What illusions does your character have about him/her?

21. What characteristics did your character inherit from parent? What trait does your character regret inheriting?

22. What unfinished business does your character have with parent? Can your character resolve it? How?



Siblings:

23. Names, genders, dates of birth of all siblings. What number is your character in the family? What effect has the birth order had on your character?

24. What is your character's role with the siblings? Mini-mom? Baby? Peacemaker? Troublemaker? Explain.

25. Does your character have a favorite sibling? What brings them together? How has the pairing affected the rest of the family?

26. Does your character have a least favorite sibling? Why don't they get along? How is your character at fault?

27. Who is the most important sibling in the family? Why? How does your character feel about that? Which sibling did Dad like best? Mom? What conflict does this cause?

Family as a whole:

28. What economic class was the family in your character's childhood? Has that changed? How did that affect your character?

29. Where did they live? Describe the house and town.

30. What is the family's implicit "motto"? You can never be too careful? Don't air the dirty laundry? United we stand? Father knows best? The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing? Can you keep a secret?

31. What image did the family present to the world? How was it untrue? What lies does the family tell itself? "Mom's not drunk; she's just sick?" "Dad's the boss around here?" "We kids are sure lucky?"

32. Was this a happy family? Why or why not? What would a typical get-together be like? Chilly? Fractious but fun? Full of nostalgia? Active? Food-filled?

33. Describe an important family ritual like an in-joke, a story they always tell when they get together, and a recurring argument.



FAMILY CONFLICTS AND RESOLUTIONS

These family conflicts do more than just create backstory for the character. The old proverb "The child is father to the man" reminds us that who we are early in life, our childhood circumstances and difficulties, in part shape who we are in adulthood. The spoiled heiress Scarlett O'Hara is going to have a very different experience with later poverty than, say, the born-poor Moll Flanders. Explore the early background and especially the family situation, and you'll have more understanding of the person's conflicts and values.

Of course, those characters who grew up in extreme circumstances (rich or poor, over-protected or neglected) will probably always show some effect of their pasts. But how they react will help individualize the character. The man who grows up rich and conscientiously takes on the role of charitable donor and social sponsor will be very different from the prep-school classmate, also rich, who rejects his family's wealth to make it on his own, and they'll both have little in common as adults with the man who inherits young and engages in a decadent and wasteful life. The young woman who flees the small town that called her "trailer-trash" might have the motivation of proving herself better than that, or just the motivation of hiding the past shame from her new acquaintances.

What's important is to consider how that past would affect this person's future. Is there a rebellion against the background, or an embrace of it, or some other way of dealing with the past?

I like to imagine what the family motto was—what (whether it was ever spoken aloud) was the deeply engrained belief of the family that was passed onto the children. A family with the dark suspicion that "they're all out to get us" is going to produce a character who no matter how he tries will have trouble trusting fate or other people. The scion of the "can you keep a secret" family is likely always to consider deception (even if she eventually rejects it) as a viable choice of actions.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW

With all this preparatory work, you might know your character well and have specific questions about what this person will do in response to the plot events. Well, just ask! Customize your own interview with specific questions that relate to this character and this story.

Here is a sample interview, which I did in the middle of plotting a novella. I ended up making a central scene out of something Nicholas describes in this interview, re-reading his wife's letters late at night. And I learned the source of his angst-- just by asking.

Customized interview with Sir Nicholas Trent, a character in *Allegra's Song*, Alicia Rasley's novella, available now on Kindle.

(This interview was conducted when the characters and basic plot were established. They gave me better insight on motivation

Did you love Allegra when you married her?

Of course. We eloped to Scotland once when I was on leave, a week after we met.

You must have known right away, that she was the one for you.

Well, I knew she wouldn't still be available my next leave. Allegra was -- very popular. Still is. All the men wanted her.

And you won her.

(Shrugs.) I guess I did. I wasn't surprised when she accepted me. Not that I mean to boast. But -- well, it was clear that she returned my feelings. And it was just a matter of securing her forever, so I could go back to the fighting.

How soon after you wed did you leave?

A week. Hardly had time to get back to London before my leave was up.

Did you worry about her, when you left?

I did. I felt that I was deserting, you know. She had to face her family-- not that her parents cared, as far as I could tell. They were probably glad to have her gone. But her sisters-- well, they weren't so tolerant. The elder-- Maggie-- she looked at me as if I were some vile seducer, and an oppressor besides. Yvette was just a child, but she shook her head and said she hoped we'd be very happy, as if she thought it a lost cause. They're not so bad, my sisters-in-law. They accepted it, and me, without much fuss. But it was clear they didn't think I'd make Allegra happy.

Have you?

Made her happy? (pause) I don't know. Occasionally. That's all, I guess. Maybe that's all we can hope for. She's happy usually, anyway. Just has that brightness, that pleasure in life.

Always cheerful. It drives me mad sometimes, especially at breakfast. But it's better than the alternative.

So you think she is happy with you?

It's just been such a different sort of marriage. We'd spend a fortnight or a month together, and then be apart a year. It wasn't easy, but she handled it well. I have to admit I was surprised. She doesn't seem very strong, my wife. In fact, I've no doubt people think she's some frail beauty. But she isn't. She's got some-- I don't know. Some inner fiber. She bends but she doesn't break. There's something.... tough inside her. If she were a soldier, she'd be the one who always did her job, but always survived too. No useless heroics, but no desertion either. My mother told me once that I was lucky Allegra was the sort who made the best of a bad situation. I didn't like that, that marriage to me was something she had to make the best of, but I suppose with me at war, and all the worries, it wasn't really what she expected out of marriage.

What do you think she expected?

Oh, bliss. Ecstasy. To be together always, in total communion-- all that rosy dreamy stuff. It's not that I didn't want it too, but it just wasn't to be. That's the soldier's lot, and his wife's too, to live alone most of the time.

Did you want her to come to the Peninsula with you?

No. No. Maybe for myself.., but it would have been selfish. Would have been stupid. War is no life for a woman-- for a man either, I suppose. But Allegra-- I can't even imagine her there. She came to Lisbon several times to visit, and that was fine, but not on the battlefield. Oh, she's a good colonel's wife, don't get me wrong. My men admire her, think she's a beautiful lady. In fact, the younger troopers used to beg bits of ribbon from her and sew them on their uniforms, saying they were her sworn liegemen. And she was kind to them, with just the right amount of reserve, just enough to keep them worshipful. She's good with the officers' wives too, and the Beau-- the duke, I mean, Wellington— was charmed by her. One time she came to Lisbon, after Albuera, she played "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done" and he wept. She knew just what he needed to hear. She is sensitive that way.

You must have been glad to see the end of the war.

Well, I was glad that the killing was done. Waterloo was... very bad. We'd always taken such care with our men, kept the casualties down. It was the French who were profligate. Those marshals--they didn't care if they lost fifty thousand men, as long as they could claim victory. But we never had the men to lose... until Waterloo. And we -- we let them be slaughtered, as if we didn't care about their lives after all. We lost twenty thousand, with the missing counted in, the Allies, in one day. In a year on the Peninsula, we wouldn't have lost that many. It's not anyone's fault, really, except that madman Bonaparte. And it was a great victory. But my battalion wasn't the worst hit, by any means, and we lost a couple hundred good men-- the Light Bobs are all good men. I've seen dozens of battlefields, but never anything like that. Even Albuera wasn't so bad.

The vision has haunted you?

I suppose. Stupid, isn't it? I'm a soldier; I'm used to death. It just seemed a bloody end to a good war, I never have felt quite right about it. But that's all right. We look to be in for a long siege of peace. No one would be foolish enough to challenge Britain now.

How has it been, this peace?

Dull. (Grins) Frankly, it's been dull. I'm still training the troops, and we parade and do expeditions, but it seems rather futile. My trainees get sent off to some colonial outpost, where they get to swat mosquitoes and occasionally put down an uprising. And I just send them off and train the ones that take their place.

But still, you must be glad to be home again with your family....

I'm glad to have time with Tim. He's a bit wild, as might be expected with me gone most of his life. But he's a good boy. Sweet-tempered, curious as a cat. He's in that phase now, when he wants to be just like his papa. That can't help but be gratifying.

And to be home with your wife, that must be fulfilling too.

I don't know. It should be.... Those first months are rather a blur. I wasn't wounded, except for a slash on my arm, nothing much, but I felt feverish all the time. Not really feverish, just blurred. I could concentrate on my duties, but nothing much else. As if I were in a fog. It was just so strange, being home. I grew up just west of Shorncliffe-- that's the training camp of the Light Division-- and so I slept there at the house, rather than staving in the garrison. It was my home, but it was so different from what I remember. My parents weren't there, that was the biggest change. They'd both died while I was gone. I knew it, of course, but I don't think I really understood it till I got home and they weren't there. And there we were, Allegra and I, in the master suite. My parents' room. It was... strange. I didn't like it. Foolish of me, I suppose. I couldn't sleep there. So I took to sleeping in my old room, down the hall, I'd visit Allegra, of course. Odd, isn't it, that I could do-- that, but I couldn't sleep there afterwards.

Why not?

I don't know. Guilt? No. Not guilt. My parents got sick and died, it wasn't to do with me. But I couldn't get caught up with the time.

It's as if the whole world had moved on while I was at war. The house was redone, modernized. My parents grew old and died, and Timmy wasn't a baby any more, and Allegra— And Allegra?

She was grown. A woman. I hadn't really noticed that. She'd been just a girl when I married her. You know? Foolish notions. Stars in her eyes. She used to write these letters to me while I was away, and she'd dot her i's with little fat circles. The sort of things governesses tried to beat out of girls, you know. And I didn't really notice, but last week I was looking through all those letters, hundreds of them, almost seven years worth, and I realized somewhere about 1811 she stopped using those little circles.

Why were you looking through those old letters?

Looking for her. (Laughs) She's been gone for a couple months, up in London studying with some piano master. And I'd forgotten what she is like. I felt like it had been years, not months, since I'd seen her. I couldn't remember what she looked like. Oh, I could remember her in a ballgown, with her hair up, a portrait-sort of memory. But I couldn't remember her the other ways, like when she's frowning and biting her lip as she reads through a piece of music and imagines how it will sound. Or when she's feeling cross with Timothy, or when she's laughing with him. Or at night, in the moonlight, with her hair down on her bare shoulders. I couldn't remember any of those memories. So I read over her letters.

It must have taken a long time.

A couple days. But I could remember her better then, after I read them.

But you'd just been living with her for nearly a year. You should have some fresh memories.

I should have, but I don't. She was there, I remember that— in the house, at the dinner table, in the bed. And she made everything comfortable for me, which was pleasant— except I'm not used to comfort, and sometimes it was annoying, to have her keep asking what did I want to do. Did I want to redo my father's study, did I want to buy a few more mounts for the stables, did I want to go to London for the season. Did I want salt on my eggs. Did I want her to play me that new sonata she'd learned. Did I want to have another child. Did I want to be alone. That's all I remember, really, all those questions. I reckon she wouldn't have asked them, if she didn't want to know. But I was supposed to say yes or no, when— when I didn't really have an answer. So sometimes I said yes, and sometimes I said no, and she'd go off and do what she thought was best anyway. She's been doing that all along, making her own decisions. She had to, when I was a fortnight's voyage away. And she does it so well. She's grown up, as I said. She managed to do without me all that while.

So you didn't worry when she went to London alone.

Well, she wasn't alone. She had Timmy, until I sent for him, and that great-aunt of mine who never comes out of her room. I don't know why that makes everything proper, but that's how people are. Anyway, she was eager to study with this Martelli, and I understood. Her music is important to her. And so she asked me, do you want me to go, and I said— I don't remember. Yes or no, one of those two. And she did what she wanted to do, went her own way. That's the problem with us. We never needed each other. Oh, we thought we did, and each time we parted, I felt that need, sharp like an arrow, right in my heart. But we had to go on living, and we did, both of us. and so we just learned not to need each other. It hurt too much. So...well, she does well without me. She has her own interests, her own way. But it's time now, I think, for us to start needing each other again.

When did you realize that?

I came to London, and saw her note saying she'd gone to some house parts'. It made me angry, but it was for her sisters, and she is fond of them. Anyway, while I was in London some of us got together for the anniversary of Waterloo. Some of my friends, I think, hadn't had their uniforms on since the battle. I'm still serving, of course, so mine fit. But a few (smiles) had gained two stone or more, and the buttons wouldn't meet in front— in just a year. And there was one who lost two brothers in the battle, and he was laughing, and he looked at me and said, "Life's too short. A year's enough for grieving." And... I wondered how he knew, when I didn't. That's what this last year had been, a grieving. But it's done now, and I'm done with grief.

What will you do?

Get Allegra and bring her home. We haven't really started our life together, and I think it's time we did.

What if she doesn't want to?

Doesn't want to? Oh, well, she will. She's been waiting for me, I think. That's what all those

questions were... Do I want, do I want. She was asking, do I want her? And now I hear the question, and I know the answer.

What if she's gotten tired of waiting?

Has it been so long? No, I don't think so. And if she has... well, I'll change her mind. We were mad about each other when we married. It's still there, even if she's forgotten about it.

ON YOUR OWN

Even all these different questions might prove inadequate at some point. Perhaps you know the character well, but need to determine how she will react to your big plot twist in the middle. Maybe you aren't really sure what romantic conflict you can put him into, or how you can get him out of the one you just invented.

That's where the self-designed interview comes in. In this one, you play two roles. You are the interrogator and the character. You ask the questions, and then, in the voice of the character, you answer them.

Start with a provocative question that requires something more than "yes" or "no" for an answer. A question that intrigues or annoys might help too. Then go where you need to know. If you're having a problem inventing a conflict, ask!

"What is it you're really worried about when it comes to this murder investigation?"

"What is it about Terri that scares you?"

Remember to shift into the character's voice to answer. Ask follow-up questions. And badgering the witness is allowed!

Give it a try. Just ask the questions, and let your character do all the work for a change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alicia Rasley is the award-winning author of Regency romances, *The Power of Point of View*, *The Story Within Plotguide*, *The Year She Fell* (a Kindle bestseller), and many articles about writing topics. She teaches writing and literature at two universities and in workshops around the country. A pioneer in online education, she currently teaches writing at edittorrent.blogspot.com, and tutors college students in a variety of writing tasks. She also consults with public schools on helping students write successful essays for standardized tests.

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Sign up for my email list, and you'll get a free article on plotting- <http://bit.ly/AliciaRasleyStory>

Character Sympathy course (free): https://plot-blueprint-course.teachable.com/p/creating-character-sympathy?preview=logged_out

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New Course! Building Bolder Scenes. <http://bit.ly/building-bolder-scenes>

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- 4 Modules!
- 1. Know Your Story
- 2. Plot the 3 Acts
- 3. 9 Turning Points
- 4. Characters 3 ways

Module 1: Know Your Story- Lessons

- 1. Why Write? Why Write This Story?
- 2. Know Yourself as a Writer
- 3. Focus Your Story
- 4. Discover Your Audience
- 5. Why Write Now?
- 6. Troubleshoot Your Writing Life

Module 2: PLOT THE 3 ACTS- LESSONS

1. THE BRAID OF PLOTS IN YOUR STORY
2. CONFLICT WITH PURPOSE
3. THE THREE ACTS
4. ACT 1- STARTING AND SETTING UP
5. ACT 2- THE MAGIC RULE OF 2 IN THE MIDDLE
6. ACT 3- ENDING WITH A CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION

Module 3: 9 Turning Points

- 1. The Ordinary World
- 2. The Inciting Event
- 3. Call to Action
- 4. Response to Call
- 5. Reversal
- 6. Point of No Return
- 7. Crisis/Dark Moment
- 8. Climax of External Plot
- 9. Resolution of Internal Plot

Module 4: Character

1. Plotting Through Character
2. The Character Journey
3. Goal and Motivation
4. The Heroic Strength/Flaw
5. Plotting It All Together

Plot Blueprint

Apply these lessons right to your own story!

And you get **FOUR** free coaching calls with Alicia.

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