Someone to Care About

Someone to Care About, pt. 1

Externals

It is important you create a character who seems real to the reader. You've probably read books in which the main character seems about as real as a plastic action figure. Chances are you didn't enjoy those books very much.

Believable characters take more effort to create, but they are worth it. They are more interesting, and much more fun to write about.

Your hero must be someone your readers will care about. Otherwise they won't keep reading. This doesn't mean your reader must like the hero. They simply have to feel an emotional connection with him and want to find out what happens. Usually this means the reader needs to want the best for him.

We only really care about people we know. But knowing someone doesn't guarantee we'll care about them. First, they have to be real. Second, they have to be the sort of person we want the best for. Usually this means that we can identify with them. We see something in them that we admire or that we recognize in ourselves.

Fictional characters can be constructed on two levels. The externals are all the things you could learn about someone in a job interview or on a police blotter. Hair and eye color, height, occupation, educational background, physical deformities. These are the things you might think of first when you start dreaming up a hero. How tall is she? What does she do? What's her favorite color?

I call these externals because they don't go very deep into who a person really is. Nevertheless, they are necessary, and they can often give insight into the deeper levels of character we'll discuss in the next lesson.

For now, try to see your hero in your imagination and answer the questions in *The Map* as completely as possible. Keep in mind that some of the things you decide on may never enter into your story. In fact, many of these things probably shouldn't. Why? Because you will be writing in a first-person narrative voice. "I did this, and I did that."

How often will your narrator need to describe herself? (How often do you go around describing yourself? Not very often, I hope.) So you are limited in the ways you can bring in descriptions of your narrator. Making him or her stand in front of a mirror is an obvious and over-used technique, and one which usually doesn't work. Better to have other characters mention details in dialogue.

"Blonde," the Pirate said. He grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked

my head back. “Just like One-eye.”

Or, if it is germane to the story, the narrator can mention it.

> They were looking for volunteers, for anyone who could pass themselves off as a Scandinavian. The corporal took one look at my blonde hair and blue eyes and jotted something on his notepad. “You’ll do,” he said. He didn’t even ask my name.

But even though you won’t use all the information on these pages of *The Map*, it is still important to work it out on paper. The extra work will help you know your hero better. And the more real he is to you, the more real he will be to your reader.

The three externals described below will be extremely helpful to you in creating a character who seems real, someone your readers will care about.

“When you put something down that happened, people often don't believe it; whereas, you can make up anything, and people assume it must have happened to you.”

- Andrew Holleran

Undeserved Misfortune

Make your hero the victim of undeserved misfortune. He’s an orphan, or unfairly persecuted or greatly misunderstood. Whatever the misfortune is, it must be severe enough to be worth writing about and engage our sympathy. However, your hero mustn’t complain about it. He must weather the storm. He can feel the pain of it. He can suffer. He just can’t complain.

Undeserved misfortune is perhaps the single most important characteristic you can give your hero initially. But make sure the misfortune is undeserved. It is the lack of fairness coupled with a high level of misfortune that will win over your audience.

Power & Humility

Giving your hero a noticeable power is an easy way to create admiration in your reader. For better or worse, we admire powerful people. But it is important that your hero be both powerful and humble. We’ll find out why in the next lesson. For now, consider possible powers he or she might have.

I’m not talking about comic-style super-powers. Power can be something as simple as speaking a second language, or being good at math or having a good memory. Whatever power you choose for your character, it must be both extraordinary and believable. Extraordinary means she doesn’t

have a good memory; she has a photographic memory. He doesn't speak passable German; he speaks flawless German in six dialects.

Believable, on the other hand, means the power is limited to the realm of the possible. She can't remember something she hasn't seen or heard before; she can't remember something someone else experienced. And he doesn't speak every language, or even 36 languages. Such powers cross into the supernatural and don't fit well with adventure novels, which are based on the idea of ordinary people becoming extraordinary or doing extraordinary things. (But, yes, supernatural powers are fine in several other genres.) For now, just realize that your hero's power needs to be human and natural in order for us to admire it.

Weakness

Don't make the mistake of creating a perfect hero. Your readers won't like him. We tend to resent people we perceive as being too wonderful, because we simply can't identify with them. A character who has no weaknesses is either not human or a villain. Every real human being has many weaknesses, and if your hero is to be believed, we need to see, and even empathize with, his.

Fortunately, weakness creates more empathy than power, because we can all identify with it. We feel weak more than we feel strong.

Use this fact to your advantage. Give your hero weaknesses that are easy to identify with. Common ones might be physical size, deformity, disease, background, phobia or social status. But even uncommon ones, exaggerated to the point of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose, can be humanizing if demonstrated clearly. Which means showing us what such weakness really means—the consequences of having a huge nose or a hunched back or being the smallest kid in class. Once we see the consequences, we understand and empathize with the weakness.

Later on, in the lessons on "something to suffer," your hero's weakness will result in multiplied complications and sufferings. For now, remember that we identify with weakness, but we admire power.

A good hero must demonstrate both.

See the facing page for a reading from *The Blood Ship*.

from *The Blood Ship*, by Norman Springer

Chapter Two

I'll begin with that morning, in this very port of San Francisco, when I walked out of the Shipping Commissioner's office with my first A.B.'s discharge in my hand, and a twelve months' pay-day jingling in my pocket. For I must explain something of my state of mind on that morning, so you will understand how I got into Yankee Swope's blood-ship.

It was the heyday of the crimps, and I walked through the very heart of crimpdom, along the old East street. It is not a very prepossessing thoroughfare even to-day, when it masquerades as the Embarcadero, a sinner reformed. In those days, when it was just East street, it consisted of solid blocks of ramshackle frame buildings, that housed all the varieties of sharks and harpies who live off Jack ashore; it was an ugly, dirty, fascinating way, a street with a garish, besotted face. But on this morning it seemed the most wonderful avenue in the world to me. I saw East street through the colorful eyes of youth—the eyes of Romance.

I stepped along with my chest out and my chin up-tilted. A few paces behind me a beachcomber wobbled along with my sea-bag on his shoulder—for what A.B. would demean himself with such labor on pay-day, when moochers abounded at his heel! I was looking for a boarding-house.

But it was not the Sailors' Home. That respectable institution might do very well for boys, and callow ordinary seamen, but it certainly would not do for a newly made A.B. Nor was I looking for Mother Harrison's place, as I told Mother's runner, who stuck at my elbow for a time. Mother Harrison's was known as the quietest, most orderly house on the street; it might do for those quiet and orderly old shellbacks whose blood had been chilled by age; but it would never do for a young A.B., a real man, who was wishful for all the mad living the beach afforded. No; I was looking for the Knitting Swede's.

Knitting Swede Olson! Remember him, Briggs? A fine hole for a young fool to seek! But I was a man, remember—a MAN—and that precious discharge proved it. I was nineteen years old, and manhood bears a very serious aspect at nineteen. No wonder I was holding my head in the air. The fellows in my watch would listen to my opinions with respect, now I was an able seaman. No longer would I scrub the foc'sle floor while the lazy beggars slept. No longer would I peggy week in and week out. I was A.B. at last; a full-fledged man! Of course, I must straightway prove my manhood; so I was bound for the Knitting Swede's.

Everybody knew the Knitting Swede in those days; every man Jack who ever joined a ship. They told of him in New York, and London, and Callao, and Singapore, and in every foc'sle afloat. The king of crimps! He sat in his barroom, in East street, placidly knitting socks with four steel needles, and as placidly ignoring every law of God and man. He ruled the 'Frisco waterfront, did the Knitting Swede, and made his power felt to the very ends of the seas.

Stories about him were without number. It was the Knitting Swede who shanghaied the corpse on board the Tam o' Shanter. It was the Knitting Swede who drugged the skipper of the Sequoia, and shipped him in his own foc'sle. It was the Knitting Swede who sent the crowd of cowboys to sea in the Enterprise. It was the Knitting Swede who was the infamous hero of quite half the dog-watch yarns. It was the Knitting Swede who was—oh, the very devil!

And it was on this very account I was bound for the Swede's house. Very simple, and sailorlike, my motive. In my mind's eye I saw a scene which would be enacted on board my next ship. Some fellow would ask me—as some fellow always does—"And what house did you put up in, in 'Frisco, Jack?" And I would take the pipe out of my mouth, and answer in a carefully careless voice, "Oh, I stopped with the Knitting Swede." And then the

whole foc'sle would look at me as one man, and there would be respect in their eyes. For only very hard cases ever stopped at the Knitting Swede's.

Well, I found the Swede's place easily enough. And he was there in person to welcome me. I discovered his appearance to be just what the stories described—a tall, great paunched man, who bulked gigantic as he perched on a high stool at the end of the bar, a half-knitted gray sock in his hands, and an air about him of cow-like contentment. He possessed a mop of straw-colored hair, and a pair of little, mild, blue eyes that regarded one with all the innocence of a babe's stare.

He suspended his knitting for a moment, gave me a fat, flabby hand, and a grin which disclosed a mouthful of yellow teeth.

"Ja, you koom for a good time, and, by and by, a good ship," says he. "Yoost trust the Swede—he treat you right."

So he sent my bag upstairs to a room, accepted my money for safekeeping, and I set up the drinks for the house.

What? Give him my money for safekeeping? Of course. There was a code of honor even in crimpdom, you know. I came to the Swede's house of my own choosing; no runner of his snared me out of a ship. Therefore I would be permitted to spend the last dollar of my pay-day, chiefly over his bar, of course, and when the money was gone, he would ship me in a ship of my own choosing. Unless, of course, men were exceptionally scarce, and blood money exceptionally high. Crimpdom honor wouldn't stand much temptation. But I was confident of my ability to look after myself. I was a man of nineteen, you know.

So, at the Knitting Swede's I was lodged. I spent most of my first day there in examining and getting acquainted with my fellow lodgers. Aye, they were a crowd, quite in keeping with the repute of the house; hard living, hard swearing, hard fighting A.B.'s, for the most part; the unruly toughs of the five oceans. I swaggered amongst them and thought myself a very devil of a fellow. I bought them drinks at the Swede's bar, and listened with immense satisfaction to their loud comments on my generosity. It was, "He's a fine lad, and no mistake!" and, "He's a real proper bloke, for certain!" And I ordered up the rounds, and swung my shoulders, and felt like a "real proper bloke" indeed.

Well, I saw one chap in the house who really attracted me. I should liked to have chummed with him, and I went out of my way to be friendly towards him. He was a regular giant of a man, with yellow hair and frosty eyes, and a very white face. In fact he looked as if he might have recently been sick, though his huge, muscular frame showed no effects of an illness. He had a jagged, bluish scar over one eye, which traveled up his forehead and disappeared beneath his hair, plainly the result of some terrible clout. But it was not these things, not his face or size which drew me to him; it was his bearing.

All of the chaps in Swede Olson's house were hard cases. They boasted of their hardness. But their hardness was the typical tough's hardness, nine parts bravado, a savagery not difficult to subdue with an oak belaying pin in the fist of a bucko mate. But the hardness of this big, scar-faced man was of a different sort. You sensed, immediately you looked at him, that he possessed a steely armor of indifference that penetrated to his very heart. He was a real hard case, a proper nut, a fellow who simply did not care what happened. It was nothing he said or did, but his demeanor declared plainly he was utterly reckless of events or consequences. It was amusing to observe how circumspectly the bullies of the house walked while in his neighborhood.

But I found him to be a man of silent and lonesome habit, and temperate. He discouraged my friendly advance with a cold indifference, and my idea of chumming with him during my pay-day "bust" soon went glimmering. Yet I admired him mightily from the moment I first clapped eyes upon him, and endeavored to imitate his carriage of utter recklessness in my own strutting.

Reading Questions

What do we know about the narrator after this chapter?

What does he seem to want?

Are you "on his side?" Why or why not?