

Accessorize, Traumatize, Analyze and Eulogize Your Character

June 2009 Write Brain

Presenter: Chris Mandeville

By Grant McKenzie

In today's fiction market, you have to get your reader's attention—especially when that reader is an agent or editor—by the end of page one. As Chris Mandeville explained at June's Write Brain, this can be done by forcing the reader to connect with and begin to understand your character from the very first sentence.

In the past, as Chris illustrated, chapter one was used for setting the scene or giving a sense of the vastness in which the characters lived. Today, chapter one is devoted to introducing the world through the restricted view of the character, allowing the vastness to be revealed as the plot develops.

Sticking with this theme, Chris first had us do an exercise that revealed the intimate nature of our character when chapter one begins. We were asked to “analyze” our character by answering straightforward questions like the character's age and gender, as well as deeper questions such as the character's motivation and conflicts. This allowed us to understand how our characters see their world.

In order to understand how our characters interact with their world, we were next asked to give them a hobby. This “accessorizing” included determining how the character obtained the hobby and how it has affected them over the course of their lives.

The most intimate look into our characters and their motivations came with the third exercise of the evening. We were asked to “traumatize” our characters, or write about a trauma that occurred in their lives prior to their appearance in chapter one. A traumatic event in anyone's life will affect that person's personality. In the same way, our character's traits should be defined by past trauma. One writer present explained that his character was a vegetarian due to the death and roasting of a pet lamb in the character's childhood. Chris pointed out that you can start with a trauma to get to a trait or start with a trait and figure out what trauma caused it.

Chris introduced the final exercise by explaining a writer's conundrum: our characters must be relatable, but they must also be unique. To visualize this, Chris had us “eulogize” our characters. Ideally, a eulogy should be given by someone in the character's world and should include the highlights of the character's life. It is difficult, however, to consider the death of some of our characters, so the exercise allows the use of an award presentation or other similar event where the life of the character would be highlighted and praised. This accentuates the things that make the character unique.

By analyzing, accessorizing, traumatizing, and eulogizing your character, you can get to know your character more intimately, making it much easier to write a rich introduction to your story. Adding other exercises like the ones Chris gave as a parting gift, such as planning a vacation or figuring out your character's ideal last meal, will only make your character more relatable—and more extraordinary.

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 4, July, August 2009