

Creating 3-D. Stereotype-Free Characters

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Don't think you have to be African-American/Latina/Asian/etc. to write a multicultural character. If all of us wrote what we knew and what we are, literature as we know it would be BORING. The key, when you're writing any kind of character who is different from you, is to be respectful. If you are not a Latina, for example, approach writing a Latina character the same way you would a historical or if you have an Irish character in your book and have never met an Irish person. Good research is the key.

Make your books reflect real life. The fact of the matter is that in many regions and most cities, you'll find citizens of every color of the rainbow. Don't be afraid to put a few multicultural people in your books.

Don't think of ethnic characters as "exotic." They are not to be treated like museum pieces to be admired from afar. You can't forget their humanity. Their race, gender, religious belief can't overshadow.

Think about who might be reading your books. When you do create, say, an African-American detective or a Latina lawyer in your books, know that you're going to have readers with those background for whom those characters will pop—no matter how small their role is in your novel. Think of them mentally going, "Yay, a Latina!" or "Hey, cool! A Korean, just like me!" Ask yourself if your depiction would make that reader proud or pleased. Even if the character isn't that likeable—maybe it's the villain—will the reader see that you took pains to create a real person, not a cliché?

Give your characters a firm, well-thought-out goal. If your characters have a goal that your reader can understand, if not identify with, you'll be well on your way to making them stand out for your characters.

Include those little details that make a character pop. Quirks and idiosyncrasies can make a character. EXAMPLES: (i.e. What do we remember about Indiana Jones? He hates snakes. What about Sally from *When Harry Met Sally*? She likes her dressing on the side.) You can often turn those details into threads that you weave throughout the book, and so they become important to the plot.

Turn stereotypes on their heads. This is especially important if you have one person of color in your book—don't make that person a stereotype. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the words "gay hairdresser?" "Pool boy?" "Cowboy ranch hand?" "East L.A. gangbanger?" We've all seen those characters before, and if you choose to write them, make them different enough that your reader won't grow impatient. So reverse those stereotypes, and you'll have the start of a very interesting person indeed.

Avoid using your character to have a social discourse on the trials and tribulations of the person's race, gender, religious beliefs unless it will move the plot. The reader shouldn't be lulled into a false sense that she is getting a good story and then get hit with trite speeches.

Read books by a diverse segment of the population. Read books cross-genre. Go to a mall and people-watch. Watch movies, but be aware that Hollywood has a large share of the blame for perpetuating stereotypes.

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