

3 – Arms and Legs

The process has just begun. Having gathered together the pieces that will form the backbone to the story, several things have to happen before these ideas can grow into a novel.

I have my main characters and I have established their motivations. I know the time and place in history in which I want the story to take place, and I am aware that I need conflict to drive my characters. But that is not a novel.

I will, at this stage, write a very brief outline. I wouldn't even call it a synopsis, but rather a gathering of the elements I have established. It can be no more than a couple of sentences, something to kick start me into 'living the novel', of getting that mental film up and running.

At this point, almost at the very beginning of a novel, it is imperative to have patience. Let your mind dwell on the elements you have, without forcing their growth. It is not necessary at this stage to write CHAPTER 1 and to dive in. What is necessary is to think about the characters, know how old they are, what colour hair they have. Are they tall, short? Can you base them on anyone you know? And also, and this is more important than you might initially think – what are their names?

I like to write a character sketch for my main characters, at least an A4 per character. Knowing the character, finding his foibles and passions, will help fatten out the plot too. Also, and this is a pivotal point for me, each of the characters has to illustrate some particular trait, and that trait must be emphasised. Although in real life, a person may display many facets, if we were to have fictional characters incorporating too many traits, it will make the story confusing, and believe it or not, unbelievable. Readers need, to a certain extent, to rely on a character behaving consistently. More so than we see in real life.

I will state though it might sound cliché, that it is imperative to relate to the main characters. I might want to step into the shoes of the one I have chosen to be the narrator, and this is all too easy to do, but if the novel is to be credible, then I must feel the same rapport with the others. In the case of *The Cloths of Heaven*, I had to feel Maud and Michael (the priest) just as strongly as I felt Sheila (my narrator with CP). And this is where the advantage of limiting the character traits per character comes in. I could find aspects of my own character, and times in life when I had been in conflict either with myself, or my environment, remember how it felt to be in that place in time. I can remember sadness, I can remember anger, and I can remember frustration. I can also remember sheer joy, contentment, feeling a sense of achievement. And they all feel different. So even if one of my characters is less likeable than the others, or is farther removed from my own set of values, I can plug into the sensation by using my own life experiences. And for me, being able to plug in to ALL characters is a must. At no stage in a novel do I want the reader to detect that I might be TAKING SIDES in any issue that might arise. I am a chronicler; it is not my intention to become a didactic.

I recently read *House of Sand and Fog* by Andre Dubus III. A magnificent novel displaying great literary skill. But more than that, it is a perfect example of the point I am making above. Andre Dubus III makes it even more complicated by using not one, but two narrators, alternating chapter by chapter from an unstable female to a dogmatic, disagreeable Iranian husband and father. Dubus speaks through both characters with equal conviction. But what he also does, and this to me shows his craft, he illustrates each one's flaws and weaknesses and less palatable traits, by what each says himself! This gives the reader complete freedom to form his own opinion about each character. Not once in the entire novel do we hear a whisper of Dubus himself. Never do we feel nudged in a particular direction. We never find out what Dubus himself thought of the actions of his characters. And that, to my mind, is a feat of genius, and characterisation.

In *The Cloths of Heaven*, I had only one narrator and two other main characters but the impartiality (or complete partiality) that Dubus illustrates was no less important. I had to like all the characters. I to find an empathy that would endure, whatever the plot had them do. That is why I choose to establish the characters, and acquaint myself with them BEFORE I know exactly where the plot is going.

It is possible however, to have a character with a particular trait grow and develop and become more than we would have initially expected. (And this is where plotting comes in). Through the conflicts he endures he might be changed, either for the better or the worse, but he cannot JUST change in order to fit the plot – then the plot has not been properly thought out. A good example of this type of development is Scrooge, from Dickens' Christmas Carol. He is enticed into becoming more giving and generous by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, that he has seen. His changes, though a surprise to the other characters in the book, are not unexpected to the readers.

And if the characters are the arms and legs, then the plot is the beating heart of a novel.