

CREATING A BELIEVABLE CHARACTER ARC

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Let me preface this discussion by clarifying some jargon: "character arc" refers to the stages of a character's emotional transformation through the course of the story. Producers like to use that term. You can feel very professional when you say it. The word "pattern" refers to the one key emotional issue that your character struggles with, which effects others or himself negatively. I refer to it as a pattern because it's a repetitive, rigid behavior. This term is between us; your producer will smile and nod but in fact be really confused if you use this term in your pitch meeting. So don't do that.

Now back to creating believable character arcs:

You know those films where in the final scenes, the main character suddenly transforms, and we don't quite believe it...? We knew from the moment the film began what the character's pattern is and how she needs to transform, but we don't feel like we witnessed the transformation. We just see her transformed and are expected to buy it. Audiences often don't know that this is the problem they're sensing; they just leave feeling like the ending didn't "feel real" or "wrapped up too fast."

The difference between a believable character arc and one that feels contrived lies in the relationship between the writer and the character.

I once heard a rabbi say: "If you want to change someone, the first thing you have to do is send them flowers."

If you want to change your character you have to love your character. You have to be on his side. You can never ever be judgmental towards your character. It is your job to be your character's biggest ally in the world.

What this means in practice is that you have to understand that their pattern is the result of some way that they had been mistreated early in their life. If you think of your character as just a stingy old scrooge, you won't have the power to change him. But if you're aware that he was cruelly treated by his father, alienated and unloved as a child, that he lost the one sister who loved him, you are well on your way. Your character's pattern is not some innate flaw. It is the aftermath of having been hurt.

Now that you recognize that your character is hurt, not evil, how do you change him? You treat him in the opposite way in which he was mistreated. Hillary Swank in "Million Dollar Baby" is neglected by her family. Her trainer, portrayed by Clint Eastwood, says to her "You've got me." Mr. Banks in "Mary Poppins" is not just a strict, square banker.

He is someone who was clearly raised by one. Mary Poppins' world of imagination and fun is the exact opposite of what his childhood must have been like. Pollyanna had the power to transform an entire town because she treated everyone in the opposite way of how they were treating themselves and each other. Pollyanna, incidentally, did not just kill people with kindness. She was rough and yelled at people when they laid around in bed feeling sorry for themselves. She had high expectations of people, and in that way offered the opposite of what they had gotten before. John Book, played by Harrison Ford in "Witness" is transformed by an Amish woman who condemns violence. His violent pattern stems from having been raised in a violent society and treated violently. If the writer of Witness thought that John Book was inherently a thug, he wouldn't know how to transform him.

You don't need to show us what a character's past is like or why she is the way she is. Those scenes usually need to get cut out of scripts. You can make the rewriting easier by not putting that stuff in there to begin with. You do, however, need that information for yourself in order to create events that will impact your characters.

Needless to say, all this pertains even more so to your villains. If you think your villain is just a plain ol' jerk, you will create a cardboard villain that we've seen a million times. But if you can be your villain's best friend and get where he's coming from, you will create a villain that your audience will fall in love with. That's what you want.

Incidentally, this is true of real life people too. Next time you're mad at someone, make a list of everything that bothers you about them, and then tell them the exact opposite of everything on your list. See what happens.

At the end of the day, you can only change people by caring about them.

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