

NOW WRITE! SAMPLE EXERCISE

The Interview

by Lauren Grodstein

The stories and novels that I write are usually pretty interior – the characters tend to drive the action, instead of the other way around. I’ve found that the best way, then, for me to write convincing stories is to create characters who are as human as I can make them. For instance, my novel, *Reproduction is the Flaw of Love*, is about a young man who waits outside the bathroom door while his girlfriend takes a pregnancy test. The entire thing takes place in the narrative space of an hour and a half (give or take a few flashbacks). Without a compelling character with whom to wait outside that bathroom door, the reader would quickly lose interest in the story. So, when I was writing *Reproduction*, I did everything I could to make Miller, my hero, as three-dimensional as he could possibly be. I wrote interior monologues for him, devised his family tree, wrote scenes from his childhood, and, finally, interviewed him.

To be honest, I forget where I got the idea of interviewing a character – although I’m pretty certain I didn’t make it up – but doing it allowed me to get to know Miller more intimately than I might have otherwise. I trained myself to hear his voice. I learned that he’s a pretty quiet guy, although he’ll speak in long, rambling sentences when he’s feeling philosophical. I learned that he likes to listen to classical music, but only by himself, in a car on a country road. I learned that he’s suspicious of cats. And, most importantly, I learned to see him as an individual, instead of just an extension of myself, the writer.

Interviewing characters is not a sure-fire way to start writing three-dimensional people; it can feel forced or silly, and sometimes just like extra work a writer doesn't need. But I've gotten pretty hooked on it. It helps me know my characters better, and spend some time with them outside the limited confines of the novel or story to which they belong. And that, in itself, is often a pleasure.

Often, writers face the urge to write about characters who are really thinly veiled versions of themselves. (Some authors simply get right to it and baldly name their characters after themselves; the star of Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, for example, is a novelist named Philip Roth). I recommend that you avoid this urge if possible. First, it's not such a stretch to write about someone who has the same job as you, uses the same toothpaste, wears the same sneakers. Second, there's often a falseness or a forcedness apparent in characters who are clearly too close to the author. It's as though by writing about versions of themselves, the authors become more concerned with "getting it right" than with good writing. The author becomes so obsessed with describing his own day at work, getting the details perfectly, that he forgets that he's writing fiction.

So instead of writing about yourself (or your father, or your wife) try instead to write about a purely invented character. The inspiration for this character can come from anywhere, but the details of his or her life should come from your imagination. Think carefully: what does your character look like? Bald spot? Glasses? What motivates him to go to work every day (or not go to work every day?) Where did he go to school? What were his parents like? Is he a cat person? Dog person? Parakeet person? Vegetarian? Even if none of these details are relevant to the story, you need to know them to convince

your reader of the genuineness of your fictional world. A thin character is not strong enough to hold up the narrative dream your stories should create.

EXERCISE

This assignment involves creating a character and getting to know that character as well as you possibly can. Your job is to interview your character as though you were a journalist for, say, Esquire or the New Yorker, and your character were the subject of a big juicy profile piece. Here are some of the questions you might want to ask your character:

- What is your earliest childhood memory?
- What's your idea of a dream vacation?
- If you could have any other job, what would it be?
- Who do you consider a hero?
- Which do you prefer: rock, opera, or jazz - and why?
- Or do you only listen to talk radio? Or do you listen to nothing at all?

But feel free to ask your interviewee anything you want!