

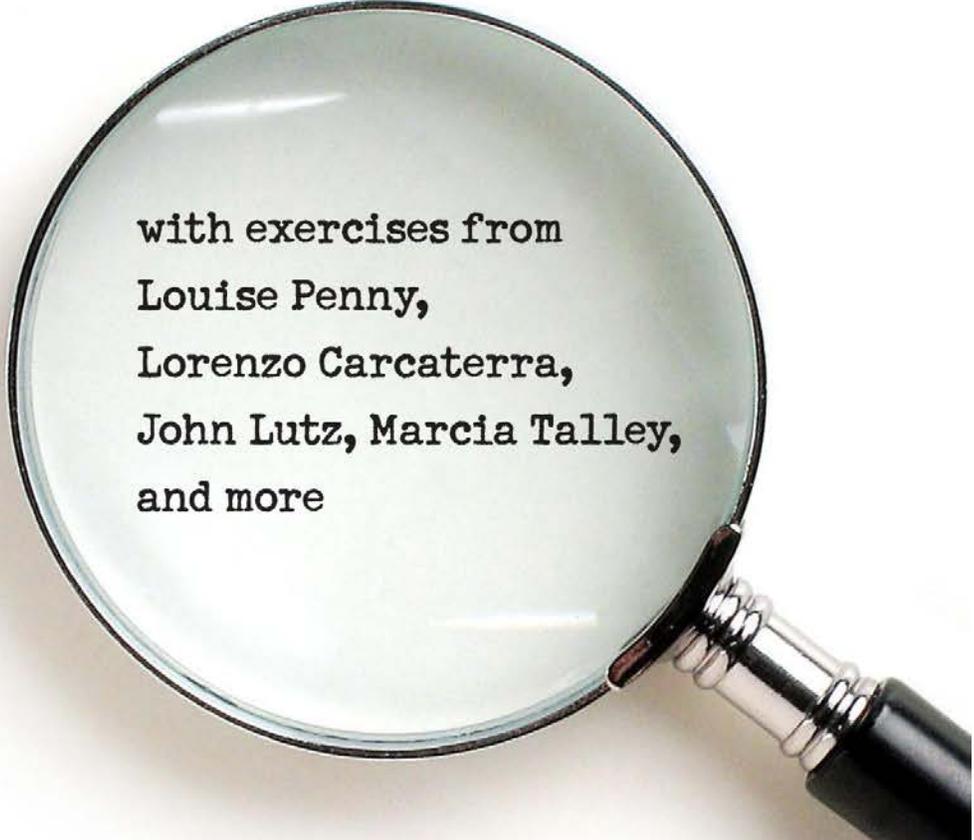


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The Offbeat Protagonist

by Deborah Coonts

Las Vegas is about as idiosyncratic as cities come—perfect fodder for a novelist. I've lived here ten years and have come to understand that those of us who find our place in Sin City are square pegs. There isn't a normal person in the bunch. Of course, while this presents all kinds of wonderful storytelling opportunities for my mystery series, it also presents its challenges. One of the most critical, I found, was my choice of protagonist.

Now, protagonists are interesting creatures. Not only are they the door through which your readers enter and become invested in your world, they are also a function of the tenor and tone of your tale. Ideally, protagonists are recognizable to your readers—people they can relate to or feel empathy for. Their conflicts should strike a common chord so the reader starts to root for these characters, to care what happens to them.

For storytelling purposes, the protagonist also reflects or embodies the world the writer creates. Since I write stories about Las Vegas, there was no way my protagonist could be normal, a run-of-the-mill straight arrow. However, she needed to be normal enough so she wouldn't be off-putting or hard to relate to. It's a fine line: quirky yet normal. How's that for an oxymoron? But, if you think about it, most of the people we remember are unique, yet normal enough.

As writers, how do we walk this line? What makes a protagonist memorable yet still accessible to your readers? For me, the characters I remember most are usually a bit eccentric, quite often with a finely-honed wit that made me laugh, whether they intended

that result or not. Often they are also a bit unexpected. To me, this makes them more interesting and engaging, which is especially important in a protagonist.

It seems there are two different ways to make characters stand out: give them distinctive mannerisms or give them an odd but relatable conflict.

So, in building a backstory for my protagonist, I thought through all of the weird and wonderful things about Vegas. I thought about how someone would be shaped by growing up here. And Lucky was born: a woman in her early thirties who is extraordinarily good at her job as Head of Customer Relations at a Strip mega-resort, but who is completely inept in handling her personal life. She spent her formative years being raised in a whorehouse by her mother, a former hooker and current owner of the establishment. Lucky doesn't know who her father is. Through all of the bumps and bruises inflicted by this kind of upbringing, Lucky developed a keen appreciation for human frailties. She is tall, six feet, and large enough that she shops in the section where the transvestites shop—not a comfortable existence in the land of the beautiful people. Her best friend is a straight female impersonator, Juilliard-trained with a Harvard MBA, who wants to be more than friends. Lucky isn't too sure about dating a guy who looks better in her clothes than she does.

One of the difficult parts about creating a unique protagonist is you need to populate the story around them. In my Las Vegas stories, I had to resist the temptation to make them all totally over-the-top. If I did that, then my offbeat protagonist would blend in with the crowd—not a good thing. I had to choose carefully which particular traits or curiosities exposed by Vegas I wanted each character to represent.

Generally, what I like to do with supporting characters is to take the expected and

turn it at least ninety degrees. Lucky's mother the madam? She's svelte, decked-out in designer duds, and a lobbyist for her industry. Lucky's boyfriend wears a dress for a living and her assistant is a fiftyish frump dating a thirty-five-year-old Aussie hunk. She represents some of the dreams people come to Vegas to find, or the fantasies they play around in while here.

EXERCISE

So, how do you create memorable, quirky characters all your own?

Since the well of personal experience is what we draw from, think about the people in your life you remember. What traits or characteristics did they have that separated them from everyone else?

Did they have a particular physical trait that made them stand out? A cat's eye? Were they tall? Short? Fat? Thin? One leg longer than the other? Purple hair?

Did they have a particular skill that was unusual? Perhaps they played the piccolo? Or they drove a backhoe for a living? Or they rode circus horses when they were young or followed the Grateful Dead one summer? Perhaps they drive an unusual car or fly airplanes. Or they fold origami when they're nervous.

Maybe their job is unique: a sous-chef or a veterinary assistant. The shy desk clerk at the strip club . . . or the chicken girl at the Tropicana (don't ask).

Or perhaps their goals seem inconsistent with their lifestyle? A fifty-year-old frumpy secretary who dates a thirty-five-year-old Australian hunk. A woman who has serious trust issues yet longs for a mate. A straight guy who channels Cher for a living.

Let your imagination run wild, then tone things down, and mold them to your

story. For me, a good laugh is golden, so I like to have some fun.

CAUTION: Don't go overboard. Give your characters one or two eccentricities. And pick and choose which characters will get them. Too many weird traits and too many offbeat characters and they all start blending together. This is the opposite of your goal to make them memorable.