Rachel Ballon:

"Breathing life into your characters"

CHAPTER 4

less of you: creating characters different from yourself

I was always looking outside myself for strength and confidence but it comes from within. It was there all the time.
—*Anna Freud*

Many writers often believe that everyone is interested in their personal lives, and so they naturally want to write about their latest breakup or romance. Unfortunately these are often the last things readers want from a novel. Why? Because readers and viewers want to be entertained by fiction, to be suspended in disbelief and to be involved in a story that takes them outside of their own realities.

As a therapist, I believe that writers who write themselves into their own stories are doing so to make sense of their lives. You don't choose your writing subject by accident, especially if it's based on a personal life experience. Those newer to the craft may write the story of "Why my mother liked my brother better than me," or "Why my father didn't have time to be a father, because he was too busy working." In other words, they write about an aspect of their own life story, which is important and interesting to them, but which may bore audiences.

This type of writing works if you're planning on writing your autobiography or memoir, but it doesn't work if you're writing fictional stories. With fiction, you need to structure a story that is exciting and filled with three-dimensional characters. The obliga-

tion of good fiction is to entertain your readers and hold their interest by creating characters who are different from yourself and by turning your personal story into one that is dramatic and dynamic.

In this chapter, you will learn how to do just that—to take your personal life story and transform it into a powerful fictional story with fully developed characters living in an exciting plot.

Consider the following: Can you take what happened to you and turn it into an exciting story with a beginning, middle, and end? Can you create characters for your story who have a goal and overcome obstacles along the way? Can you give your story a main character who will finally reach her goal and have an emotional transformation or change in the climax? If you answer "yes," to all three questions then you are well on the road to writing characters different from yourself.

Less of You

> **Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes).** —*Walt Whitman*

When you write fiction you must use your life experience and knowledge of craft—character, dialogue, theme, conflict, structure—to transform your experience into fiction that is professionally written.

You might wonder why so many writing instructors tell you to write what you know and yet, when you do, they say it's not working because there's too much of you in the story. Well, since you create the characters and the plot, you're creating a universe. You're playing God by creating a world with rules and human beings who are going on a journey. You need to use yourself as the creative source from which you'll write your story because you are the only person with your unique abilities. You'll need to draw upon your life experiences, your emotional world, and your own psychology to make your story fresh and original. At this moment you have hundreds of stories inside of you, enough to write for a lifetime. After all, there is nobody else in the world exactly like you, and nobody but you can write the story you want to tell. However, that doesn't mean you should write exactly what happened.

Neil Simon has enjoyed tremendous success with his two autobiographical plays, *Broadway Bound* and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, in which he used characters from his childhood. But his genius was in taking real life and making it more humorous and heartfelt than common reality is usually capable of providing on its own. In your writing, it's imperative to recognize the fragile dance you need to perform in order to put parts of yourself into your characters, while at the same time, creating characters who are unique and different from you. "How can I accomplish this?" you may ask. "First you tell me to create characters different from myself and then you tell me to put parts of myself into the characters. Isn't that a contradiction?" Yes, it is a contradiction, but it is one all writers must face.

Writing about real people and real life is a great jumping-off point for creating fictional characters who are dynamic and believable. So, it's not really a contradiction, because people and incidents from your life are the motivation and the impetus for you to create a story that is important to you. You shouldn't write any story unless it has meaning to you. Most of the best scripts and novels are those that came from a significant aspect of the writer's life, even if it was just a moment in time or a fragment of an experience.

Truman Capote's touching short story "A Christmas Memory" was based on his childhood memory of his last Christmas with his older cousin. The story tells of a close bond between the two cousins, an older woman, and a young boy, and how they share their last Christmas together. It was later turned into a television program that still airs during the Christmas season because of its universal theme of emotional closeness and love.

EXERCISE

Personal Transformations

Take a heartfelt memory from your childhood, such as a holiday memory or an incident that you recall with a favorite relative. Using your senses of touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell, write for about fifteen to twenty minutes as fast as you can without stopping. After you have completed the exercise, use what you wrote as the basis for a fictional character in a story. That means you can use the feelings that touched your heart, but now you need to put them into a character and write a story with a beginning, middle, and end.

By writing this way you're allowing your right brain to visualize the memories. After you do the freewriting, you can use your left brain to organize the material and to shape your characters into fiction. The beauty of this type of writing is that you are first able to get the story down without censoring yourself.

When you create characters and write a personal story, you may be unconsciously working through some unfinished business of your life. The wonderful result may be that you experience a personal transformation just as your main character experiences a transformational arc in the story. This can be an exciting opportunity for self-discovery on a personal level, and it enables you to create a touching, heartfelt story and to reveal your truth. ■ ■ ■

Your Inner Characters

> **It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.** —*Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

Your inner characters reside inside you. They're those parts of you that are contradictory and complementary, those selves that are opposites and polarizing. These divergent parts of your personality often create the biggest resistance to change and risk taking. If you want to

meet your worst enemy and your best friend—just look in the mirror at yourself. The same goes for your characters.

By going on an inner journey you'll discover the most important resources needed to create characters filled with internal struggles just like you. Writing from parts of yourself will allow your characters to grow and change as they go through their journey. We tend to compartmentalize parts of our personality. Thus we have many selves that are never exposed or expressed to others, or even to ourselves. Our dreams and fantasies often reveal these hidden parts of ourselves. We also switch selves depending on our environment: You don't act the same at work as you do at home. You treat your father different from your mother, teachers different from peers, friends different from foes, lovers different from siblings.

We have many parts to our personality that are disparate and diversified. These aspects of our personality often make us at odds with others as well as ourselves. Your characters also need to have many contradicting personalities and selves to make them interesting and complex. You'll soon discover how these contradictions make sense, and you'll be able to use them to give your characters greater depth. As you accept the fact that you contradict yourself, you'll be able to create more diverse, flesh and blood characters.

EXERCISE

Identifying Your Inner Characters

Write down the different inner characters that live inside of you. For example you might include: the inner critic, the good little girl, the wise self, etc. Make a list and try to get at least ten to twenty inner characters who you can draw upon when creating your characters. After you have written this list, create a list for your main characters. Who are their inner characters and how do they affect their behavior in your story? Do their inner selves give them more complexity? Do they behave and react differently with other characters? Do they have a thread of inner strength to draw upon in times of danger? How do your characters differ from one another? How do they solve their problems by using their inner characters? ■ ■ ■

The exercise you just completed will help you get in touch with parts of your personality that have been dormant or hidden away. Many writers only write from one voice—usually the victim's voice, thus only showing readers a character who is helpless and dependent on others. Inside, there are many personalities you need to call upon when writing stories of stronger characters. For example, women writers may have trouble connecting to their animus, which, according to Carl Jung, is the masculine side of their personality. It is important for women to connect to their animus when writing a story with a strong or aggressive character. Mystery writer Elizabeth George stresses the psychological profile and family history of her characters, and was able to get in touch with her animus when she created her detective, Scotland Yard Inspector, Thomas Lynley, the eighth Earl of Asherton in her first novel *A Great Deliverance.*

Just as a woman writer needs to reach her animus, a man needs to get in touch with his anima, the feminine side of himself, especially when writing about characters who are emotionally expressive and giving. Tennessee Williams, the famous playwright, certainly succeeded in creating female characters who were giving, sensitive, and vulnerable such as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, by tapping into his anima.

Like male and female writers, characters also need to connect with their feminine and masculine sides. A writer capable of connecting with his or her own anima or animus will find it much easier to create such complex characters than a writer who is limited to his or her own perspective.

Method Writing

> **Write from experience and experience only. Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.** —*Henry James*

Famous actors such as Robert De Niro and Al Pacino prepare for their roles through a process called method acting, taught by the highly respected acting teacher Lee Strasberg. Method acting requires actors to go inside themselves to recall their feelings, sensory memories, affective or emotional memories, concentration, focus, and emotions. Similarly, good writers must also prepare themselves in advance for developing their fictional characters by going inside themselves. Just as there is method acting, I would like to propose method writing as a way for you to delve deeper into your characters, making them different from yourself.

To engage in method writing, you need to target a sensory memory from the past in which you felt emotions similar to those that you want your fictional character to experience. By tapping into your memory with all of your senses, you will retrieve these emotions, which are always with you, but not available without relaxation and visualization.

The longer I teach writing, the more I've come to believe that method writing is just as important, if not more so, for writers to learn as traditional writing methods. It is the writers who are the creators of all the characters in a story, film, or play. To prepare for their roles, actors ask in-depth questions of their characters such as: "What does my character want?" "What context or background does my character come from?" "What is the emotional makeup of my character?" "Does my character have high self-esteem or is he suffering from low self-worth?" These questions help method actors find meaning in a role.

Doesn't it make sense for you, the writer, to be asking the same questions of your characters *before* you create them? After all, you're

creating a world filled with human beings who all have hopes and desires, needs and wants, fears and dreams—similar to the ones you have.

With method writing, you must also do the necessary research to learn about aspects of your characters that you are less familiar with. How does a boxer train? What does a stripper do to become a stripper? How do the homeless live? How do criminals commit their crimes? It is important for you to put yourself in your characters' shoes in order to feel and think like the characters. By doing your research and putting your emotions into your characters, you will be able to give them greater emotional depth.

EXERCISE

Recalling Sensory Memories

Get in touch with your own sensory memory as you recall a real person in your life with whom you had an emotional relationship. Close your eyes and try to remember your emotions at the time. Were you in love? Did you argue? What was the most prominent emotion you felt? Now using all of your senses, write about the relationship and your feelings about it. Don't stop writing for at least fifteen minutes. Immerse yourself in the scene. After you've written about the relationship, put your personal emotions into a fictional character by using method writing to recover your feelings. ■ ■ ■

The Writer as All the Characters

> **Every human being has hundreds of separate people living under his skin.** —*Mel Brooks*

In the early 1990s, I developed a course at UCLA writer's program titled "The Writer as All the Characters." It quickly filled with all types of writers, even those writing nonfiction. Many were curious about the title and couldn't wait to learn how they could become all the characters. Some were resistant to the fact that they were all the characters because they didn't want to admit that any of the undesirable traits in their characters were also in them.

Well, it's true. You, the writer, are all the characters. Without your imagination, life experiences, and internal world you wouldn't be able to develop diverse characters. If you are able to access your various selves and put those aspects of yourself into your characters, regardless of whether you have actually experienced the same situation, you'll create great characters for every story you write. As the writer of all the characters in a story, you should be able to discover reasons for their internal needs and drives. If you are unable to do this, your characters will feel flat, forced, and fake.

As we discussed earlier, Jung believed we have a collective unconscious where archetypes or universal characters reside. The following is a list of some of these archetypal characters:

Wise old man/woman: has living experiences that incorporate inner wisdom

Little professor: intelligent, mature child who pleases parents by getting good grades

Perfect child: does everything right and always obeys

Femme fatale: sexpot, vixen, siren

Hunk: a macho stud, Don Juan, a sexy lady's man

Amazon woman: capable, independent, self-sufficient

Witch/bitch: overly aggressive, cold

Wallflower: shy, insecure, stays in background

Dictator: pushes and prods others into doing things they don't want to do, domineering and overly controlling

Rebel: nonconformist, stubborn, rule-breaker, goes against the grain

Big shot: wealthy, insistent, overconcerned with one's own reputation

Madonna: mother figure, caretaker, revered and respected

Victim: waits to be taken care of, wants to be rescued, "poor me" approach to life

Little prince/princess: spoiled, demanding, wants to be waited on by others

People-pleaser: wants to make others happy, needs constant approval from others

Joker, prankster, clown: entertainer, plays practical jokes, mischievous

Perfectionist: desires to have everything "just right," always training to do better

Warrior: saves the day, fights off the enemies, strong

Rescuer: saves others from peril or even from themselves if need be

Pygmalion: tries to change or "make over" others into something else

Martyr: willing to sacrifice one's life for the sake of others, for the "greater good"

Critic: never fully satisfied, always has something negative to say

Judge: judges, censors, and evaluates others

Vulnerable little child: defenseless, easily preyed-upon victim

Try to find the archetypes inside yourself, where all your emotions and feelings are collected. Open yourself to all of them—the good and the bad. As you'll discover in the exercise below, when you reconnect with your archetypes, you'll create powerful visual images and dynamic, universal characters and stories.

EXERCISE

You, Your Archetypes, and Your Characters

Read over the list and see how many of these archetypes you can identify in yourself. Keep in mind that while archetypes are similar to the inner characters we discussed on page 52, they are, in actuality, far more universal. Now take your archetypes and put them in some of your fictional characters. Choose one or two qualities of your particular archetypes for each of your characters in your story and use these archetypes in order to make him or her come alive.

Whether the characters you create are heroes or heroines, villains or vixens, Madonnas or martyrs, they are based on these universal archetypes. By connecting to your archetypes and employing them in your story you'll create powerful, dynamic characters who touch the collective unconscious of your audience. ■ ■ ■

If you are able to write from your personal experiences and transform them into powerful fictional characters and stories, you'll have succeeded as a writer. Writers often ask me, "How can I write about being a beauty queen if I've never been one?" "How can I write about being a prisoner if I've never been in jail?"

Well, you can. That's why you're a writer—use your imagination and creativity to go inside yourself. Access those parts of you that know what it feels to be attractive, or know the feeling of being trapped or caged. You aren't limited to only writing what you know. You also want to write what you feel.

Reach inside yourself and put your romantic feelings into your characters who fall in love, like William Shakespeare did in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*, she created larger than life romantic characters, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler.

If you can develop characters who emulate the passion of Scarlett and Rhett, your characters will come alive. Take your loving feelings and put them into a romance between your fictional characters, one that your readers root for, hoping that the characters will get together in the end. Even if you're not a mother, father, murderer, preacher, cheerleader, or beauty queen, you can still write about these characters by connecting with all the various human beings residing inside you.

As a writer who knows the importance of reaching deep inside to access your emotions, feelings, and memories, you have enough stories inside you to last a lifetime. The secret is to take your life experiences, your psychology, and your emotional world, and put them into fictional characters. You don't have to be a lover boy to be romantic, and you don't have to be a femme fatale to attract a man. Conversely, you don't have to be a husband and father to create characters who are family men, and you don't have to be a spinster to know about loneliness and isolation.

However, you must get emotional distance from real life situations or real people before you try to write about them. Recently, a writer consulted with me about writing a story about her husband's death. She was in the middle of mourning and still very distraught about his unexpected death. I explained that it would be helpful if she wrote in her journal about her feelings, pain, and despair, but that she should wait until more time passed—until she was no longer living in the throes of her pain—before working his story into a novel. At first she didn't understand what I meant, but when I explained she was too close to the incident to be objective, she understood.

If you have a person from your life who you want to write about, make certain enough time has elapsed so that you can approach him or her with an objective writer's eye and have enough distance to be able to create a composite character to tell your story, otherwise you will be too subjective and won't be able to successfully create a fictional character who works.

From Real People to Fictional Characters

The writer isn't made in a vacuum. Writers are witnesses.
—E.L. Doctorow

Many things happen in life that don't necessarily make for good fiction. For example, in fiction, characters shouldn't meet or have things happen to them through coincidence because such occurrences can lack realism. Instead, the characters need to be motivated and there has to be a basis for what happens to them. Yet, in life, coincidences can and do happen all the time, which accounts for the saying, "Life is stranger than fiction."

In life, people can be boring and dialogue can often be filled with grunts, "ahs" and "ehs." In fiction, dialogue must give information to move the story forward and reveal the character in some way. If the dialogue doesn't accomplish this in a work of fiction, you risk losing the reader's attention.

You need to create characters who hold your readers' interest and who tell a good story—that's what matters. In many instances, writers are afraid to write about a particular person from their life, especially if their character isn't a nice or sympathetic one. While you'll want to take some cautions, such as changing the character's profession or gender, you shouldn't worry too much. In my experience, I've discovered that the nastiest, most mean-spirited people don't usually think of themselves in that way. Most people believe they're pleasant and that everyone else is a problem. Odds are, they probably wouldn't even realize they're the inspiration for that miserable cad or mean scoundrel in your story. So don't worry. Instead, put your energy into observing and gathering character traits from people in your own life so you can create dynamic and fascinating fictional characters.

Values, Beliefs, Themes

> **Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.** —*William James*

It's important to write about characters who are meaningful to you and topics about which you feel passionate, in order for your intentions and interests as a writer to come through in your work. For example, if you feel strongly about how our environment is being destroyed, you might write a story using a main character who expresses that theme. You could develop another character, most likely the antagonist, who desperately wants to turn the remaining park land into a high-priced housing development. Since the main character believes in preserving the environment, this situation not only creates conflict, but allows you to express your beliefs and values through your characters.

Putting your beliefs into a fictional story or film can be more powerful than writing an essay on the environment because your audience or readers will identify personally with your beliefs through your characters. You'll entertain your readers, while revealing your feelings about the environment.

You need to decide what is at stake for the main character and the other major characters in your story. Is it honor, pride, freedom, religion, politics? Whatever you choose as the value or belief of your characters, you must give it enough importance in the story to develop a meaningful conflict that character must overcome. The belief or the value must be specific, not abstract. If you've chosen a value such as justice, then you want to show a person receiving justice or not getting justice in your story. Other values you might want to write about are freedom, honesty, ethics, education, or loyalty.

EXERCISE

Character Beliefs and Behaviors

Make a list of all your values and beliefs, writing as quickly as you can. Where did your values and beliefs come from? School? Church? Parents? Friends? Have you ever questioned or discarded some of your values or beliefs? Are you limited by your belief system or does it enhance your relationships and your life?

Now make a list of your characters' values and belief systems. How do their values and beliefs affect their behavior in your story? Are there conflicts between the characters because of their differing belief

systems? People kill in the name of values and beliefs. Wars have been waged in the name of religion, freedom from oppression and injustice. Be certain to spend a lot of time establishing your individual characters' values and belief systems. It will help you create original characters whose values and beliefs mirror your own. ■ ■ ■

In the 1961 Pulitzer prize novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, lawyer Atticus Finch defends a black man in a small Southern town because he knows the man deserves a fair trial, even though the town's citizens believe he is guilty. His friends from the town become angry with Finch and even threaten him, but Finch remains committed to his client. His belief in justice is stronger than his need to be well liked and to go along with the crowd. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee reveals the vast amount of prejudice and racism that existed in small Southern towns like Finch's. Through compelling characters, she is able to show how dangerous and venal racism is.

What is the purpose for writing anything if you have nothing to say as a writer? What is writing all about if it's not to share your viewpoint, your passion, or your personal vision of life, death, love, birth, relationships, and yourself? It's not necessary to state your theme in the beginning, but when you write about something that has meaning to you and is important, your message will unconsciously be made visible through the characters' actions or deliberately be revealed by a character. Writing about a topic that matters to you will give your writing a much deeper level, especially if your audience goes away intrigued with or at least provoked by your vision of the world.

Whatever value or belief you want to express, you need to put it into a story with exciting and interesting characters who are capable of carrying out the values that are the theme of the story. Theme will give your story meaning and purpose. What is your purpose for writing your particular story? What belief, value, or theme do you want

to share with your audience? What is important to you and why are you writing what you're writing?

EXERCISE

Novel Intentions and Take-Away Values

As quickly as you can, write what you want your readers to feel or believe after they've read your book or short story, or have seen your film or play. How do you want to influence them? What is it you have to say that you feel passionate about and hope that they will too? You may want to do this exercise before you start creating characters for your story. It will help you find your intention for your story. It will also give your main character an internal goal to work toward, which is the theme of your story.

It is your obligation to entertain your audience, to provide them with a story peopled with characters who carry out your theme in a manner that is exciting and gives your audience enjoyment and pleasure. A story where your audience can experience a catharsis, along with your character, is a powerful story. A story that allows your characters to reach their destination transformed and changed results in a natural ending that ultimately shapes your story. ■ ■ ■

Knowing Yourself, Knowing Your Characters

He that knows himself, knows others . . . —*Charles C. Colton*

For the audience to know your characters well, you must know your characters well. Many writers create characters from the outside in rather than from the inside out because they know only enough to make the characters serve the needs of the plot and no more. This makes the characters flat and stereotypical. Your characters have to be active, not passive. They need to be proactive and struggle to overcome conflict and obstacles. They can't be acted upon, otherwise they'll be bland and incomplete.

By answering the question "Who am I?" you'll be able to form a clearer perception of yourself and your characters. It provides you with the beginning of an answer to your identity. But you also need to know who you really are so you thoroughly understand what you want to say through all of your characters.

EXERCISE

Who Are You? Who Are Your Characters?

Answer this question for yourself: "Who am I?" Take into consideration all your possible roles (wife, husband, African American, conservative, dentist, nephew, sister, teacher, poor, doctor, male, Republican, actor, mother, baseball fan, football player, dancer, reader, etc.). The roles you play form your identify and are the basis of your external self and image.

Now complete "Who am I?" using no roles. Are you able to figure out who you are without your roles? You'd be surprised how many individuals are not aware of their inner self. Make a list of who you think you are on the inside. Use adjectives you think best describe you from the inside, such as sensitive, loving, depressed, isolated, lonely, happy, etc.

After you have completed the exercises, look at the information and think how you perceive yourself. Are you more attached to your external self than you are to your internal self? By doing these exercises for yourself, you will begin to learn how you feel about yourself and who you are without roles.

Now answer "Who am I?" for your fictional characters. First complete the question "Who am I?" by listing all their roles. Next answer "Who am I?" for your characters without any roles. You will know your characters better by doing these exercises, and you'll be able to give them a definite personality and identity. Can you predict how they'll act and react in your story? What roles do your characters play in your story?

After you do the same exercise for your characters you'll have a better understanding of their identity and their internal world by seeing the real person inside each character. And you will know their self-image and how they present themselves to their world through the roles they play. ■ ■ ■

Negative Inner Voices

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Most characters in stories start out with a problem, such as feeling insecure, having low self-esteem, being weak, being afraid, or being stuck in their lives. In all of our lives there is a negative voice that whispers to us and keeps us blocked and afraid to take risks. The same is true of your fictional characters. They, too, have internal negative voices that give them self-doubt, insecurities that they must overcome. At times, these voices can become very strong; at other times, they can be quieted or silenced, if only momentarily.

Try to drown out your negative voice with positive statements, even if you don't believe them. Do the same for your character. If she is afraid to go out on a date, make her talk to herself until she has the courage to accept a date. If he is afraid to call a girl for a date, let him fight his fears and call anyway.

In a wonderful teleplay that later became a movie called *Marty*, written by the outstanding writer Paddy Chayefsky, there's a poignant scene when Marty, an unattractive, shy, insecure butcher, wants to call a girl he met for a date. He practices on the phone for a long time until he gets the courage to call her. When he finally picks up the phone and calls to ask her out, she refuses. It's obvious that he hasn't had much luck in the past with women, as he is so insecure and nervous. In this touching and painful scene, the audience really identifies with the character, since we all have been rejected at one time or another in our lives. The author probably was, too.

The scene is real, the character is insecure, but good-hearted, and we all root for him. We want him to get a date and feel sad for him when he can't. This is what good character development is about: involving the reader or viewer, having them feel empathy and concern for the character.

When you can take parts of yourself and give them to your fictional characters yet make them different from you, you will have succeeded in one of the most daunting journeys you will ever take as a writer.