

June 2018 Discussion

Character Introduction and Building

How do you introduce a character? Until recently, I had a tendency to give what was termed by a critic as an “Information Dump”. I went to great lengths to describe the character in great detail.

Here is an example of character description from Ian Fleming’s “Diamond Smugglers”

Blaize duly turned up on time, and we met in my bedroom at the Minzah.

He was a man of about forty, dressed in the typical uniform of the Englishman abroad— Lovat tweed coat, grey flannel trousers, a dark blue rope-knit sweater, nondescript tie, and rather surprisingly, a fine white silk shirt of which he later confessed he owned twenty-four. He had inconspicuous but attractive good looks. He had dark hair flecked with grey, and shrewd, humorous, slate-coloured eyes that turned up slightly at the corners. His smile was warm and his voice quiet with a hint of hesitation. He spoke always with a diffident authority, and whenever I interrupted he would carefully turn over what I had said before replying.

Is this description too much? Too much information? Discuss.

In an article from Writers Digest, they give some useful tips. The article goes into the subject in detail, but in brief:

- **Description that relies solely on physical attributes too often turns into what Janet Burroway calls the “all-points bulletin.”** It reads something like this: “My father is a tall, middle-aged man of average build. He has green eyes and brown hair and usually wears khakis and oxford shirts.”
- **The problem with intensifying an image only by adjectives is that adjectives encourage cliché.** It’s hard to think of adjective descriptors that haven’t been overused: bulging or ropy muscles, clean-cut good looks, frizzy hair.
- **Select physical details carefully, choosing only those that create the strongest, most revealing impression.** One well-chosen physical trait, item of clothing, or idiosyncratic mannerism can reveal character more effectively than a dozen random images
- **A character’s immediate surroundings can provide the backdrop for the sensory and significant details that shape the description of the character himself.** If your character doesn’t yet have a job, a hobby, a place to live, or a place to wander, you might need to supply these things. Once your character is situated comfortably, he may relax enough to reveal his secrets.
- **In describing a character’s surroundings, you don’t have to limit yourself to a character’s present life.** Early environments shape fictional characters as well as flesh-and-blood people.
- **Here is a good example of surroundings:** *Living among those white-faced women with their rosaries and copper crosses, never getting away from the stuffy schoolroom atmosphere, she gradually succumbed to the mystic languor exhaled by the perfumes of the altar,*
- **To make characters believable to readers, set them in motion.** The earlier “all-points bulletin” description of the father failed not only because the details were mundane and the prose stilted; it also suffered from lack of movement.
- **We don’t always have to use concrete, sensory details to describe our characters, and we aren’t limited to describing actable actions.** The novels of Milan Kundera use little outward description of characters or their actions. Kundera is more concerned with a character’s interior landscape, with what he calls a character’s “existential problem,” than with sensory description of person or action.

The full article can be found at: writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/there-are-no-rules/11-secrets-to-writing-effective-character-description

In my short story, “*Love Eludes, Eluding Love*”, the first edition, I had a lot of irrelevant information. This was one instant where my critic classified it as an “Information Dump”. When I took it out of the story, it greatly improved the ‘flow’ of the story which was meant to be ‘sensitive’.

Thu An is a mature woman of Vietnamese heritage. Now in her early fifties her life had seen its tragedies as well as its glorious moments. Thu An is still a very attractive woman.

She is of average height for an Asian woman and she had maintained her attractive slim appearance despite her hardships. Her facial features were so beautifully Asian for a mature woman. Her skin showed no sign of aging even though age had crept upon her. Her almond shaped eyes still held a sparkle and they did not betray the inner thoughts that lay behind them.

In an article by Eva Langston in Carve Magazine, she writes:

As a kid, I devoured girly series books like Sweet Valley and Baby-sitter's Club. In Sweet Valley High, the twin protagonists were always described as having blond hair, "Pacific blue eyes," and "perfect size six figures." Unfortunately, I often find myself describing my own fictional characters as if I'm ghost-writing for a Young Adult series. I give height, hair colour, eye colour, and body shape. But these standard descriptions can sound generic, and they don't really help the reader picture your characters.

Eva Langston makes a couple of interesting points:

- **You don't always have to be specific.** In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the reader never really learns the colour of Daisy's hair or eyes, but does it matter?
- **Scatter physical descriptions throughout the prose.** You don't have to give all your description of a character when he or she first arrives on the scene. Instead, scatter brief descriptions throughout multiple scenes.
- **Describe actions that reveal physical characteristics.** "As we'd been talking, she'd pulled her hair into a high, loose bun with shorter pieces of hair falling around her face." -*Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld
- **Remember that a little description can go a long way.** This might be the most important tip of all. You don't have to describe a character from head to toe and constantly review what he or she looks like. Just an introductory description and a few well-placed clues throughout the prose will be enough to help readers form and keep a picture in their minds

The full article can be found on the internet at:

www.carvezine.com/from-the-editor/10-tips-for-writing-physical-descriptions-of-your-characters

As for me, I have been guilty of what Eva Langston states in the opening of the article, a full blown Police Report description.

As another example, here is the introduction of Miss Morrison from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes "*The Sign of the Four*. For those of us who have read this story, Miss Morstan finishes up becoming Watson's wife. With a description like Conan Doyle has given, I do not wonder that Watson snapped her up. Miss Morstan, to me, is quite a desirable person.

Miss Morstan entered the room with a firm step and an outward composure of manner. She was a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. There was, however, a plainness and simplicity about her costume which bore with it a suggestion of limited means. The dress was a sombre greyish beige, untrimmed and upbraided, and she wore a small turban of the same dull hue, relieved only by a suspicion of white feather in the side. Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature. I could not but observe that as she took the seat which Sherlock Holmes placed for her, her lip trembled, her hand quivered, and she showed every sign of intense inward agitation.

Is this description overdone? An all "Points Bulletin"?

In closing, when I think of a character and how I would like that person to look, (and you might consider me as a little weird) I look at faces on Google Images. In my story, I wanted the maid Aimee to have a unique feature that made her face unforgettable. Being Chinese, I have an image of the Chinese actress Lucy Liu in my mind. Then I know what the maid Aimee looks like. If you look at Lucy Liu's eyes, then you will understand what I mean.

