

things of the world to resonate with emotional and psychological significance, and yet it seems that the precise detail can open a world or a life in a way that illuminates while also pointing toward darkness that the writer must try to navigate. That's all to the good because it requires further writing, and in the process, if we're open to the exploration—if we'll only follow the details—we'll discover more of the truth of a character and his or her situation than we perhaps knew existed. All because we trusted in the details and how they could illuminate while also challenging us to uncover more.

Eric Goodman

COMPLEX CHARACTERS

CTION WRITERS, WHATEVER THEIR LEVELS OF SKILL AND experience, start with nouns, verbs, articles (definite and indefinite), the odd adverb, maybe an adjective or two (but not too many of these, thank you), and seek to create from them living, breathing characters. What sleight of hand (or is it magic?) enables skilled writers to press the illusion of life into these otherwise inanimate parts of speech? Loving your creation, as the puppet master Geppetto discovered about his little blockhead Pinocchio, is a good place to start.

THE EXERCISE

The first thing I want you to do, as you prepare to create a complex character, is to find something to love about her, because if you love your character, there's a good chance your readers will, too. This is particularly important with an otherwise unsympathetic creation, someone whom, if you met her, you might not immediately be drawn to.

So pick a character, any character, and find something to love. Here are some suggestions. Give him or her:

Your mother's smile.

Your first love's shade of hair.

The loyal, loving nature of your family dog.

Or make it a treasured childhood memory—say, the day you caught the most fish on a party boat. Or the time your grandfather confessed—and made you swear never to tell—that he loved you more than any other grandkid, and gave you a dime to prove it.

Now take this character whom you can never hate no matter what terrible thing he or she does and splice in something loathsome. If this offends you, remember Jane Austen's famous remark about mixed characters in the Midland Counties. That is, in the places where we really live—for most of us live in the "Midland Counties"—there is, in most people, and certainly in those we are willing to know, "a general though unequal mixture of good and bad." Therefore, let this character, around whom part of your heart is twined, do one of the following:

Cheat on her husband.

Steal money from the tip jar.

Despise his best friend's child because he has none of his own.

Shave strokes from her golf score when she thinks no one is looking.

Or anything else that makes you really mad.

In short, let your character sin, because no one loves a plaster saint, either on the page or in real life. Now go off for a while.

Brainstorm. Make notes. Maybe even write a scene or two and see what you come up with.

Welcome back. You and your lovable, flawed character. Step two is to give that character something to do. If you've been paying attention, you may have noticed that just because you've joined something endearing to something all too human and perhaps even despicable, it has done nothing to successfully animate parts of speech. To achieve that, you must create the illusion of consciousness. One way is to force your character to process a great deal of sensory input simultaneously. Everyone knows it's impossible for words to remain words and nothing more than words if they seem to be thinking, feeling, and seeing all at once.

So here's an exercise for practicing the creation of a complex consciousness that I've asked many students to do, often with amusing results. I call it Two Spaces, One Time. (Two Spaces, One Time, by the way, is the inverse of Two Times, One Space, which is a flashback.) To begin, place your character in one physical space, but force that character to simultaneously process sensory input from two or more spaces. Here are some examples.

Your character is under a bed that he's been sharing with the right woman at the wrong time; her boyfriend came home and nearly caught them. So now your character has a view of underwear, shoes, and a pizza box. He's trying not to sneeze out the cat hair he's snuffed, while up above him the woman he's been snuggling (and whatever else) and her live-in fella discuss where to go for dinner. Maybe there's a television playing, so he's processing that aural input, too.

Or your character, a little girl with muddy shorts, is climbing a tree while down below her brothers, who are afraid to climb and jealous because she isn't, demand that she scoot back down. Above her, mourning doves coo. When she looks out through the tree's

glossy leaves she can see the big house where her family lives, and the small house beside it, where the family's servants dwell. If she strains to shut out her brothers' voices, she thinks she hears someone, either their mother or their maid, calling them all home.

Or maybe your character sits on a Greyhound, which at any minute will depart the station. Outside, his parents and brothers wave, calling out farewells and encouragement. A row behind him, there's a woman giving him the eye; he just knows she is. Two rows back a baby cries; her parents argue, and the bus lurches slowly away.

If your character processes multiple sensory inputs at what *feels* to your reader to be the very same time, it creates the illusion of living, breathing flesh. Here's why this is so important. Your character's consciousness needs to feel complex, because even if he or she is a relatively simple character—say, a wooden puppet come to life—human consciousness is complex, with a million and one contradictory things going on all at once. For example: Wondering if you should attempt this exercise or skip to the next one. Hearing, with half your mind, the sounds in the next room. Or the sounds in the room in which I'm writing this, and trying to imagine if it's anything like the room in which you now sit. Wondering who is the puppet and who the puppet master, and what has breathed life into these words, and into the ones you are about to start writing . . . now.

Melissa Pritchard

TWO LITERARY EXERCISES

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Creativity is linked to freedom of thought and the ability to play.

Party of Two

With another fellow writer or student, pair up and take a twenty minute walk. The first ten minutes, Writer A simply talks, uttering aloud what the mind is saying to itself, remaining as faithful to the stream(s) of consciousness as possible, without editing, inhibiting, or conducting the mind's chaotic traffic into any organized or socially redeemable patterns. Writer B listens, nods, remains impartial and, above all, calm; Writer B must not betray any alarm, shock, horror, or ennui at what is being said. Writer A may respond to the walk itself, to sights, sounds, observations, or remain largely internalized in focus; it doesn't matter: the point is to unhamper the mind, letting it take whatever peculiar, mundane, and utterly unfettered course it will. Writer B, keeping track of time, lets Writer A know when his or her ten minutes is up. Then the roles reverse; Writer B becomes the Babbling, Writer A the Ear.

This exercise quickly and rather shockingly demonstrates how severely we edit our speech under normally socialized circum-