

## Keep Your Eyes Open (originally written in 2017)

I often joke about my book characters, saying I worry they'll go off and find a proper writer one day because it takes me so long sometimes to get their story down.

Although it's a somewhat flippant comment, there's a very real truth in this statement – that I view my characters as real people. They are very firmly at the centre of my writing, and something which readers often comment on. I also now find myself in the rather curious position of being approached by complete strangers and asked for my advice on how to make good characters. So, I offer this post up in the spirit of well and truly not knowing all the answers, but if it's useful in any way, I'm glad it helped.

Developing characters and then throwing stuff at them is my favourite part of writing. It amuses me no end when they lead me off into places I didn't think I was going, but if I really believe in them, I have to trust them, don't I? And if I really believe in them, then the chances are my reader will too.

People often say of themselves – well I don't know how I would react in that particular situation, it's never happened to me before – and the same is true of your characters to some extent. How they behave, however, should be understandable. It should always make sense and never feel alien. And while it's true that sometimes people are described as acting out of character, in books your reader probably won't like it if they do.

I like to really get to know my characters for a while before I write; not just their physical appearance, but their mannerisms, their patterns of speech, the things that make them happy, or annoy them. I like to know what colours they like, or what they would choose to wear, because somewhere along the line I know I will get the opportunity to show my reader (show them mind, not tell them) some other little facet which will add more flesh to their bones. Consider a scene where four friends are sitting around a table when a spider crawls across it. One might recoil in horror, one might give it a wary eye but no more, another might ignore it altogether, and the last might try to shepherd it to safety. Four people, all different, and all responding differently to the same situation. How you describe that scene takes into account their character.

Of course, all the above is a wonderful excuse to people watch, one of my favourite things to do, and something I always do when I need a new idea for a character. I take a notebook and sit in a public place for half an hour or so. I will probably already have some general ideas about the character I want, but then I spot someone who takes my eye, and the essence of my character is there (sometimes even plot lines too). It could be as simple as the way they walk, or an item of clothing they're wearing, but before too long the character builds layer by layer. My favourite

character grew out of my spotting a personalised numberplate on the back of a motorbike. I drew up behind it at a set of traffic lights. The plate read AM05 FRY and within seconds Amos Fry appeared almost fully formed.

Don't just limit your observations to people though, get in the habit of really observing what's going on around you each and every day. One morning this week, I stood at my bedroom window for ten minutes watching the birds in our garden as they fed at the bird table. The starlings are a noisy, boisterous group, not shy at all. They queue up on the fence waiting for the food to go out and then dive in like unruly kids, no finesse, scattering seed this way and that. The pigeons are loud in flight, usually overshoot their target, and come into land more by luck than judgement, usually in an ungainly heap. They remind me of the bumbling village idiot in a crime comedy caper. The little blue tits, however, are like ninjas – they're in and out before anyone even notices they've been. The star of my show, though, is the ever-present robin who patiently waits until there's a gap in proceedings and then pops in and out, never straying too far away. I like the robin's stance. He sits there with his head cocked to one side; he knows he's in it for the long haul, he knows he'll still be here when the other birds have flown and he knows that there will always be food for him. So is he patient, sitting back to let the others have their turn? Or is he just being magnanimous, because we all know the garden is his? Even birds have a story to tell you.

The more you look the more you'll see, and the more you see, the better equipped you will be to deliver that in your work.

Keep your eyes and your mind wide open.