

How to write compelling characters

Friday, 24 September 2010

So, I'm surfing through my blog roll and, as one blog roll leads to another, I stumbled upon Elena Johnson's site and this: The Great Blog Experiment. I'm still not entirely sure how it works, but I do know that Friday, September 24 (Gasp! That's today!) we're supposed to blog about writing compelling characters.

Now, I'm a fledgling writer, wet behind the ears, still a long way from quitting my highly rewarding day job as a homeschooling mom, but...but, I'm an avid reader and, believe you me, I have a thing or two to say about compelling characters.

My big thing? Dialogue. Your characters must speak believable magic and music to keep my interest. Here are a couple of suggestions to help you to write inspiring, memorable characters.

1. If you haven't already, spring for a pack of those spiral bound index cards, you're gonna need 'em. And a fountain pen. Ok, you don't need the fountain pen, but they sure are writerly, aren't they?

2. You probably already do this, but you must know your characters and a good tool for developing them is people watching. More than watching, listening – it's okay to get up close and eavesdrop. Chances are your characters are composites of people you know or people you've seen, heard, were frustrated by or fell in love with. What are they saying? How are they saying it? How can you say more than that with fewer, deeper, thoughtful words.

3. Record all those, "Doh! I should have said," moments. Maybe you missed the boat on the clever quip, the snappy retort, the spit-your-coffee-on-the-keyboard one liner, but your character doesn't have to. Think movie script - the lines we love to quote.

4. Read! Read lots and read like you mean it. Take notes; how does your favorite author do it? Emulate.

5. Get into character. Remember all the people watching? The gum-popping waitress, the terse clerk at the DMV who rolled her eyes when you forgot your checkbook - be one with the clerk.

Lastly, don't be afraid of dialogue. It's not easy to write, but you can master it. For me, dialogue is what makes or breaks a reading experience. If your characters aren't clever or cleverly painted, I won't care about them.

A great resource on crafting effective dialogue is Gloria Kempton's book, Dialogue, from the Write Great Fiction series.

Now, get busy.