

I. PEOPLE

1. FICTION IS ABOUT PEOPLE

On the oak-paneled wall of his den, my father-in-law keeps a varnished wooden plaque. The plaque reminds him that, “Great minds talk about ideas, average minds talk about things, and small minds talk about people.” An injunction against gossip.

In fiction writing the hierarchy is reversed. What readers of fiction most want to learn about is people. Not ideas, opinions or philosophy; not *The Communist Manifesto*, *Robert's Rules of Order*, *The Merck Manual* or lore about nuclear submarines. Novels and short stories fascinate us because, as someone put it to Flannery O'Connor, they show us “how some folks would do.” That’s what fiction does best, why it gets written and read. Call it an enlightened form of gossip.

People are not fiction’s main subject, they are its only subject. Ahab, Don Quixote, Leopold Bloom, Holden Caulfield, Scarlet O’Hara, Miss Jean Brodie, Hamlet ... We remember the characters in fiction like real people we’ve grown to love, fear or despise. They fascinate us.

“Since the novelist is himself a human being there is an affinity between him and his subject matter which is absent in any other forms of art.”—E. M. Forster

Some say, “I don’t read fiction. When I read I want to learn something; I don’t want to waste time on stuff that’s not true.” They are misguided. You can learn plenty from other kinds of books. But if you want to learn about human nature, fiction’s the place to go. Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs will take you only so deeply into the human psyche. And what a politician or celebrity *says* about himself and what he really thinks and feels are doubtlessly different things. How else but through fiction can you stand in a motel room with two adulterous lovers after a postcoital quarrel, and see not only their gestures and the looks on their faces, but what’s in their heads? How else can you learn what it’s like to hack your landlady to death, or feel the “wham” of a dose of heroin, or cower in a muddy trench in the Battle of the Somme—and not just be told about it, but experience it personally, viscerally?

Journalists misquote; nonfiction lies. Want the truth? Ask a fiction writer. *I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination.* And the truth of imagination doesn’t lie. It doesn’t lie because it taps into the universal unconscious, the place where dreams and myths shared by all of us are born. It is no less reliable a source of truth than the deep instincts that prompt us to love and fear.

Fiction is our way into experiences that we’ll never have, into people we’ll never know or meet—or want to, necessarily. Malcolm Lowry’s drunken Consul (*Under the*

Volcano) as a houseguest? No thank you. Between cloth or paper covers, though, I'll gladly have him over to dinner. I'll even take him to bed with me.

2. MOTIVATION

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams's frazzled heroine, Blanche DuBois, calls death "the opposite of desire." To the extent that people want something they exist. This is especially true of fictional characters. Begin with a character who wants something, and you're off to a good start. On the other hand, those who want nothing from life exist as shadows, or like sticks of furniture in a bare room. From such people it's hard to extract a single solid action, let alone a whole plot.

"No fiction can have real interest if the central character is not an agent struggling for his or her own goals but a victim, subject to the whim of others."

—John Gardner

People who read fiction aren't interested in shadows or furniture, they're interested in people, in characters. What drives them, what do they want, why do they want it? And how do they go about getting (or not getting, or losing) it?

The answer to such questions is a novel or a story.

There are exceptions. Think of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or Jacob Horner in John Barth's *The End of the Road*—a character so paralyzed with indecision he can't get up from a bus terminal bench. We tend to think of such passive characters as ciphers, blank outlines waiting to be

filled in. Yes, effective and even great stories have been written about characters with so little willpower that the winds of fate blow them hither and yon with little resistance. Such stories we call “existential” (Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, Sartre’s *Nausea*; Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*). In them the anti-hero’s decision to do nothing amounts to a philosophy or stance: an antidecision. But then you must know that this is your theme, and know how hard it is to pull off.

Motivation is contingent with desire, and—like everything else in fiction—most vividly conveyed through action. If a character’s desires are vague and abstract, the first part of your job will be to render them concrete and specific. Witness (and I use the word purposefully, since in dramatizing your material you turn readers into witnesses) the following example of motivation revealed through action:

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

“They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. “It makes me

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sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

On a purely abstract level, Gatsby wishes to impress Daisy and thus win her affection. More concretely, he does so by becoming fabulously wealthy by whatever means are possible—namely, by aligning himself with certain underworld elements. But we are still dealing with abstractions. Dramatically, specifically, what does Jay Gatsby *do* with his dubiously achieved wealth in order to achieve his goal? For one thing, he buys a plethora of silk shirts and waves them—like flags—in front of Daisy’s susceptible eyes.

As a fiction writer your task isn’t to tell us what characters want and therefore who they are, but to show us how far they are willing to go to get it, and by what means.

3. BUILDING CHARACTERS

To write about people effectively we need to know who they are. You can’t feel sympathy for someone you don’t know. That doesn’t mean you have to love or even to like a character. You need only be interested, curious. Having already made up your mind that the man living alone in a fishing shack by the river—the one who walks with a limp and wears green coveralls—is evil, why write about him? Writing is, after all, an act of exploration through which we learn answers to questions raised by our raw material, our characters, and their situations. If you already feel you know the answers, why bother writing?

When writing about someone, it's not a bad thing to start with a question you'd like answered. Why, for instance, does an educated, cultured, and worldly man kidnap a pubescent girl and drive her across America, from motel room to motel room? In answer to that question Nabokov gives us *Lolita*. Why does a man live underground amid 1,369 light bulbs? To find out, read *Invisible Man*. Why does the captain of a whaling ship risk life and limb, his own and his crew's, in pursuit of a white whale? Answer: *Moby-Dick*, or *The Whale*.

To answer the questions raised by our characters and their desires it helps to know as much about them as possible, starting with basic, vital statistics. How old are they? Where were they born? Family background, level of education, employment and medical history, likes and dislikes: determining factors, all. How do we learn these things? By writing them down. When a character fails to live in your pages, try this: write a one-page biography summarizing their life history. No need for poetry, just the facts.

Where do these facts come from? From the imagination, which doesn't lie. Through the sublime power of the declarative sentence, the moment we state them in writing the fruits of our imaginative instincts transform themselves into facts.

In one class of mine, a student wrote an imaginary biography of a woman, Sally Schmidt, who had been a Navy scuba diver in Vietnam. Were there Navy scuba divers in Vietnam, let alone female Navy scuba divers? The author had no idea. Yet none of the fourteen other students in the class questioned the authority of this bold and specific

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claim. Later, we learned that there had indeed been women Navy divers in Vietnam. Chalk one up for the truth of imagination.

As you dredge up these facts from your imagination, you will learn Sally's background. And knowing that background, you will know how she responds when a strange man pinches her in a Neapolitan bus station (given that she was a Navy diver in Vietnam, I doubt she'd take it kindly).

Your reader doesn't need to know all this background; you do. In fact it's better if you don't tell too much about your characters, just what the reader needs to know to get the most out of your plot. Don't paint every leaf on the tree. The same applies to physical descriptions. A few telling details: Jasper combs his hair like Hitler and likes to spit between the gap in his front teeth. The rest the reader will supply with his or her imagination, which writes better than you or I or any of us can.

In your notebooks, record subtle nuances of character based upon observation: how people dress, their gestures and voices, the things they say and do. Notice how your father-in-law cups his fingers around a stingy dollar bill to hide it as he hands it to the parking valet? That young woman yammering on her cell phone at a cafe? Notice how she flips back her hair while talking (could she be talking to the guy she slept with last night?). Observe closely and carefully and you'll learn a lot about human nature. Pay special attention to those moments in life when stereotypes collapse, or are dismayingly upheld.

Note, too, the things people do when they feel they're not being noticed. Like the man who, walking ahead of you

down the sidewalk in his spiffy suit, glances at every shop window he passes, intent not on the goods on display, but on his own spiffy reflection.

The expected ways in which people behave are as important to note as the unexpected ways. People *do* cross their arms defiantly, and scratch themselves where they have no itches. They look to the floor when embarrassed or shy, and to the sky in search of release. Ever seen someone smile with their eyes? Sure you have. Ever seen someone smile with their lips only, while their eyes remain sad and dead? You have, but maybe you haven't noticed.

4. TYPES VS. STEREOTYPES

Convincing characters function both as individuals and as types. This sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. When we first encounter people, we often encounter them as types: the stilted intellectual, the jock, the charmer, the vixen, the prude, the square, the tweedy professor. As we get to know them, we see that they don't fit quite so snugly into these labels; their personalities spill over into unexpected areas. The jock reads Alexander Pope; while playing poker with his friends the slob drinks champagne (he also breaks open a brand new pair of socks every day); the milquetoast holds a fifth degree black belt. Some of these category-defying combinations, like the Bashful Librarian (who, in act 3, takes off her catty glasses, lets her hair down, and morphs into Ava Gardner) are themselves stereotypes to be avoided.

And what, exactly, is a stereotype? Simply a character not born or created by its author, but appropriated, ready-

made, from previous works. Even assuming that Marion the Librarian is a realistic character, still, we find her uninteresting, having encountered her so often before in cheesy novels, plays, stories and movies (see: *The Music Man*, *The Rainmaker*, *Superman*, *Rocky*, etc.). A stereotype is the human equivalent of a cliché: a creation once fresh and exciting but which, through overuse, has worn out its welcome.

Since you'll be running into the term throughout this book, now is as good a time as any to say a few words about clichés. Martin Amis calls all good writing a war against cliché. "Not just the clichés of the pen," he writes, "but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart." Clichés are ideas, scenarios, or strings of words—or any combination thereof—that, instead of being arrived at honestly by an author, have been snatched from a communal artistic recycling heap. The advantage of clichés: They cost nothing in time and effort; the disadvantage: They're worth what they cost. At best readers skip over them as one skips over something unpleasant on a sidewalk; at worst they foul up whatever they touch. Some of the world's most flagrant clichés ("it's raining cats and dogs") were once poetry worthy of Homer or Shakespeare. Whoever coined that phrase had cause to be proud. But you didn't, and neither did I, and should either of us commit that particular string of words to paper except as dialogue in the mouth of a dull character, we should be mortified. We're writers, not junk peddlers: We owe our readers fresh words to describe the rain.

So, a stereotype is a character cliché. The bottom line being this: Write characters; don't recycle them. Follow Fitzgerald's excellent advice and begin with an individual,

someone who may share the characteristics of persons you know or have known, or of people you've only heard or read about. In fact it's probably best *not* to base characters on people you know too well, since this not only limits your imagination, but clutters it with specifics that may or may not serve your fictional character and the story you want to tell about or through them (it may also lead to embarrassing, hurtful, and potentially libelous situations).

Remember this, too: that though for sure we want our characters to be "real," they should be real not because they stand for living people in the actual world, but in their own, fictional terms. Fictional characters are made not of flesh and bones and blood but of *words*. Not words that signify something out there, in what we call reality, but that create their own reality on the page. The difference between the writer who tries to copy the world using words, and the writer who *makes* a world *out of* words, is the difference between tracing a picture and painting one.

5. ROUND VS. FLAT CHARACTERS

Characters who don't grow or change or surprise us in any way we call *flat* characters. The term, coined by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, sounds derogatory, but isn't meant to be. There is nothing wrong with flat characters. They may be types, but they aren't *stereotypes*.

For a good example of a flat character look at the detective in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. This private eye (hired to spy on the woman with whom the protagonist has had an adulterous affair, to learn if she's now having

an affair with someone else) is accompanied by his thirteen-year-old son, a snoop-in-training who seems far more competent than his dad. In a novel otherwise shot through with despair, you can see the possibilities for comic relief. Each time we encounter this unlikely duo we're amused and gratified, despite or perhaps because we know pretty much what to expect from them, since they are predictable, flat, characters.

Other examples of flat characters: the greedy landowners in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout Finch's friends Jem and Dill (the latter based, allegedly, on Lee's childhood friend, Truman Capote). Nearly all secondary characters in Dickens.

They key to creating flat characters without succumbing to stereotype is, again, to begin with specific, individual qualities rather than thinking in terms of types. Think of three teenage boys. One reads a lot, one often gets into trouble, the third is athletic and gregarious. Note how quickly—like an invading army—the stereotyping process seizes the imagination, supplying the “bookworm” with “Coke-bottle thick” glasses, the “juvenile delinquent” with a black leather jacket and a drunk/jailbird father, the “jock” with sandy blond hair and the Homecoming Queen as his main squeeze. Though scientists now claim it as the source of melatonin, I suspect that the mysterious pineal body, lodged deep in our brains, is in fact the source of stereotypes, hence they come so easily to us. To avoid them requires nothing more than vigilance: the ability to recognize and, once recognized, to subvert them. Give the jock the

thick glasses (who says all jocks have 20-20 vision?). Let the bookworm toss a cherry bomb into the lavatory toilet (on which he has spent the last hour finishing Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*). Make the delinquent's dad a Nobel Laureate and Mensa member. Do what you must, but smash those damned clichés. Then even your flat characters will charm and amuse us.

But flat characters serve a greater purpose than to charm or amuse. They often provide the static status quo against which we measure changes undergone by characters *not* flat, but round. Unlike flat characters, who fill minor or supporting roles, round characters play major or leading parts. They are multi-dimensional, complex, and subject to change, making them unpredictable and interesting. Flat characters may come in handy, but you don't want to read whole novels about them.

Some round characters: Huckleberry Finn, Colette's Chéri, Holden Caulfield, Blanche DuBois, Atticus Finch, Francis Phelan (the protagonist of William Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about Albany bums, *Ironweed*) ... I could go on forever, since the main characters of all great or even good stories and novels are round.

6. WAYS OF EVOKING CHARACTER

Assuming that we know them well, how do we get our characters onto the page? How do we evoke them? One way is **through summary or physical description**:

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am

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very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. ...

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

[H]e sighed in relief in seeing her so like herself, her mouth barely touched with lipstick, her lower lip broad and often chapped, her upper lip short and drawn up by the nose—that little nose that was slightly flat, slightly crushed, ugly, Cambodian and inimitable—and those eyes especially, elongated like leaves, with their mingled green and gray, pale in the evening lamplight, darker in the morning.

—Colette, *Duo*

These descriptions tell rather than show; they are not dramatic, but expedient, the main advantage of summary being that it (usually) takes less space. In just a few pages we learn all about Robert Cohn's past—that is, we learn everything we need to know to appreciate what's coming, namely a dramatized scene. To have fleshed out Cohn's years at Princeton *dramatically* would have taken many more pages, if not a whole novel.

Colette's summary description, on the other hand, has to do mainly with her character's physical appearance. It can be argued that from it we learn more about the perceiver than about the object perceived, since beauty exists (so

we're told) in the eyes of the beholder. Unless seen through the eyes of another character, as here, such descriptions of a character's looks tend to be static and to feel perfunctory. Later I'll discuss ways of making such inert descriptions active. For now, I simply want to acquaint you to the possibility of introducing information about characters through summary.

Before I go on to discuss more dramatic methods of evoking character, here's an example of character evoked not through action or through pure summary but through **summarized action**:

This man who farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her. Somehow this husband whose whiskers she finds each morning in the sink, whose shoes she must air each evening on the porch, this husband who cuts his fingernails in public, laughs loudly, curses like a man, and demands each course of dinner be served on a separate plate like at his mother's, as soon as he gets home, on time or late, and who doesn't care at all for music or telenovelas or romance or roses or the moon floating pearly over the arroyo, or through the bedroom window for that matter. ...

—Sandra Cisneros, "Woman Hollering Creek"

From the earlier example of Gatsby flinging his silk shirts in "many-colored disarray," we could assign certain characteristics to the title character. We could say that he is *wealthy, materialistic, naive, a show-off, childish, desperate, pathetic*, and so on. Those are the abstract terms (opinions)

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that Fitzgerald, through cunning dramatization, avoids. Similarly, in the above excerpt, Cisneros doesn't tell us that the husband in question is crude, demanding, selfish, unromantic, or a slob. Here, too, we are shown his behavior, not through a single, fleshed-out scene, but through a summary of his actions. Either way, actions speak louder and more effectively than mere words, among other reasons because they let readers draw their own conclusions based on *evidence*, painting a far more vivid, visceral and convincing picture than can be achieved by hurling every adjective in the dictionary.

How to give more *telling actions* to your characters? Here, too, the key is motivation. Again, ask yourself, *What does the character want?* and then, *How far is she willing to go to get it?* If the answer to the second question is *Not very far*, at least you know why you're having trouble writing active scenes, because a character who doesn't want anything, or doesn't want it badly enough, is not going to act. Give her the necessary motivation, situate her such that she doesn't simply want the thing in question, but *needs* it in order to survive physically or emotionally, and your character will do things that show us, vividly, who she is.

Add **dialogue** to the mix, and the portrait grows more vivid still:

... the stranger opened the door [of the cafe] with a determined thrust of his arm. he passed between the tables with a rapid, springy step, and stopped in front of me.

"Traveling?" he asked. "Where to? Trusting to

providence?"

"I'm making for Crete. Why do you ask?"

"Taking me with you?"

I looked at him carefully. He had hollow cheeks, a strong jaw, prominent cheekbones, curly gray hair, bright, piercing eyes

"Why? What should I do with you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why! Why!" he exclaimed with disdain.

"Can't a man do anything without a why? Just like that, because he wants to? Well, take me, shall we say, as a cook. I can make soups you've never heard or thought of. ... "

—Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*

Though actions speak louder than words (and are therefore, as evidence goes, far more potentially damning), still, we stand to learn a good deal from characters by the things they say, and by how they are said. Even when their words contradict their actions, we learn something from that contradiction.

And just as action grows out of desire, dialogue grows out of action. *To the extent that characters want things they exist.* Likewise, to the extent that characters, even those as taciturn as Gary Cooper's Will Kane in *High Noon*, must speak to achieve their goals, they will do so.

Here is Jayne Anne Phillips in "1934" evoking the character of father from his son's viewpoint, combining summarized description, generalized action (note the use of the conditional tense), and specific dialogue:

And I'd walk him downtown. "Frank, my boy," he'd say, and put his arm around me. He'd tip his hat to all the women. He was a very handsome man, my father. He'd fairly swagger with happiness, and everyone on the street spoke to him. They'd nod and shake hands eagerly, the men anxious to talk. At the dry goods store he'd ask Mrs. Carvey about her children.

"How's Bill doing in the sand lots? That boy has a genuine pitcher's arm, Miranda, he should be training, it's a fact."

In the above passage Phillips moves, or appears to move, deftly from general to specific. I say "appears to" since a literal reading ("he'd ask") requires us to believe that this man spoke the same dialogue each time he visited the dry goods store. We know better, and take this to be a representative sample of the *type of thing* he'd typically say. As a rule it's best to steer clear of the generalized or conditional (he *would* do such-and-such) in favor of a particular moment or scene (he *does* or *did* such-and-such), since generalized behavior can never pack the punch of a unique occurrence. Then again, as in the example above, conditional and specific can and often are combined to good effect.

I will have more to say about dialogue and its role in evoking character later. Suffice it to say for now that when characters speak we listen less to what they have to say than to how they say it. The Zorba who says "Would you mind, please, taking me to Crete with you?" is not the Zorba I know and love.

We also learn a lot about a character through what **other characters** have to say, a tactic put to very clever use by Graham Green in his novel *A Burnt-Out Case*:

“What are they singing [the passenger asked the captain after dinner]? What kind of song? A love song?”

“No,” the captain said, “not a love song. They sing only about what has happened during the day, how at the last village they bought some fine cooking-pots which they will sell for a good profit farther up the river, and of course they sing of you and me.”

“What do they sing about me?”

“They are singing now, I think.” He put the dice and counters away and listened.

“Shall I translate for you? It is not altogether complimentary.”

“Yes, if you please.”

“Here is a white man who is neither a father nor a doctor. He has no beard. He comes from a long way away--we do not know from where—and he tells no one to what place he is going nor why. He is a rich man, for he drinks whisky every evening and he smokes all the time. Yet he offers no man a cigarette.”

To be sure, when characters speak of other characters, we shouldn't always accept what they say at face value; we have to take what they say with a grain or two of salt, or at least with the understanding that their views may not be objective. Still, their testimonies are added to what amounts to a thick mental dossier in which the reader gathers evi-

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dence from all of the above-mentioned sources, and possibly from other sources as well.

Depending on the type of narrative you're creating, you may wish to add to your reader's dossier a character's own internal thoughts, also sometimes called interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness. These may come in the third person, as here:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; chill and sharp and yet. ...

—Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Note that when conveying a character's thoughts in the third person you needn't set them in quotation marks, or italicize them, as some authors do—annoyingly, in my opinion, since such devices are not only an eyesore, but insult the reader's intelligence by assuming that he needs the tip-off. And anyway thoughts aren't quotable, since most people don't even think in words, let alone in complete sentences. We use words to replicate thoughts because we have no choice; we are writers; words are our medium. But putting them in quotation marks calls undue attention to them.

Of course, a first-person narrator can also convey her own thoughts directly to the reader:

If you really want to know about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was

born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like getting into it, if you want to know the truth.

—J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing in particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. . . .

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Each of these methods works in combination with the others, and all have their advantages. But the bald shorthand of summary can never hope to paint as clear, solid and convincing a portrait as a moving image (action) or a soundtrack (dialogue)—let alone both combined. Forced to establish a hierarchy for these methods, I would say that action speaks more loudly than dialogue, which speaks more loudly than thoughts, which speak more loudly than physical descriptions, which speak louder than epithets.

But no one is forcing us to choose one method over another. In fact we can choose them all, in whatever combinations best suit our purposes. There's a time to show and a time to tell, a time for scene and a time for summary, a time for action and a time for description. . . .

I'll stop there, lest you assume that you've stumbled into chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes.

7. NAMES

Names tell us as much about a character as the other things I've listed above. Sally Bowles, Bigger Thomas, Augie March, Ignatius O'Reilly ... The Manhattan white pages is as good a source for names as any. Whatever names you choose for your characters, they should feel right. And even if they are your narrators, and their names appear nowhere in their stories, still, you should name your main characters, since you can't possibly know them and not know their names.

In naming characters, you sometimes need to walk a thin line between the memorable and the outrageous. From someone named Joe Smith or Martha Jones I expect little wit or originality. On the other hand a character named Sebastian Dangerfield—the protagonist of J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*—promises to be a handful, and delivers. However many decades go by, Miss Jane Brodie will forever be in her prime, since I equate her name with an eternally vain and self-deceiving woman. John Kennedy Toole's Ignatius O'Reilly (*A Confederacy of Dunces*) is one character whose name I won't soon forget, because I find it so implausible. As for Scarlet O'Hara, her name alone—with its traces of blood and blarney—makes her memorable.

Yet a character name need not be sensational or even extraordinary to burn itself into our brains. Randall Patrick ("R.P.") McMurphy is an ordinary but memorable name. So is Elizabeth Bennet. Yet we remember these names as we do the names of people we grew up or went to school with, since their stories touch us like our own.