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Willamette Writers Conference 2020

First impressions: Introducing a character

The challenge...

What does the reader *need* to know right away?

How much back story, and how soon?

First appearance of a protagonist – Example 1

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The Los Angeles International Airport was the worst place to lose your mind in post-9/11 America. Especially if you were a person of color. Especially if you perspired like Kobe Bryant in Game 7 of the NBA Finals. Especially if you popped Valium twice a day to combat anxiety. And there I was, standing in the TSA security clearance line at LAX, a sweaty, anxious black woman wearing sweaty green silk, sipping air and blinking away tears.

Miriam, keep it together. They're gonna pull you out of line if you keep on. Calm down. But “calm” was slipping further away, an iceberg on a quick current being pushed by a pod of enthusiastic killer whales.

And so I closed my eyes and I prayed again. *God, don't let them kick me out of LAX today. Please help me stay calm.*

“Next.”

In my mind, I said, “Amen,” then opened my eyes. I forced myself to smile at the gray-eyed TSA agent seated behind the little podium, and hoped that she thought I was a slow blinker and not a terrorist praying one last prayer before setting one off.

The agent flicked her hand at me and said, “ID and boarding pass, please.”

I handed her both without saying a word.

She glanced at me, glanced at my passport—*Miriam Macy, Los Angeles, forty-five years old*—then she stamped, scribbled, and handed me back each document. “Have a nice trip.”

I croaked, “Thanks,” just as a teardrop bubbled to the rim of my right eye. I swiped it away, dropped my bag, shoes, and phone into a gray bucket, then sat the bucket onto the conveyor belt. With panic punching at my gut, I stepped into the full-body scanner. Clamped my lips together as imaging beams searched my body for weapons.

“Step through, please.” Another TSA agent, this one male and bearded, flicked his hand at me. He waited for the all-clear from the agent at the monitor, then said to me, “Thanks.”

I snatched my bag, shoes, and phone from the gray bucket and hurried away from the security clearance area. I'd kept it together. But my prayer had met its expiration date and that calm I'd prayed for was now wearing away like sandcastles at high tide.

- Rachel Howzell Hall – *They All Fall Down*

Making introductions: Your choices

Who are we meeting?

Through whose eyes do we meet the character?

What is the character doing? What *happens*?

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How is it conveyed (action, dialogue, internal dialogue)?

What is the setting, and is the character “at home” in it?

Who else is there? Other characters, and does the author set them up as ‘continuing’ characters?

What makes us want to keep reading?

Giving the reader at least some of these basics...:

- Name
 - Gender
 - Approximate age
 - Job
 - Hint at physical presence
 - Situation (throw (or prepare to throw) the character off balance)
 - Back story? Ladling on versus feathering it in
- **Setting up the character arc: What will this character’s journey entail?**

Deciding...

What will you show from the outset; what will you reveal later?

Discovering

How will those opening moments pay off later (and do you need to know)?

First appearance of a protagonist – Example 2

“I’m getting married.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve already picked our colors, pink and gray.

“Um...pink and what?”

“Gray. What do you think, Chelsea. I want your honest opinion. Is that too retro?”

I stared at my middle-aged widowed father. We were standing in a bridal store in central Boston on the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets, and he was talking to me about wedding colors. *His* wedding colors.”

...

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Pink and gray, too retro?” Glen Martin, a.k.a. Dad, asked. He pushed his wire-frame glasses up on his nose and looked at me as if he was asking a perfectly reasonable question.

“No, before that.” I waved my hand in a circular motion to indicate he needed to back it all the way up.

“I’m getting married!” His voice went up when he said it, and I decided my normally staid fifty-five-year-old dad was somehow currently possessed by a twenty-something bridezilla.

“You okay, Dad?” I asked. Not for nothing, because the last time I checked, he hadn’t even been dating anyone, never mind thinking about marriage. “Have you recently slipped on some ice and whacked your head? I ask because you don’t seem to be yourself.”

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"Sorry," he said. He reached out and wrapped me in an impulsive hug, another indicator that he was not his usual buttoned-down mathematician self. "I'm just ...I'm just so happy. What do you think about being a flower girl?"

"Um . . . I'm almost thirty." I tried not to look as bewildered as I felt. What was happening here?

"Yes, but we already have a full wedding party, and you and your sister would be really cute in matching dresses, maybe something sparkly."

Paris is Always a Good Idea, Jenn McKinlay

Think about...

Who are we meeting?

Through whose eyes do we meet the character?

What is the character doing? What *happens*?

How is it conveyed (action, dialogue, internal dialogue)?

What is the setting, and is the character "at home" there?

Who else is there? Other characters, and does the author set them up as 'continuing' characters?

What makes us want to keep reading?

---**Setting up the PLOT – how will this story end?**

How much, and what kind of detail?

An attractive young brunette sat at the desk. She had on glasses, and she wore a dark top. She looked up and saw me.

What's wrong with this introduction? It's pallid and generic. *Attractive* is one of those waffle words that don't carry a specific meaning. *Dark top*? Was it a scruffy T-shirt? A ruffled blouse?

A skinny adolescent girl sat at the desk. She had dark eyes and pale skin, and her short dark hair was streaked with red. She had on wire-rimmed glasses and wore black jeans and a black T-shirt. A leather lace was tied around her wrist, and there were silver rings on all her fingers.

Olivia was slumped at a desk facing me, staring intently at a computer screen. She looked nothing like the lively six-year-old or the mousy preadolescent I remembered. A long neck and bony elbows stuck out of her loose black T-shirt. But the hair was what you noticed—black spikes with poster-paint red streaks running through them.

She took off her round, wire-rimmed glasses, picked up a bottle of eye drops from alongside her keyboard, tipped her head back, and squeezed some drops into each eye. She had a leather lace tied around her wrist and silver rings on all her fingers, including the thumb.

I coughed. Her gaze flicked in my direction but she seemed to look right past me.

Character introduction and viewpoint

What gets noted when... the character is describing themselves

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He was studying my face like he'd never seen green eyes, a pointy chin, or flaming hair before. Made me wonder whether I looked drawn or pale. I widened my smile, hoping the extra wattage would substitute for a blusher. – *The Big Dig* by Linda Barnes

What gets noted when... the character is being described by their...

- mother
- best friend
- rival at work
- boss
- child
- real estate agent
- hairdresser
- divorce attorney

Holding up a two-way mirror

Lola stepped into the room and started for the corner table. She was gorgeous, as always, with her flaming red hair and dress that fit her like quicksilver. She seemed oblivious to all the men in the room who were watching her like a pack of hunting dogs who'd just caught a scent.

Lola slinked into the room and started for the corner table. That silver lamé dress looked as if it had been painted on. She tossed her silky red hair back, nonchalant, almost as if she didn't notice the men's eyes following her.

How are you introducing your main character and is it serving your novel?

What is the character doing and how does the reveal character *and* launch your story?

Who else is there (are you introducing other characters at the same time)?

Through whose eyes do we meet the character?

What will you show from the outset; what will you reveal later?

How will those opening moments pay off later (and do you need to know)?

What are the main things about your character you want to SHOW the reader from the beginning?

What do you want to reveal later?

What about that character is going to *change* in the course of the novel, and how does your opening set that up?

Follow-up questions

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