

# Of Human Bondage: Connecting Characters and Readers

Keynote for the 2017 NINC Conference

by Cheryl B. Klein

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[Note: I write my talks in nested bullet points to remind myself when to change my tone and take a breath.]

- I'm Cheryl Klein
- I'm the Editorial Director at Lee & Low Books,
  - And author of *The Magic Words: Writing Great Books for Children and Young Adults*
- I'm really excited to be here today among all of you
  - Because the fact that we're here together means that we are all giant narrative dorks
  - And we now have two hours to dork out together.
- As you know, this talk is called "Of Human Bondage"
- And for those erotica writers among you, I'm sorry to say this is not a talk about actual bondage—I will leave that to you.
- Rather, it's about emotional bondage—not between characters, but between characters and readers.
- How does a writer create characters whom readers will deeply invest in,
  - Someone they'll follow for three hundred pages,
  - Someone who will compel or fascinate them?
- Or to phrase this another way:
- What techniques do authors use to involve readers in a world that *isn't actually there*,
  - And connect them with a protagonist *who doesn't truly exist*,
  - and make them interested in events that *never really happened?*
    - It's all kind of insane when you think about it.
- I will say, I have a pretty good talk I give to beginning writers about these techniques,
  - and how they can create characters who'll hook readers.
- But coming here to NINC, where all you rockstars have written an average of 24 books each —
  - Where you can probably give a protagonist a tortured backstory in your sleep —
  - I thought, "Good grief. What can *I* tell these successful, super plugged-in novelists about creating characters?"
- And I was stuck on that for a while, I have to admit.
- Then I was browsing the reviews on Amazon for a young adult novel I edited.
- This is an award-winning book with incredibly complex characters, a morally suspenseful plot, insights that, I promise you, will change your life, as they changed mine . . .
  - and a reviewer called it "silly, elementary, and contrived."
- "Oh," I thought. "Of course. Here's a challenge every writer faces in the modern age:
- STUPID READER REVIEWS."
- And especially stupid reviews that don't get your characters, which throws off the reader's understanding of the rest of the book.
- So, we're still going to talk about characterization techniques here.

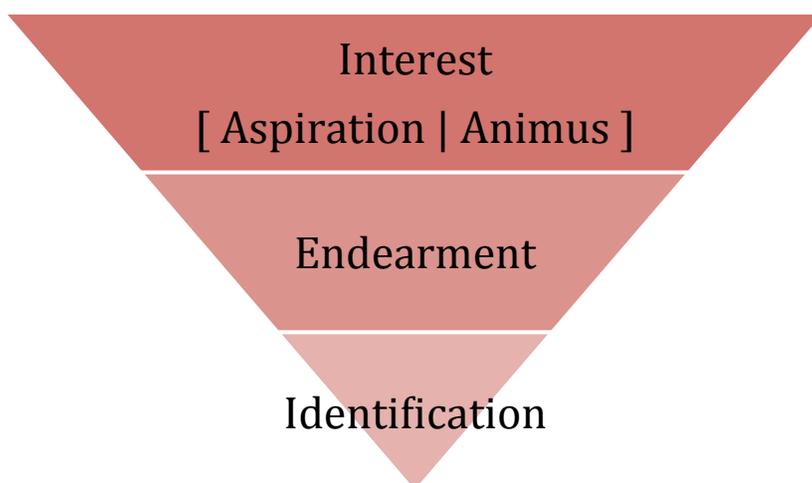
- But we're going to do it in the terms of the reader reviews we all sometimes see on Amazon and Goodreads,
  - and break down why those reviews might happen,
  - why the reader might not get what you were trying to do,
  - and what you can do with your characterizations to avoid those kinds of reviews in the future.
- Sound good? Okay.
- Before we dive in here, I want to set out four basic principles.
- The first is a point that you all know already, I'm sure.
- **#1: Some readers are not your readers, and all you can do is ignore them.**
- Some readers who review your book will want it to do things your book is not designed to do.
  - I once co-edited an extraordinary YA retelling of the Noah's Ark story that was very much in the vein of *The Red Tent*, if you all remember that book.
  - Feminist, philosophical, gorgeously written, actually quite sexy . . .
  - And one of the professional reviews said, "This doesn't teach morality," like that's the highest calling of ANY YA novel.
- Other readers might be your readers, but they'll be in the wrong headspace for this book.
  - I was browsing through reviews for an adult contemporary romance I didn't like, and someone else wrote, "For some reason the hero reminded me of the Dos Equis beer commercial's "most interesting man in the world" character and I couldn't get that out of my head. Yuk!"
  - You cannot control for the woman who reads your hot, thirtyish hero, pictures this guy, < CLICK to picture of "the most interesting man in the world" > and is turned off by him.
- And some readers, truly, are just bad readers.
  - They don't pay attention to basic details.
  - They'll say "I couldn't connect with the protagonist" because she's a person of another race than the reader.
  - Or they're actively looking for something to be irritated by, some way they can feel superior to you or the book or the entire genre.
    - They're more trolls than readers.
- In these cases, I tell my authors, you can't worry about those readers' reactions.
  - It's too bad that they still get to review your book, and possibly drag your overall star rating down.
  - But it is the nature of the game, and we just have to try to find & keep good readers instead.
- How do we do that?
- **Principle #2: You win good readers by giving them pleasure.**
- This is also something you all know already, I know.
- But I think it's worth reviewing every so often where the pleasures of fiction come from.
  - Action: I often think of readers as wild beasts on the savannah, watching for any sign of movement. If they see it, they'll track it as long as it lasts.
  - Pleasurable events: They enjoy the things the characters themselves enjoy, like witty banter, or adventure, or victory, or—I can say this since y'all are mostly adult authors—sex

- But at the same time, readers love growth, which often comes about through pain: a character suffering through their own faults or others' failures, and turning that into a triumph.
- Those kinds of experiences speak to the insights we can gain from fiction, into our own lives or other people or the world around us.
- And insights happen when a novel is rooted in Reality of some kind, about people or emotions or our modern world.
- Action, Insights and Growth can all come about through the theme of this very conference: Discovery, or Surprise: learning something new or unexpected within that reality.
- And all of that is often rooted in Character: living, breathing human beings called forth from the page, whose actions fascinate us and whose company we enjoy.
  - And that's what we're talking about today.
- Every novel will, or should, deliver a different combination of these pleasures to readers.
- And that brings us to my next principle:
- Before you make any kind of craft decision, you should **#3. Know what your book is designed to do.**
- As you'll probably be able to tell from this presentation,
- Most of the novels I've edited in my career have fallen under the category "children's and YA literary fiction,"
  - which puts a strong emphasis on character psychology and seeing some kind of change or growth in the protagonist.
- The writer Caleb Crain defined literary depth as writing with "a sense of the complexity of reality,"
  - And I love books that explore that complexity.
- But not every book does—and that's great!
- Sometimes, it is really not pleasureable to engage with the complexity of reality,
  - Especially in 2017,
  - And that's not how readers want to spend their time.
- So what pleasures will your novel bring to readers?
- What, and how much, reality is your book designed to explore?
- What is your book designed to do?
- If you can answer those questions at some point fairly early on, either at the outset or after you've finished a first draft, that will help you make better, more efficient craft choices, especially about characterizations.
- Which leads to our next principle:
- **Principle #4: The elements and depths of your characterizations should reinforce the novel's design.**
- Duh, one more time, but : You want to choose personality traits, details, and contexts that will reinforce the point of the book you're creating,
  - And you will show them in a depth that corresponds to the particular reality of your book.
- This image shows what I think of as the Cheryl Klein Character Depth scale.



- A Blank Slate is a character that is basically just a lens on the action, a vehicle through which we experience the pleasures of the setting or plot.
- These people are generally likeable, with maybe one or two distinctive or specific qualities.
- Think Harry Potter in Book 1 here: We know he's a generally good kid who's been put upon by the Dursleys and then gets picked for Hogwarts
  - Could you tell me anything about his personality or tastes beyond that? Not really, not in any depth, I don't think. That changes as the books go along and he grows up, but at the beginning, he's basically a lens.
- The pleasure for readers here comes from our ability to assume his point of view, go to Hogwarts and experience all the cool stuff there, and participate in the action.
- In the middle, we have what I call Watercolor Sketches, which is maybe Harry Potter in Book 5:
  - We know the history that's formed him, and we see definite emotional reactions to present events as a result of that history.
  - We witness and understand his flaws and mistakes.
  - Most action heroes are Watercolor Sketches, I think, because we know them well enough to form a strong bond with them, but the focus of the book is still more on the action than their character development.
- At the right, we have the Full Canvas, where the character is a fully fleshed-out human being with a very specific history and personality,
  - And perhaps some prickliness or other element that isn't so instantly likeable.
  - The pleasures of this kind of character come from that reality and specificity.
- Have many of you read *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell?
  - That's one of my favorite novels of the last five years. Rainbow Rowell describes what Eleanor wears each day; the comic books she's reading and the music she listens to; her family history, her pride in the face of her poverty, and how she protects the people she loves, even from the things that threaten her personally.
    - Eleanor is a Full Canvas.
- So if you're writing a book that isn't so much about the complexity of reality
  - as the thrills the reader can get in that particular reality,

- Then you'll probably want more of a Blank Slate who the reader will immediately like,
- So you can get on with the business of conveying those thrills,
  - with a character that readers have bonded with or can see the action through.
- Whereas if you ARE writing something more literary-oriented, something that's designed to convey the complexity of reality,
  - Then your highest goal will be honesty about that reality.
  - So you'll create a Full Canvas protagonist, perhaps with a mean streak or a drinking problem,
  - But you will present those flaws so lovingly or straightforwardly that the reader can't help but believe in and connect to that reality in him or her.
- I also have a Reader-Character Engagement Pyramid, where I see readers and characters relating to each other on four levels. (I know you all appreciate my sophisticated graphics here.)



- The first level is the most basic level of reader-writer bond: Interest,
  - Where we readers find something in this person worthy of attention; we'll watch the character until they prove themselves unworthy of that attention.
  - this is a level all your major characters should achieve, Even if they're Blank Slates —
    - That they've got some distinct quality that makes them worth paying attention to.
- Sometimes we readers decide to be interested in someone just because they're talking on the page—
  - The wild-beast principle: we're going to watch this movement because it's there.
- But it's more exciting if they capture our interest because they're showing us something new or giving us some kind of pleasure.
  - Remember when I mentioned that book that got five starred reviews and optioned for a movie, and a reviewer called it “silly, elementary, and contrived”? Here are the opening lines.
  - “Marcelo, are you ready?’ I lift up my thumb. It means I am ready. ‘Okay, I’m going to wheel you in.’ Then he slides me inside the tunnel of the machine. I like the feeling of being

closed in. The lights are not bright enough to hurt my eyes but I close them anyway.” —  
*Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork

- We can tell a couple of things about our narrator, Marcelo, from just these few lines:
  - He speaks stiffly and differently.
  - He likes the feeling of being closed in,
    - And more than that, he will take the time to remark on it, to tell us about it,
    - Where another character might take that entirely for granted.
- As a result, there is something *new* about him, something different that I don’t see in most YA protagonists,
- And I will read on just to find out what’s going on with him.
  - I’m interested.
- I’ll add, one easy way to do something new and capture a reader’s attention is just to invert a cliché.
  - There are nine million middle-grade books about boys who want dogs.
- So suppose you write a book about a boy who wants a cat when all the other kids in his class want dogs.
  - Suppose the boy or girl wanted a kangaroo instead.
  - Suppose the boy or girl really wanted to *kill* a dog.
- All of these things would be new to me, so they promise intriguing variations on the standard pet plot,
  - And intriguing psychology as I find out why this character is so different from all other characters I’ve read about before.
- Going down a step, our next two levels of reader-character bond are really just variations on Interest.
- The first is Aspiration, where we’re interested not so much in the character as in the excitement of their life, which we get to experience through the action of the book.
- I’m thinking here of characters like James Bond, or Carrie Bradshaw, or Superman, or any of Jackie Collins’s Hollywood characters—people who are living glamorous, dramatic lives that we get to live vicariously.
  - The Kardashians are like this a little bit too.
- These people often aren’t very interesting themselves—they’re blank slates all the way down—but the drama can be juicy.
- The second is Animus, where we’re interested in but actively dislike the character.
- This is the level most of your antagonists should be at, where they’re intelligent and powerful enough to be a worthy opponent for your protagonist,
  - But we dislike them because they’re bad or annoying people, or they take action to counter the protagonist’s desires:
    - We want to see them defeated.
- I was talking about the reader’s pleasure earlier—well, it can be really pleasureable to dislike some characters!
  - Especially if we feel morally justified in disliking them, and we’re on the reader’s side in doing so.

- In the Harry Potter series, I *loved* hating the Dursleys, and Severus Snape
  - While I actually felt less raw emotion about Voldemort at the beginning, because he felt less interesting to me—just another evil overlord.
  - Like Harry, he was a Blank Slate, where Snape was much closer to a Full Canvas.
- On the flip side of Animus, we have our next level down in readerly bonds:
- Endearment, where we readers actively like the character; we want to be the character’s friend and follow their actions.
  - This is often the base level for any novel that’s focused on the protagonist’s emotional journey and emotional growth,
    - Like most children’s and YA fiction, and most romances.
    - Generally, we aren’t invested in the emotional growth of people we don’t like, so it follows that we need to find the character endearing to some degree in order to be invested in the book.
    - We’ll talk more about what makes people Endearing in a minute.
- And beyond Endearment, we have our final level, Identification, where the reader makes a deep personal connection with the character.
  - The reader says something like, “This character is like me as I am right now.”
    - The emotional situations they face are situations I face.
    - Qualities that they possess are ones I recognize in myself as well.
    - The questions they’re trying to answer are the questions that haunt me.
    - The desires they have match mine.”
  - And these are the characters who inspire the most passion in readers,
    - Because they’re the ones we know, we *are*, deep down inside.
- The characters with whom I identified most when I was a kid were Sara Crewe, of *A Little Princess*; Anne Shirley, of *Green Gables*; and Aerin, of Robin McKinley’s *The Hero and the Crown*.
  - All girls, all a bit strange, all passionate readers who got into awkward situations because of their imaginations.
- Indeed, unlike endearing characters, who by definition are easily relateable
  - Identification characters are frequently very specific people—almost always Full Canvases—
  - often somewhat odd, often *knowingly* odd
    - Which is partly why we outsider readers take to them so much: They are like us in their difference, and sometimes in their suffering over it.
- Readers can identify with a character without even liking them very much;
  - I believe teenage girls responded to *Twilight* as strongly as they did not because Bella Swan was a fascinating, lively person—because I personally found her kind of a drip,
  - But because the way she loved and was loved by Edward spoke so deeply to that teenage desire to be accepted and adored in spite of all your flaws—
    - To be loved passionately just for who you are.
    - (You could say the same things about *Fifty Shades of Gray*, of course, with the added frisson of sex.)
- Writers have some control over a reader’s Interest or Endearment level in a character.

- But I don't know how much writers can control Identification, because writers can't know who exactly their readers will be and what their emotional needs are.
- The best you can do very specific and real about who this character is
  - And what his challenges are,
    - And let the book find its right readers.
- So why does all of this matter?
- Again: If you can figure out where you want your characters to be on these scales, based on the design of your book, that will help you make better, more efficient craft choices.
  - You won't spend time developing a Blank Slate in great depth, because hey—it wouldn't be in tune with your design!
  - And if you know that because of the nature of your book, you need your protagonist to be Endearing, that tells you to spend more of your time and readerly resources over there making her warm.
- Once you've set up your design, and decided on the depth of your characters, you need to be relentless about reinforcing those choices, even at the expense of other elements you may like.
- The best romantic comedy I read this summer was *The Hating Game* by Sally Thorne,
  - Where Lucy and Josh compete for a promotion and have excellent sexual tension in the publishing company where they both work.
  - It's enemies-to-lovers, with really witty writing, in the first person from Lucy's point of view.
  - But I was puzzled that the only people Lucy ever talked to besides Josh were her parents and her boss.
  - She didn't have any friends, which felt deeply weird to me, because normally twentysomething women who work in publishing basically *live* with their friends.
    - I've been there. I know.
    - And I also saw some reviews calling out this sort of obvious gap.
  - Then I realized friends would have distracted from the design of the book, because they would have distracted from Josh—and the biggest pleasure of the whole book was the deliciously intense slow burn with Josh.
  - So Ms. Thorne seems to have chosen that pleasure over friendship,
    - And I enjoyed the book so much, I can't say she was wrong.
- One of the things I say a lot and truly believe about publishing
- To the extent I'm going to call it Principle #5 here,
  - Is that readers buy books for their plots
  - But love them for their characters.
- Because the characters and their personalities and histories and the way they change
  - bring emotion and personality and depth and meaning
  - To what otherwise would be a mere list of events—
    - Also known as the plot.
- Characters make plots matter.

- And that’s why it’s super frustrating when a reader or reviewer says, “I didn’t connect with the protagonist.”
  - Because without some investment in the protagonist, the plot won’t matter to readers,
  - They won’t want to follow the rest of the action
  - And then they might stop reading your book.
- There are lots of reasons this lack of connection might happen—many of them having to do with an individual reader’s personality and tastes,
  - which, again, is not a thing you can control.
- But often, “I didn’t connect” is code for one of these deeper truths:
  - “I didn’t believe in the protagonist.”
  - “I didn’t *like* the protagonist.”
  - “The protagonist was one-dimensional.”
  - “The protagonist was boring.”
  - “The characters didn’t develop much in the course of the action.”
    - How many of you have gotten a review or rejection letter that said something like that?
    - So as you can see, this is really common.
- The good news is, if you get the sense that one of these things are happening, or if your readers actually say those things outright,
  - THEN we’re in business, because those are critiques you CAN fix in the next draft, or in your next book.
  - So we’re going to walk through them one by one.
- First, “I didn’t believe in the protagonist.”
- Some of the most irritating reviews I read are by people who complain about the unreality of novels.
  - “These kids would never be able to survive that adventure!”
  - “A spaceship couldn’t possibly go that many light-years across the galaxy.”
  - “NO WAY this many good-looking people live in one small town.”
    - Hey, Doubty McDoubtface: If you can’t accept the premises of the genre, don’t pick up the book.
- That said, the entire effect of any fiction depends on faith: the reader’s belief in the world and people the writer is creating for them.
  - Weaken that faith and you weaken your church; break it, and you’ve killed the whole religion.
- This is especially true with characters, whom the reader expects to have their own distinct personalities, physicalities, histories, desires, passions, patterns of speech, roles in society, and all the other dimensions that make up a human being.
- They can be utterly unlike anyone the reader knows in “real” life and still remain credible,
  - so long as they have some kind of consistency to their internal makeup,
  - and that makeup is consistent with what the reader knows of the world and time the character lives in.

- A character becomes unbelievable when her internal makeup lacks accuracy, consistency or depth,
  - Or when the character’s emotions or actions seem inconsistent with her nature or human nature.
  - So if someone tells you, “I didn’t believe in the protagonist”:
  - First, **Check your reality.**
  - This is a really hard thing to talk about, actually, because our everyday reality is like water to a fish: utterly all-encompassing and notoriously slippery.
    - Not to mention, *super* individual—my reality might look nothing like yours, depending upon our communities, values, and beliefs.
  - But here are some questions to ask that can help you know whether your reality is something another person can believe in.
  - ARE any of the character’s actions inconsistent with their nature or context?
    - Think about the nature and values you set up for the character in the beginning of the book. Are her actions and speech consistent with those all the way through? If they aren’t, does the narrative call it out or ignore it?
      - For example, suppose your protagonist at the beginning lives in Chicago and has a career she loves, working at a museum, and has a ton of friends and generally leads a happy life.
        - Suppose she then meets a divorced man and falls in love. He asks her to quit her job to marry him and move to Fargo, where she’ll stay home and take care of his four kids, and she does it without any internal or external doubts that the reader sees.
        - Now, every part of that is actually fine except for the lack of “internal or external doubts.” People do fall in love and change their lives for others all the time, and that’s wonderful.
        - But if this heroine really was happy with her job and life, there would be some doubts, some qualms, surely, in stopping her career to move far away and care for some kids who aren’t hers.
          - We readers would expect to see the book document these doubts and qualms,
          - and if that documentation doesn’t exist, it feels like a violation of the character’s internal makeup, which you would need to fix.
      - Or as another example, If you have a Victorian heroine say “awesome” as an exclamation, that’s a giant, glaring anachronism that would instantly make me doubt everything else in the book.
        - Of course, if you did that, you probably don’t know that Victorian people didn’t say “awesome” in the way we say it now.
        - So you need to do more research, to learn that and then fix it.
- Do all your characters talk in the same speech rhythms or tell the same kinds of jokes?
  - That’s a sign the characters were created by an author, and they aren’t real.
- Have you done enough to set up the unique circumstances that influence the way your character thinks and acts?

- We'll talk about this one more in a minute.
- Do the setting and characters have enough texture to be real?
- If this last one is a no:
- **Add specificities to create texture and depth.**
- Specificities are precise individual details that reveal the character's life, nature, and patterns of thought and feeling.
- I thought about using the word “quirk” or “peculiarity” here. But both of those would suggest you should choose cutesy details for cutesiness's sake, over the solid, particular things that make a character real and interesting.
  - For instance, here's an excerpt from a middle-grade novel about a twelve-year-old girl named Tink:
- “The thing that would probably surprise you most about me is that I love a tree. One specific tree, next door. The people there are away most of the time, so it's as good as mine.... / I have twenty-six life goals I keep them on a list that I have taped to the back of my closet door, so if I ever die horribly by being run over by a bus, you can take a gander at them. I will tell you that number seven on my list has to do with the tree next door.” — *The Encyclopedia of Me* by Karen Rivers
- Now, some of you might still find that paragraph too cutesy by half. But it rings true to me, for these reasons:
  - Tink loves a tree—and that is the sort of thing that people do all the time, or at least *I* do: feel excessive affection for inanimate objects;
  - She has a particular number of goals that she keeps in a particular place—which is also the sort of thing I do, frankly: This book's reality and mine are pretty similar.
  - She says things like “being run over by a bus” and “take a gander,” which indicates she grew up in one specific time and place.
- That kind of specificity gives her a depth and a texture that makes her believable as a real human being.
- Going back to that question “Have you done enough to set up the unique circumstances that influence the way your character thinks and acts?”
  - If a reviewer says, “I couldn't follow the hero's thinking,” or “I didn't understand why the protagonist made the decisions she did,” or “I didn't feel close to the protagonist's point of view,”
- Those are all informational problems, because the reader is not getting the information he needs to understand what your protagonist is doing.
- Usually this problem happens because an author feels so deeply connected to a character or situation themselves that the author thinks readers will likewise understand all the necessary nuances.
  - But no. We readers cannot see inside your brain to your vision of this world. You have to put it on the page.
- And so you must:
- **Give the reader enough information to follow the protagonist's thinking or action.**
- You can do this on the plot level through adding backstory, and on the text level through internal narration.

- As an example of plot-level information:
- A couple of years ago, I edited a novel about a preteen boy who was terrorized by a psychopathic bully.
- One day, the bully assaulted and killed a homeless woman who was the boy’s friend, and the boy got pictures of the assault.
  - He should, obviously, take those photos to the police. That’s what every adult would tell him to do, and with photographic evidence, the bully would likely go to jail, right?
  - But the author felt strongly that our protagonist had been traumatized enough that he would NOT do that,
    - And it was important to him to build this into the book.
    - This might sound self-indulgent, but let’s face it: Sometimes you need your characters to do ludicrous things to make the plot work. Judge not yet yet be judged.
  - Because that goes against the reader’s expectations and logic, we had to take great care to set up the circumstances that led into this situation.
    - And that meant deepening both the psychology of these characters, and the plot situation.
  - So the author added flashbacks and a couple of frontstory incidents showing:
    - How the years of bullying had made the protagonist live in constant fear
    - How the bully was capable of great charm around adults—to the extent that he’d charmed the protagonist’s parents—and he would be likely to charm the police too.
    - How the police were already suspicious of the protagonist, because the bully had framed him for wrongdoing in the past.
    - (This was a really cheerful book, as you might imagine)
  - When the professional reviews came in, some of the reviewers still didn’t fully buy it.
  - But we had done our best to build in the backstory that would make the character and the plot circumstances believable.
- On the text level, consider this paragraph from *The Hating Game*, the romantic comedy I mentioned earlier.
  - The circumstances here are that the heroine, Lucy, got a stomach bug at work, and her coworker/nemesis, Josh, took her home and took care of her overnight. She wore a red tank top, and he was actually quite kind and tender with her. Here she is waking up the next day:

I peer out into the living room. Josh is still here, sprawled out on the couch, one big-socked foot dangling off the end.

I approach the couch. He jolts before I can get a glimpse of him sleeping.

“I think I’m going to be okay. Thank you for sacrificing your Friday night. Go home now please.”

- The thing that’s confusing about this: Why is she throwing him out so rudely when he was so nice to her the night before? That’s inconsistent with her general sweetness, and with the closeness they’d established the previous night, so it doesn’t feel believable she’d eject a new friend.

- Well, I have to make a confession. This excerpt is actually fake news. The real excerpt of the text runs like this, with the emotional material I edited out underlined :

I'm wearing a blue tank top now. I clutch the mattress as vulnerability makes a long overdue appearance. I feel my shoulder and realize I'm still wearing my bra. I thank all available gods. But still. Joshua Templeman has seen all the rest of my torso skin.

I peer out into the living room. He's still here, sprawled out on the couch, one big-socked foot dangling off the end.

This feeling is worse than a hangover. It's worse than waking up after a nude karaoke performance at the office Christmas party. I said too much last night. I told him about my childhood. He knows how lonely I am. He's seen everything I own. He's got so much knowledge the power will fog out of him in toxic clouds. I have to get him out of my apartment.

I approach the couch. He jolts before I can get a glimpse of him sleeping.

“I think I'm going to be okay. Thank you for sacrificing your Friday night. Go home now please.”

- With this additional context, we get why she's throwing him out: She feels exposed and vulnerable in multiple ways, and the one way she can reestablish security and power is ejecting him, getting him out of her space.
- If your protagonist's actions feel abrupt or unbelievable, smart internal narration like this can guide readers through their thinking, and help them feel more connected to the character thereby.
- So suppose readers believe in your protagonist — but they don't like him.
- This one I think can often be frustrating for writers, especially first-time writers,
  - Because quite often, whether they know it or not, their protagonist reproduces their own personality.
  - And if they don't see why their own personality might rub someone the wrong way,
    - they won't see that in the character either.
      - That's actually true of believability as well, now that I think of it—
      - If something is totally believable given your own makeup, you never imagine other people will doubt it.
        - Why you have to check your reality.
- If you get this critique regularly, try two exercises here.
- EXERCISE: When you go back to your manuscript, look at the first couple pages on which a character appears, and in a new document, make a numbered list of the first fifteen things he or she says or thinks or does (including internal narration, but not incidental actions like opening a door).
  - Consider those actions outside the context of the page and your knowledge of what happens next.
    - Make particular note of the first significant action we see her take—the first thing she chooses to do, beyond those incidental actions.

- Whoever your protagonist is right there, in that numbered list—that is who that character is to the reader.
  - This is especially established by that first significant action.
- What do you think of that person as seen in this list? Is he or she an interesting person? Someone the reader would want to hang out with? Someone *you* would want to hang out with? How does she treat others round her? Is she engaged or detached? Nice or rude? Does she offer good energy or bad vibes?
- Second, give this list to your most honest friend and ask for their impressions of the character. Listen carefully to what they tell you.
- What both of these exercises are doing is helping you check your reality again,
  - As you look objectively at the protagonist as she is, outside the context of the opening action and setting.
  - Does that impression fit with her place in your design for the whole book?
  - If you realize she’s kind of a jerk where a reader would expect her to be Endearing, then you can fix that.
  - Or you might think, “No, I actually really want her to be a jerk at the beginning—that’s important for the character transformation she’ll undergo later.”
    - And if that’s the case, okay. You have a design for the book in mind, and you’re going to execute it.
    - But just keep in mind: in the whole menu of “reasons a reader will keep reading a book,” you’ve taken “reader investment in the protagonist” off the table in the opening here.
    - So you’re going to need to be very conscious about providing *another* reason for the reader to keep reading in the beginning: a high-stakes plot, or beautiful prose, or the promise of some action the reader will find fascinating.
- That said, everything is a lot easier if you leave “reader investment” on the table.
- And the easiest way to get readers invested in the protagonist: Make the character endearing. Give us an objective reason to like the character.
- We like characters for the same reasons you’d like someone you met at a party, say.
  - They’re nice. They’re funny. They’re interested in the world around them. They say interesting things.
  - Simply: You experience pleasure in their presence. You want to see what they say next.
- All of these qualities might come out in their voice, if they’re first-person narrators,
  - Or in their action, dialogue, and internal monologue, if we see them through a third-person narrator.

- I'm going to run quickly through some of these reasons we like people, with examples mostly from children's and YA fiction—but the reasons hold for adult fiction too.
- And again: Build these qualities into your first fifteen things, and you're less likely to get that "I didn't like the protagonist."
- **Kindness/Moral Goodness/Empathy**
  - If we see the protagonist demonstrate moral goodness, or show kindness or empathy toward someone else, we'll know he's a good person. For example:
    - "Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself – no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass, trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house."—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling
- It's easy to forget: In the first chapter of the first Harry Potter book, we don't actually meet Harry, except as a baby. Rather, we meet the Dursleys, and see what awful people they are: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of Number Four, Privet Drive, were proud to say they were perfectly normal, thank you very much."
- It's not until the second chapter that we get to know ten-year-old Harry himself,
- And this is one of the first things we see him do in the dramatized action—
  - look at a snake on a trip to the zoo, and eventually set it free so it can return to South America.
- Harry doesn't feel sorry for himself because he's an orphan, tortured by the Dursleys, underfed and used as a household drudge.
  - Rather, he puts himself in the snake's place, identifying with the snake and feeling sorry for *it*.
- And that is really important, because that shows Harry has an empathetic and generous heart,
  - and that makes it easy to like him and be invested in him for all the action that follows.
- You all might know this as the "Save the Cat" technique from screenwriting—there are actually multiple books on this, which preach that in the very first scene, you should show your protagonist being kind to a figure that has less power.
  - A cat. A dog. A small child. The gas-station attendant.
  - Here Harry saves the snake.
- Because it's the first action we see him do, and the first time we go inside his head, it sticks in our heads, too. It really works.
  - (This is actually my cat, in passing. I love this picture and couldn't resist sticking it in.)
- A second quality readers like in their protagonists:
- **Good Energy/Imagination**
  - "I suppose you are Mr. Matthew Cuthbert of Green Gables?" she said in a peculiarly clear, sweet voice. 'I'm very glad to see you. I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming for

me and I was imagining all the things that might have happened to prevent you. I had made up my mind that if you didn't come for me tonight I'd go down the track to that big wild cherry tree at the bend and climb up and stay all night. I wouldn't be a bit afraid, and it would be lovely to sleep in a wild cherry tree all white with bloom in the moonshine, don't you think? You could imagine you were dwelling in marble halls, couldn't you?" — *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery

- So let's say you're actually at some party, and this red-haired woman starts talking to you.
- She is delighted to see you and excited about everything, and she tells you that if she hadn't met you tonight, she might have climbed up and slept in a cherry tree.
- I admit you might find her a bit grating, especially if you are a more cynical person, but:
- Are you going to be bored hanging out with her?
  - You kind of just want to see what she'll say next.
- What I love about Anne is she has good energy: She is interested in things, she expects good things to happen, she will *make* good things happen.
- And she gives off emotional warmth, so we readers feel accepted by her as well.
  - That's actually really important: Characters who seem holier than thou, who might judge and reject the reader him or herself, can be super uncomfortable to read.
- Anne also exudes confidence: She not only believes you're interested in what she has to say, she wouldn't have been scared to sleep in a cherry tree all night.
  - And she has another of my favorite qualities, resourcefulness: She can take care of herself.
- On the flip side, people who have negative energy are super hard to take—people who are just bored by or bitter about everything without being insightful or witty about it.
  - They'll drag a party down by complaining about everything around them, how nothing ever goes right, how the world is against them,
  - and they're just the kind of people you want to step away from.
  - You can get away with this kind of negative energy a lot more in adult fiction than you can in children's and YA fiction, though,
    - Where you go make that person a Full Canvas character, and make them as interesting as possible, so we're intellectually compelled by them, even if we aren't Endear'd to them.
    - Or you go deep into Animus, where the reader loves to hate them.
      - This is kind of the technique of *The Hating Game* again: Lucy has a lot of emotion going toward Josh from the beginning,
      - And when he demonstrates (a) that he's a good kisser and (b) kindness, as above, it flips from hate to love.
        - Good kissing could definitely be on this "Like" list, but that's very specific.
- A third technique:
- **Humor/Wit**
- This can be either our laughing with someone, where a character is deliberately funny;

- Or laughing at someone, taking pleasure in their humor, whether they intend it or not. I think Anne of Green Gables falls into this category too.
  - We laugh at Anne for being so nutty, but we still respect her.
  - That’s kind of an underlying code to all of these: If the reader lost respect for the character, they’d lose interest too.
- **Enthusiasm**
- This is having good energy or warmth about one topic in particular,
- As people who are passionate about things are interesting people.
  - And they will probably have good energy about other things too.
  - As an example, one of my favorite YA novels is *The Year of Secret Assignments* by Jaclyn Moriarty. Three girls at a private school get set up in a pen-pal program with three boys in public school, and hijinks ensue. It is both super funny and a master class in voice and character, so you’ll see a couple of examples from it below.
  - Here’s one of the teenage boys writing to a girl he admires.
  - ♦ “Dear Lydia, You are as beautiful as the Irish equalizer by Robbie Keane in injury time in the Ireland v. Germany game, World Cup, 2002, Korea.” — Seb in *The Year of Secret Assignments*
    - So clearly this guy has so much enthusiasm for soccer that he will compare a girl’s beauty to a particular goal. (Argentina!)
- Seb’s writing also shows
- **Expertise/Intelligence/Skill**
- David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, said, “It doesn’t matter if your hero is good or bad. He just has to be interesting, and he has to be good at what he does.”
  - Coming back to that idea that we should respect our hero above all else.
- Generally we appreciate and admire smart people, people who can do or achieve things that we can’t. So if your character demonstrates some notable intelligence or ability, an expertise, that’s a sign that s/he is someone worth following.
- **Insight:** We talked about this earlier as a form of readerly pleasure.
- When a character makes an observation that is true or insightful,
  - We readers recognize that and want to follow them, to hear more of these truths.
  - You all have seen the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, yes, with Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth?
    - In one of the very first scenes of that adaptation, when we’re first meeting the Bennet family, Elizabeth Bennet turns to her sister and says, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,”
      - The screenwriter made the smart choice to put Jane Austen’s words in Elizabeth’s mouth to establish that she too is insightful and funny, and make her someone we instantly like & care about.
        - And if we viewers recognize that as the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, we have the additional pleasure of feeling smart ourselves.
- **Honesty**

- “I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house. Though even that isn’t a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn’t write any more of it.” — *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith
- What is important about this, and Insight too, is that readers are looking for things that are real in their books—things that chime with what they know about the world, and promise to tell more truths about it.
- This is a virtue you can practice in the narrative voice, too. Another of my other favorite opening lines from a children’s book is
  - “When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too.” — *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- It’s the honesty of that, and the surprise that the author is throwing her protagonist under the bus first thing, that draws us in:
  - If this story dares to make its main character disagreeable, what else might it do?
- Another method to make your character likeable:
- **Give the character friends.** Readers like characters who are liked by other people. They are suspicious of characters who aren’t liked by other people.
- For example:
- ♦ “In the woods waits the only person with whom I can be myself. Gale. I feel the muscles in my face relaxing, my pace quickening . . . The sight of him waiting there brings on a smile. . . / ‘Hey, Catnip,’ says Gale.” — *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
- This example from *The Hunger Games* comes three or four pages into Chapter One, and in those pages, Katniss has proved herself to be sort of the opposite of an emotionally warm person. She loves her family, but you can tell from everything she says that she’s not at all sentimental or soft—she’s mostly interested in finding food for her family and surviving.
  - Then she goes to meet her friend Gale in the woods, and she warms up. She relaxes. She *smiles*.
  - And he likes her too, which affirms our readerly interest in her, and maybe even takes it up from interest to endearment for us
  - As a side note, if you look closely at the first chapter of *The Hunger Games*, it uses almost every one of the techniques I’m listing here to establish who Katniss is. And that makes our investment in her really deep and really strong—we have multiple reasons to be interested in her and the high-stakes situation she’s about to be in.
    - And that deep and strong investment is one of the many reasons people tore through this book, and it became a bestseller.
- Putting this idea another way: Readers echo reactions of characters they already know and like and/or trust, and oppose reactions of characters they don’t like or trust.
  - So in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Chapter 1, we start out greatly disliking the Dursley family, because they’re all small-minded and self-satisfied.
    - (I think we really enjoy disliking them, in keeping with Animus.)
  - The Dursleys talk about how much they dislike the Potters and their baby Harry.

- And automatically, we readers like the Potter family, because we don't want to be on the same side as the Dursleys.
- When Dumbledore shows up, he's obviously a fascinating guy, and he likes the Potters and dislikes the Dursleys, that confirms all of our impressions.
- It's a neat little bit of character math that adds up to our being interested in Harry.
- So if you're getting a lot of "I didn't like the character" responses, go back to that list of the first fifteen things the character says or does, which should cover the first scene or two.
  - Add friends, or choose your virtues here, and build in enough of them that the reader finds your character endearing, and invests in the character and the story.
- The second common reader complaint we'll investigate here:
  - "The protagonist was boring."
- Boringness means that your character is failing to reach the Interest level on the Readerly Bonds pyramid.
- And this can happen for a number of reasons that end up encompassing other complaints:
  - The protagonist was one-dimensional: We see only one part of his life or personality.
  - The protagonist was predictable: The reader can tell what all of his or her actions and secrets will be.
  - The protagonist didn't DO anything, so he feels passive in the novel he's supposed to be at the center of.
- If someone says to you that your protagonist is one-dimensional or predictable, endow them with one of these three things in ways that reinforce the character's role in the novels' overall design.
- **Vulnerabilities**
  - A vulnerability is anything that leaves a character open to big feelings,
    - Especially if it's something the character guards closely.
  - All of the following things could serve as a character's vulnerability: a loved one; a fear; a secret, especially about the past; a place of pride that might blind her to her own failings; a great flaw
  - If your protagonist has such a vulnerability, we readers will expect to see it pressed at some point, to see that thing that's been protected crack open.
  - The big feelings can then break the character,
    - Or function like that lovely Leonard Cohen line: "There's a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"
      - And bring light and change.
  - Quite often in romantic and young adult fiction especially, vulnerabilities are a place of hurt that needs to be healed, and watching them be healed can be deeply emotionally satisfying.
  - There's a danger here, however:
  - If your character with a vulnerability is man who's become a rake because he was cheated on by his ex-wife
    - Or a modern guy who's a real jerk because he was neglected by his dad
    - Or any character who tortures themselves over something (especially a death) they are likely not responsible for . . .

- You may have made your character two-dimensional by giving him a painful past,
- But you've also made the story predictable because readers can guess everything that will happen next.
  - He'll meet the heroine, who inspires him to think differently about love and start to trust again,
  - And eventually he commits himself to her.
- To counter predictability, you basically have to imagine deeper or imagine differently:
  - Make your people so real and unique that even though they're enacting old actions, the dynamics feel newly fresh and intense.
  - Or just come up with another way to treat this, another vulnerability to explore.
    - All these badly behaved men who get redeemed by the women they love . . .
      - What if the woman acted like a rake? Or was a jerk back?
      - What if she didn't try to heal him, and that surprise knocked him out of his funk?
- Another element that keeps characters from being boring or one-dimensional:
- **Inconsistencies.**
- One of my favorite quotes ever is “Inconsistencies cannot both be right, but imputed to man, they may both be true.”—Samuel Johnson
- Inconsistencies are a form of vulnerability, in that they're two incongruent truths that exist simultaneously within a character.
- I think of them as a character's “but.”
  - Severus Snape might say, “I hate Harry Potter, but I love ... [certain people he's associated with].”
  - A CIA assassin might say, “I love my country more than anything—but I can't stand what we're doing in Guantamano Bay.”
  - If you can find two opposing truths about a character and put them side by side,
    - You can build a whole novel around the inner and outer conflict that might inspire,
    - With a lot of tension, actually, because the stakes are so high when the character must choose one truth or another.
      - Or the second truth will provide just the opening you need to create a turn in the action and help the character grow.
- **Secrets or mysteries.**
- In character terms, a secret is another form of vulnerability, because the protagonist is trying to protect a piece of information from other characters or the reader.
  - ♦ “He caught me. Dragged me behind the garage. Took Joe Pepitone's baseball cap. Pummeled me in places where the bruises didn't show. A strategy that my ... is none of your business.” —*Okay For Now* by Gary D. Schmidt
- A protagonist with a secret will always be interesting to readers because
  - If a character has a secret, they must also have someone to have a secret *from*—so they're already operating in multiple dimensions, internal and relational

- Secrets are a form of movement that activate reader’s wild-beast instincts—we want to follow them until we know the truth
- Secrets are a technique best used in combination with one of the Likeability points above, because a mystery about someone whom you don’t care about is not actually that interesting.
- It’s also a technique that’s really easy to overdo: If a character is spending more time hinting to readers that he has a secret than telling you anything interesting, we’re going to get bored and walk away.
- But if you can show us that the character is withholding information, or hint at depths that may not be immediately apparent, readers are going to want to know what’s going on with him.
  - Getting him to reveal the secret is another opportunity for growth.
- All of those will make the protagonist more interesting in and of herself.
- But characters don’t exist in vacuums. They live in the world of a novel, and readers expect to see them make a real difference in the action of the world of the novel.
- And if they don’t, we get back to our root complaint here: “The protagonist was boring.”
- To avoid this:
- **Give the character a compelling desire.**
- A desire is some perceived good a character wants to achieve for themselves or the world.
- By “perceived good,” I mean that the character sees this thing as good, not that it *is* good; the character might want to steal a million dollars or murder the queen, which are morally questionable at best.
  - But if the protagonist wants something, and we connect with the character enough to read about her, then we also accept her perceptions and values enough to follow her wherever this desire leads.
- A desire can then serve as a plot engine in a novel like few other story elements can, because once we have a character to invest our interest in, and this character *wants* something, that creates stakes—will she get it?; tension—can she overcome the obstacles in her path?; and action—what will she do to make it happen?
- As a rule of thumb, every major character in your novel should have a desire, because people with desires are people who are engaged with the world and take action within it, and those are the kind of people most readers want to read about.
- Characters often even have more than one desire, which is a great way to create dimension, conflict, and action.
- Desires should also be positive goals that look forward and allow the character to drive the action, not negative statements dependent on others, or about going backward or staying in the same place.
- “I want a promotion”; “I want to catch the killer”; “I want to dance onstage”: All of these will make the protagonist move toward some drama and change. Contrast that to,
- “I don’t want to leave New York”; “I want my life to return to the way it was when I was married to Ayesha”; “I want my mother to stop drinking.” In the first two cases, the negative desires leave your protagonist with nothing to do but mope about their present circumstances, which is the

opposite of interesting drama. (Change these to, “I’ll run away to Tinyville,” and “I’m going to make Ayesha be friends with me again,” and instantly we have more action, energy, and narrative possibility.) In the last example, while the protagonist could certainly help Mom move toward sobriety—throw out her liquor bottles, drive her to AA meetings every day—the achievement of that desire is ultimately dependent upon *Mom’s* desire to be well, which is something our protagonist can neither create nor control.

- Once that desire is set up, then the character has to have some follow-through.
- And that means they have to take the second step in avoiding boringness:
- **DO THINGS.**
  - “When I stood up again, I found myself chest-deep in the water. And right as I thought that all my bad luck had been used up in creating this calamity, I heard the same smooth voice that had just said he would never marry me. / ‘Do you need help?’”
  - This is an incident from a book I edited, a historical novel about a young woman named Jade Moon in the early 1920s in China, who is desperate to escape her repressive village life.
    - She believes she is cursed with bad luck—which means she’s constantly doing things like falling in the river in front of cute guys, and speaking when she shouldn’t,
      - And eventually she runs away to America.
    - Jade Moon constantly DOES THINGS, sometimes by accident, sometimes by instinct, occasionally by intention
      - And we wild-beast readers love characters like this, because constant doing means they’re never boring.
- I am a big proponent of outlining manuscripts after the first draft (I’m agnostic on if you do it before),
  - And one easy way to test how much your character is an active character
  - Is to outline the book chapter by chapter.
    - Then look at the outline & see how often the character’s name is the subject of the sentence, preceding an action verb.
    - If that doesn’t happen very often—if other people are more responsible for driving the action, and our protagonist mostly observes—then yes, she might be a boring character,
      - And you’ll need to address that by giving her more to do.
- The final reader complaint we’re going to counter here, quickly:
- “The characters didn’t develop much in the course of the action.”
  - Or a parallel complaint, “There wasn’t much substance to the book.”
- What this means is that readers were denied the pleasure of character growth,
  - Likely because there weren’t many events of sufficient significance to prompt that growth.
- My first piece of advice on this one is, **Work backward.**
  - Think about where you want your characters to end up emotionally and physically.
  - What will it take to get them there from your beginning?
  - What do they need to learn or get or discover to reach that ending?

- And what kind of events will prompt those lessons and discoveries?
  - That's what your plot action needs to be.
- Second, back at the beginning, **leave space for them to grow.**
- If their emotions unfold on a scale of 1-10, don't start the book when they're already at 8,
  - Because that two-point growth in feeling won't feel substantive enough to matter.
- You want something more like a six or seven point growth, where the characters start the book at a 3 or 4, and so much feeling accumulates over the course of the action that they end at 10.
  - Sometimes this means you make the beginning quieter, rather than the end.
- The same for any change in their essential natures.
- Usually, when we're talking about growth in a character, we're talking about the character discovering new dimensions in the world and in their relationships to other people.
  - Elizabeth Bennet learns that her pride and prejudice sometimes blinds her to the nuances of a societal situation,
  - While Mr. Darcy learns that true love requires sensitivity as well as honesty.
- Growth equals characters learning the complexity of reality, basically—just the depth we were talking about at the beginning.
- I actually hate it when characters *don't* gain this kind of knowledge and complexity as I read along.
- That's because if I know everything about the protagonist from the beginning,
  - Then I'm not experiencing anything new as I read, going deeper or reaching new heights,
    - which can quickly lead to boredom.
- And they learn that complexity and hit those depths, and heights through the interplay of joy and pain, action and reaction, events and growth.
- This pattern looks a lot like the double helix of DNA: Our protagonist wants her desire (which comes out of her character), but she hits an obstacle she needs to overcome (creating action). This overcoming gets her in trouble, which makes her feel badly (which changes her character), and escaping that negative feeling inspires her to try a different approach to her desire (action). This succeeds in part, but the consequences make her question her desire itself (character) and then adjust her aims (action).
  - As this cycle repeats over and over, our heroine learns more and more about herself and her world, until the novel arrives at its climax, where all the major elements of the action are brought to a crisis and then resolved.
- As a rule of thumb, If you don't have at least two cycles of action and reaction like this, your novel is going to feel a little thin.
- And the more pain you have, the more growth can follow.
- I *love* suffering in a novel. I am a total pain junkie for bad things happening to good characters.
- It is, in fact, the way some writers plot a novel: Come up with a character, think of the worse thing that could possibly happen to him—and then do it.
  - Worth keeping in mind, especially if you're one of those writers who struggles with plot.

- The most important things involved in creating a character are truthfulness and time. Be truthful in your writing about what you’ve observed of the world and people’s behavior in it. Readers respond to characters and feelings they recognize.
  - That doesn’t mean the characters and events have to be people they’ve met or things they’ve experienced themselves, but things that ring emotionally true, that fall within the realm of human possibility.
- And the best way of creating recognition is to base a character on your observations of real life
  - Your knowledge of yourself and of other people
  - How we all change and grow
- Plus your own marvelous imagination and view of the world.
- And all these things take time. You get to know your characters the same way you get to know a good friend: Multiple experiences together, multiple conversations—multiple drafts, frankly.
- Saul Bellow said, “The main reason for rewriting is not to achieve a smooth surface, but to discover the inner truth of your characters.”
- And once you’ve gotten readers hooked on your characters,
  - you keep digging down until that inner truth is revealed.
- So that’s the conclusion of my presentation here today.
- Thank you for your kind attention.
- I wanted to mention one more time my writing book, *The Magic Words*,
  - Which was published last year by W. W. Norton.
  - It contains a lot of the ideas I’ve covered here, and many more—384 pages’ worth.
- And here’s some contact information for myself and my company.
  - I have a newsletter I send out about once every two months with reflections, Q&A, book recommendations, and other such stuff.
  - You can sign up for it at my website, [cherylklein.com](http://cherylklein.com).
- Thank you again.