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for YOUNG ADULTS

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Week 10 – Subplots & Secondary Characters

In picture books, we limit the number of secondary characters and subplots so as to avoid confusing or overwhelming young readers, but in middle grade and young adult novels we can broaden our scope.

A rich supporting cast of secondary characters does more than just entertain. It enriches the hero's journey by providing opportunities for contrast and tension, allowing for different sides of the hero's personality to be revealed and better underscoring his or her motivations and challenges on the journey.

Subplots also provide contrast, underscore theme and can be of great value when it comes to managing the pacing of action and events. The key is keeping everything connected to your hero and to the central theme of your story.

Secondary Characters

When developing secondary characters, there is one prime question to keep in mind at all times:

How does this character inform the hero?

What is their relationship to the hero's journey? How does he or she help us to better understand the hero's motivations?

Every secondary or supporting character, no matter how minor, should have a role to play when it comes to deepening the reader's understanding of the main character… otherwise they have no reason – or right – to be there. No character should be merely decorative, or exist simply to populate the world of your story. Everyone must have an impact on the main character, whether that main character is aware of it or not.

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How Many?

How many secondary characters can you have in a YA novel? It depends on the genre and subject matter – fantasy and science fiction, for instance, tend to invite larger casts than contemporary realism. Having only two or three characters can confine a story and make it feel claustrophobic – which may or may not be useful, depending on the story you're trying to tell.

The real question is: how many characters do you *need* to tell your story, and what **role** does each one serve?

Roles & Archetypes

We touched on the events of the Hero's Journey as interpreted by Christopher Vogler in his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* in Lessons 3 and 8. But the hero's journey actually has *two* components:

1. A classic **sequence of events** that comprise a "hero's journey" and that can be applied to all character journeys, even those in contemporary stories (symbolically, if not literally).

2. A set of **archetypal characters** from mythology that appear in every story, even modern-day ones (again, symbolically, not literally).

In other words, the Hero's Journey is populated by **archetypes**. Think of them as common patterns of human behavior, as symbolized by certain standard characterizations. Although in a fantasy some of these might be quite literal, in general the archetypes should be viewed as symbolic. In some cases, they may not even be characters, but events or objects that serve the same purpose or play the same role in relationship to the hero.

There are **eight archetypes** (and interestingly, eight is often thought of as a good total number of primary and secondary characters in YA fiction – though again, it depends on the genre). They are as follows:

1. **Hero** – Your protagonist or main character. The one whose journey of transformation or growth is at the heart of your story.

2. **Shadows** – Antagonists, villains or enemies. Can also be the enemy within the hero – the dark side or repressed needs or emotions within his or her subconscious, such as grief, anger, frustration or creativity that might become dangerous without an outlet.

3. **Mentors** – Sources of wisdom or guidance. May be a coach, teacher, parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, counselor or any wise elder or friend. Could be the memory of

an absent loved one, or advice once given. Could also be the hero's conscience, or cultural mores, or any other guiding principles.

4. **Herald** – A catalyst; one who brings the Call to Adventure (or, later, any other needed information.) May be a person, event, object or message, such as a letter or a sign. Connected to the inciting incident.

5. **Threshold Guardians** – Foils, challengers and obstacles; the characters or forces that stand in the hero's way at important turning points. May include jealous friends or enemies, doubters, allies who resist change, worried or judgmental adults – may even be circumstantial events or objects like injuries or flat tires. May also be inner forces, such as the hero's fears and doubts.

6. **Shapeshifters** – In fantasy, can be literal creatures that change shape, like vampires or werewolves. In contemporary stories, shapeshifters represent change or ambiguity – the way other characters (or the hero's perceptions of them) keep changing. A betraying or two-faced friend, perhaps, or an unreliable counselor. Anyone who is not who or what they seem to be.

7. **Tricksters** – Clowns, tempters and mischief-makers. May also be an aspect of the hero's subconscious, shaking up his or her ego and urging change.

8. **Allies** – Sidekicks, friends and partners who help or sometimes even accompany the hero on parts of the journey.

Although they come last on the list, **allies** can actually be among the most important secondary characters to develop. We all have important loved ones in our lives – friends, family members, partners – whom we turn to and rely on; people who matter to us deeply. Our heroes should be no different.

Beginning authors often make the mistake of creating solitary heroes, but in fact, most of our strongest motivations in life are activated by key relationships. We seek to defend, protect, prove ourselves to, or please those who matter to us most. This is particularly true in YA, where peer relationships are front and center. Your hero's allies can be critical in terms of understanding his or her motivations, so be sure you've given them their due.

The list of eight archetypes is an invaluable **tool to measure your secondary characters** against. It can reveal which characters don't have clearly defined roles or relationships to the hero (in which case, perhaps they need to be cut, or combined to create a more multi-dimensional character) and which are doing too much heavy lifting (and could perhaps be divided into more than one character.)

It can also help you **better understand and develop your hero**. We are multi-dimensional beings, and often behave differently depending upon whom we are with and the nature of our relationship to that person. How your hero behaves with a mentor,

for instance, may be very different than how he behaves with a friend. When thinking about the roles your secondary characters play in relationship to your hero, don't forget to consider **how your hero's behavior is informed** by *them*, and what aspect of his or her personality this particular relationship allows you to reveal.

Ask yourself this:

- How would the hero's life and/or journey be different if he or she **had never met this character?**

- How would this character's life and/or journey be different if he or she **had never met the hero?**

Stereotypes and Clichés

Don't let working with archetypes tempt you to create stereotypical or cliché characters. Challenge yourself to think beyond the encyclopedic brain, campy gay, and vapid popular schoolmates. Aim for something more original than neglectful parents or enigmatic mentors.

Here are some ways to create fresh secondary characters that defy stereotypes and clichés:

- **Find strong objectives and motivations** – Humanize a villain, for instance, by giving them a powerful and understandable reason for their behavior. *Why* do they want or need what they're striving for? What's at stake for them? What secret pain are they running away from, or hiding? Stories are so much more satisfying if we can see both the protagonist's and antagonist's point of view, and understand their motivations for doing what they do. Is there a moment, perhaps, when the hero and villain see eye to eye – or something they both agree on? This challenges readers to look beyond assumptions and question their own values. Whose side should we really be on?

- **Look for opposites, contradictions and surprises** – Instead of an angry or neglectful parent, how about one who is a sympathetic ally? Instead of the gay best friend loving show tunes or opera, how about Korean pop – or Irish step-dancing? Aim for fresh and interesting characters that defy expectations.

It's particularly important to think beyond the obvious when it comes to **antagonists**. No one is *all* bad – or all good. A dear friend of mine was once called to pack up the apartment of his recently deceased and long-absent father. This was a man he had barely known, and who, by all accounts, had cared for nothing and nobody. My friend was astonished to discover dozens of thriving and well-nourished houseplants on every windowsill of his father's small tenement apartment… a testament to the old man's

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capacity for love, even if only for living creatures that could not talk back. Now *that's* an interesting character!

Remember, too, that every character must have a **unique and authentic voice,** one that is different from the other characters in your story. Each character's voice should be **specific** enough that the **reader can tell who is talking even if there are no attributions or dialogue tags.** Look for ways to distinguish each of your character's voices and manners of speech from one another.

Subplots

Like secondary characters, subplots can deepen and add complexity to the hero's journey. They can underscore theme by providing contrasting perspectives, and can be of great help in terms of managing pacing and momentum. And as with secondary characters, the key to effective subplots is keeping them **connected to your overall theme**.

Good subplots are **distinct from your main plot** but **support your central argument or idea.** They usually involve **secondary characters who have their own emotional journey**, although they can sometimes result from a sidebar journey or experience of the hero's (as long as that digression ultimately re-connects with and influences the main story.)

Subplots involving secondary characters are most effective when they provide **contrast to the hero's journey**. Avoid subplots that simply mirror the main character's journey or plot scenario, as well as those that have no bearing on the main character or story whatsoever. The idea is not to add stories within stories, but to provide **perspective and dimension** to the main story you are telling. Think of subplots as **tools to enrich and support your big idea.**

One stylistic approach often used in YA is to weave two or three parallel stories that eventually connect – but this is an advanced technique, and it can be challenging in terms of sustaining a reader's interest. If you choose to try this, aim for **connectivity** sooner rather than later.

There's no rule that says you have to have a subplot at all. It's perfectly acceptable to write an entire novel that focuses solely on your hero's journey. But if you choose to explore a subplot or two, here are some ways to do so and things to keep in mind:

- Make sure you are clear on the **overall theme** of your main story before you attempt to expand upon it with subplots. (Go back and revisit Week 5's lesson on Theme if you are struggling with this.)

- Consider which of your **secondary characters** is the most sympathetic, and might be best suited to encountering **conflicts** that are compelling and germane to your

overall story. Generally in YA, this will be someone close to the hero – a family member or friend.

- Provide a secondary character with an **opposite or contrasting experience** to your hero. For example, if your hero is wrestling with a turbulent relationship, have a secondary character enjoying a successful one.

- Work with subplots during **turning points, transitions and realizations**. If your hero makes a discovery about him or herself, or experiences a reversal or triumph, see if there's a contrasting experience you can provide for a secondary character to offset and further inform the hero's journey.

- Shake up the pacing by introducing or touching base with a subplot **after an intense period of linear plot development** for your hero.

- Use a circumstantial subplot to **complicate** your hero's central journey and/or the main plot. For example, if your hero is about to leave home for the first time and his father or best friend gets sick, he now has to deal with that problem as well as the original one.

- If a subplot can be cut without **impacting or changing the story** in any real way, then it probably should be.

Remember that **subplots must have all the same ingredients as a main plot** – a compelling, sympathetic **character** in pursuit of a **need or goal**, encountering **problems and obstacles** and taking **actions** to overcome them. Like your main plot, every subplot should have a **beginning, middle and end**, a central problem or **conflict**, a **climax** and a **resolution** through which the character involved **grows or changes**.

Don't leave subplots **hanging or unresolved,** unless you are developing a series, in which case you might wish to leave one or two items open to carry over to the next installment. But use this technique with care – most series books need to function well as stand-alones these days, so you don't want to leave too much hanging or it will make for an unsatisfying read.

How many subplots can a YA novel handle? **Two or three at most**. Again, if it's just a diversion or comic relief, cut it – but if it informs or enriches the main plot or theme, it adds value.

Tracking Secondary Characters and Subplots

As you dig deeper into your story to explore secondary characters and subplots, it's important to maintain consistency with character details and manage the trajectory of subplot developments.

Creating a system, file folder or spreadsheet to track all these details can be invaluable. Among the assignments this week are sample spreadsheets to assist in this regard, though of course you can always create your own, or use a different system that works for you if you prefer.

Week 10 – Assignments

Identify the archetypal roles of all your characters using the Character Archetype worksheet.

Determine each secondary character's purpose in the story using the Secondary Character Purpose worksheet.

Identify/develop any subplots using the Subplot Worksheet.

Create a system to track the details of all secondary characters and subplots (using the spreadsheet attached or creating your own.)

Keep writing… the next chapter, scene or 10-15 pages.

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