The Character Arc: Leading Your Protagonist from Denial to Action

by Tamar Sloan



Our characters have a problem, a problem that will spark our plot and drive their arc. As a reader, it's the transformation from refusal and denial to acceptance then action that I love experiencing, and judging by the popularity of the book industry (an estimated 113 billion dollars globally!), I'm going to predict so do a few other people. As a writer, it can be one of the toughest parts to write. Capturing that deeply primal, psychological struggle onto the pages of a book is no easy feat.

But it's also the most fun. You get to create a world where you challenge your character, propelling them to fulfil a destiny they never conceived as possible... that your reader doubted, but desperately hoped, will be possible. If you write romance like me, that'll mean getting the guy and living happily ever after. If you write thrillers, then your protagonist will catch the serial killer/creepy stalker/child abductor and the streets will be safe again. If fantasy is your genre of choice, then the possibilities are only limited by the infinity that is human imagination.

How can we achieve this? Well, at the beginning of your story, there's going to be something wrong with your character or your world, maybe both. Conveniently for us is the human tendency to deny, a defence mechanism we use to stop ourselves from feeling bad, sad or mad. Denial means we don't have to face something all sentient beings tend to avoid - change. Denial means your character isn't going to just sail into acceptance and that rosy horizon (and if they do, then go back and edit - it's the fight us readers want to struggle and ultimately conquer as if it was us single handedly conquering that fear of commitment/the baffling crime/defeating the cyborgs).



Denial can become the core of your conflict, in fact, it could sustain the whole book! What's even more convenient is that psychology predicts they're going to go through some stages.

1. The Existence of the problem

This is where we start. The belief that there is no problem. Think the denial of global warming a decade ago or alcoholics saying 'I can quit whenever I want'. Your character won't even acknowledge there's an issue with their dead end life, their womanising ways, or point-blank refuse to acknowledge the existence of vampires.

For growth - the change that drives those hundreds of I-can't-put-this-down pages - to occur then your protagonist is going to have to acknowledge the problem. Luckily

that darned inciting incident that we throw in their path will probably achieve that quite nicely... and the seed of change will be sown.

2. The Significance of the problem

Once we've acknowledged that a problem exists, be it within ourselves or out in our world, we need to realise the gravity, the magnitude of the problem. Our initial reaction will be to say 'oh sure, there's a problem, but it's not very serious' (do I need to mention global warming again?). Sprinkle some plot complications and your character is probably going to start appreciating that not addressing this problem has consequences, serious consequences. Sometimes for themselves, sometimes for those they care about, sometimes for the entire universe. Now they realise they can't sit on their haunches or hands, because there's definitely an issue, and it's definitely serious.

3. The Solvability of the problem



Okay, so we're moving along and our character has a problem, and they don't only know it, they know it's a biggy. But denial doesn't give up without a decent struggle, it's going to cling to conscious ignorance because facing this could be painful. It might mean sacrifice. It might mean our hearts or lives or loved ones on the line. Denial, clever and protective defence mechanism that it is, will tell your protagonist that sure, this is a serious problem, but there's nothing we can do about it. It's not solvable. There's no answer, no solution. But we're clever authors, and a solution will present itself. The seed will germinate. And change will be born.

4. Bringing it back to self.

So, your character has acknowledged the existence of the problem, they've grasped its magnitude, and they've realised the problem can be fixed. The next thing they'll do is ask themselves 'can I do something about it?' If they're stubborn, if you really want to make your protagonist (and reader) work for it, their initial reaction will be 'hell no'. What could be more hopeless than a problem, a problem with big consequences, and a solution that seems impossible... sounding like the 'all is lost moment'?

But they'll realise. They'll figure it out. That yes, they can do something about it. And darn it, they're going to do it right now! And bam, you've got your final act, that scene where Luke Skywalker takes down the Deathstar in a dramatic, glorious explosion. Where Frodo throws the ring into Mount Doom. Where Harry finally takes down Voldemort.

Sigh. I love the crossroads of psychology and writing. How the sub-conscious becomes conscious. How life and literature intersect. As a writer we have the privilege of exploring these sometimes universal human tendencies in worlds of our

WritersReign.co.uk Articles – Competitions – Links to Resources – Markets

own creating, with characters that practically live and breathe like we do. And in my books (pun intended!), that's why we write, and why we read.

* * * * *

The PsychWriter Blog is a fun and informative blog aimed at disseminating psychological information to support and extend writers. Subscribe to receive the weekly posts straight to your inbox! www.psychwriter.com.au

Article Source: EzineArticles.com/expert/Tamar Sloan/

* * * * * * * *

Improve Your Writing with a FREE WritersReign Email Course

Free to readers of this article! And to be perfectly frank, free to any Tom, Dick or Harriet that would like to sign up!

Click on the links for further details:

CREATIVE COURSE ARTICLE COURSE