

Writing Diverse Characters: How One White Guy Writes About a Latina Cop



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Guys like me are about as likely to naturally understand the intricacies of the Latino Experience as my third-grade self could solve a calculus problem. But, armed with desire, intention, and a lot of help, I set out to create [Jessica Ramirez](#) and populate her metaverse with fascinating diverse characters, with the intention of inspiring individuals like them to aspire to be heroes, too.

I try to base every character I write on a composite of real people I know or have researched. Jessica is based on my friend, [Traci Ruiz](#), a twenty-five-year law enforcement veteran who experienced many of the struggles common to females and minorities who entered a predominantly male career field. Traci and a dozen other female police officers I came to know during my research, helped guide Jessica's character development.

From my own experience and through conversations other authors about their writing processes, I learned we are all capable of crafting compelling and authentic characters of any gender or background through thoughtful research, empathy, and attention to avoiding stereotypes. If you've ever created a villain, you have a sense for the challenge.

Each of us brings limited personal familiarity with any character, location or plotline that is not in our wheelhouse. Powerful, accurate exposition of time and place can immerse a reader in a memorable vicarious experience. Likewise, how we approach our research and commitment to respectful character representation is the key to creating an enticing story and can broaden our own understanding and empathy for the rich diversity of the human adventure.

Here are notes and highlights from today's presentation. I welcome your feedback!

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What Makes a Great Character (Regardless of Identity)

Agency: Characters drive the plot, not merely react to it. Give them choices, even if those choices are difficult.

Specificity: Details bring characters to life. Quirks, mannerisms, and experiences shape their speech and actions.

Characters are more than a list of traits.

Motivations: The WHY behind the WHAT

- Actions: A character's motivations are the driving force behind their choices. Why do they want the thing they're pursuing? What deeper need does it fulfill for them?
- Nuance: Motivations can be noble, selfish, complex, or contradictory. Even a villain might have understandable motivations (though their actions remain harmful). This makes them less one-dimensional.
- Example: Jessica is driven by a deep-seated desire for justice, a need to make up for a past failure, and an obsession with control. The motivation informs how she approaches the case.

Internal Conflicts: Struggles Within

- Beyond Just Good vs. Evil: Even well-intentioned characters have internal struggles. The Villain in CHASING VEGA is my favorite kind of troublemaker; doing the wrong things for what she feels are the right reasons. The best villains battle between their desires and their sense of duty, or grapple with conflicting values.
- Relatability: Jess struggles with moments when doing what's right requires breaking the rules. Internal conflicts make characters relatable because everyone experiences moments of self-doubt, temptation, or difficult choices.
- Example: When Jessica is painted into a corner, we see her resilience tested. She is often calmest when in the greatest danger. Great

characters with unwavering faith might be tested when an injustice occurs. Do they maintain their belief, or does anger and doubt set in?

Flaws: Perfect Imperfections

- Overly perfect characters lack depth. Flaws make them more believable and create opportunities for growth.
- Types of Flaws might include personality-based flaws (selfishness, arrogance), skill-based flaws (a brilliant strategist who is socially awkward), or flaws tied to past mistakes (regret, lingering consequences).

Examples of Modern Female Protagonists

- *Lisbeth Salander (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo - Stieg Larsson)*
 - Motivation: Rage against social injustice, desire for vengeance against those who harmed her.
 - Conflict: Difficulty trusting anyone, her methods often skirt or cross legal boundaries.
 - Flaw: Antisocial tendencies - limited emotional expression isolates her despite her desire for connection.
- *Kinsey Millhone (Sue Grafton)*
 - Motivation: Independence, a desire helps those overlooked by larger systems.
 - Conflict: Loneliness clashes with her solitary nature, troubled past colors her view of relationships.
 - Flaw: Stubborn, sometimes holds grudges to her own detriment.
- *Eleanor Oliphant (Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman):*
 - Motivation: Desires a simple, uncomplicated life after a traumatic past.
 - Conflict: Social awkwardness and rigid adherence to routines isolate her despite a longing for connection.
 - Flaw: Difficulty expressing and understanding her own emotions, quick to judge others.
- *Villanelle (Killing Eve by Luke Jennings):*
 - Motivation: A mix of boredom, the thrill of the kill, and a desire for luxury and control.
 - Conflict: Her obsession with MI6 agent Eve Polastri puts both in danger as their game escalates.

- Flaw: Psychopathic tendencies, lack of empathy makes her a ruthlessly effective assassin but highly destructive.
- *Riley Sager (The Last Time I Lied by Riley Sager)*
 - Motivation: Driven to uncover the truth about the disappearance of her friends years ago.
 - Conflict: Haunted by guilt over her role in the events, increasingly unsure who she can trust.
 - Flaw: Impulsive, prone to act before assessing the full danger, endangering herself.
- *Mare Sheehan (Mare of Easttown HBO series)*
 - Motivation: Protect her community and get justice, even while battling personal demons.
 - Conflict: Grief over her son's death, strained family relationships, clash between small-town life and the demands of the job.
 - Flaw: Stubborn, can be abrasive, pushing away those who want to help.
- *Louise (Behind Her Eyes by Sarah Pinborough)*
 - Motivation: Initially drawn to the mystery of a strange couple, later driven by survival.
 - Conflict: Her loneliness makes her susceptible to manipulation, struggles against supernatural forces beyond her understanding.
 - Flaw: Prone to self-sabotage, difficulty setting healthy boundaries in relationships.

Examples in Classic Detectives

- *Sherlock Holmes (Arthur Conan Doyle)*
 - Motivation: Driven by intellectual challenge, a need to impose order on chaos.
 - Conflict: Boredom between cases, social awkwardness clashes with his need for observation.
 - Flaw: Arrogant, dismissive of those less intelligent, his drug use hints towards a darker side.
- *Hercule Poirot (Agatha Christie)*
 - Motivation: Obsessed with truth and justice, takes pride in the orderliness of his methods.
 - Conflict: His ego clashes with less observant companions, struggles to see outside his own logic.

- Flaw: Vanity about his appearance and intellect can make him seem slightly ridiculous.

The Hardboiled Detective

- *Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler)*
 - Motivation: Upholding personal code of honor, even in a corrupt world.
 - Conflict: Cynical outlook clashes with his underlying idealism, leading to disappointment.
 - Flaw: Heavy drinker, quick temper, often alienates allies who could offer support.

And remember...

- Even the most brilliant detectives can be flawed. This adds realism and potential sources of tension in a mystery plot.
- "Cozy" mysteries sometimes have fewer complex characters, but even then, motivations and potential conflicts add depth.

Important Note: Even well-written villains demonstrate this principle. Analyzing their motivations, weaknesses, and the conflicts they generate (for themselves and others) can be very illuminating!

Combining for Complexity

The best characters often have a mix of...

1. Motivations in Conflict: A character driven by loyalty or love may have to make a morally questionable choice, creating an inner struggle.
2. Flaws Exacerbating Conflict: Jessica can have a hair trigger temper. A short-tempered hero's anger might jeopardize their mission, forcing them to confront their weakness.
3. Growth Potential: Internal conflicts and recognizing flaws can lead to character development over the course of the story.

Research is Your Best Friend

- Immersion: Read! books by authors from diverse backgrounds, watch documentaries, and engage with cultural resources to develop understanding.
 - Some examples of Diverse Authors you may not have discovered:
 - The Widows of Malabar Hill by Sujata Massey (Japanese-American, setting: India) - Set in 1920s Bombay.
 - The Devil in a Blue Dress by Walter Mosley (African-American) - Introduces his PI, Easy Rawlins.
 - The Other Americans by Laila Lalami (Moroccan-American) - An exploration of race, immigration, and grief.
 - Arsenic and Adobo by Mia P. Manansala (Filipino-American) - A Cozy with great food, family drama and murder.
 - [A YouTube playlist](#) of videos on writing diverse characters.
- Learn from the Source: When possible, respectfully seek insights directly from individuals within the communities you want to represent. Employ sensitivity readers for feedback.
- Specificity Wins: Focus on nuanced, individual experiences rather than relying on broad generalities informed by stereotypes.

Respectful representation versus Harmful Stereotyping

Focus on Respectful Representation

- **Complexity and Individuality:** Your cast is portrayed as full human beings with strengths, weaknesses, unique motivations, and their own story arcs. They aren't just a bundle of traits associated with their identity group.
 - Example: A young Muslim woman who loves rock music, has a complex relationship with her family, and dreams of becoming a scientist. She grapples with how her religion, passions, and goals fit together in her own way.
- **Challenges Stereotypes:** Representation can actively push back against common tropes and assumptions about a group. This doesn't mean every character needs to be exceptional, but it avoids reducing them only to expected patterns.
 - Example: An African American male character who is gentle, a doting father, and successful in a field not stereotypically associated with Black men.

- **Nuance and Context:** Cultural elements or experiences tied to a character's background are depicted with care. They're part of the individual's story, enriching portrayal, not used to explain away all their motivations or actions.
 - Example: A Latina character's close connection to her family is explored as a source of strength, love, and sometimes tension due to traditional expectations. It's not shorthand for simplistically explaining away all her choices.

Avoid Harmful Stereotyping

- **Flat and Reductive:** Characters are defined primarily by their identity marker (race, gender, sexuality, etc.). They are a collection of stereotypes, not a unique person.
 - Example: The sassy African American woman, the nerdy Asian guy, the sexually aggressive gay man.
- **Tokenism:** A single character is meant to represent an entire group, often with an extreme portrayal meant to stand out. This puts unfair pressure on the single character and creates a distorted view.
 - Example: The only female character in an action team whose main trait is being tough or seductive.
- **"Othering" and Exoticism:** Characters from marginalized groups are presented as fundamentally different or strange from a presumed "default" (usually white, heterosexual, cisgender).
 - Example: A Native American character whose primary role is to provide mystical wisdom or be unusually connected to nature.

Important to Remember...

- Intention vs. Impact: An author may have good intentions but still perpetuate harmful stereotypes without realizing how their portrayal will land.
- Audience Perception: What someone finds stereotypical, or offensive might vary. Sensitivity readers and listening to feedback from the relevant communities is crucial.

Take-Aways:

- Authenticity is a process, not a single step. Respectful, well-researched portrayals are always a work in progress.
- Actively seek critiques from readers within the communities you are writing about. Be receptive to identifying where your own blind spots may exist.

- Step outside your comfort zones, embrace diverse voices, and champion authentic representation in literature. Your stories will be richer and so, too will your real-world relationships.

More about me: TerryShepherd.com – For links to Jessica’s books, podcasts, narrations, and appearances.

