

Character-Driven Writing and Story-Telling

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11/12 - 11/14/07, 11/21/07

These are the notes for my panel on “Character-Based Writing” which I ran at Midwest FurFest. I have annotated the file with some notes I came up with while preparing for the panel at the convention and a couple of bits of feedback I received from attendees after the panel.

Once I started writing an outline, I found there was more information I wanted to talk about, so this document grew with a life on its own. It’s now more of a short dissertation than a simple outline. There is a lot of information here, so I doubt I’ll be able to get through all of it in the time allotted to the panel; I will likely have to gloss over some things. Therefore I’m providing copies of these notes to make all of this information available afterwards.

This discussion contains anthro/furry themes, but it can be used for any genre of fiction. I’ll be referencing science-fiction and fantasy heavily here, but also mentioning more-mainstream genres as well.

I will mention various written and cinematic works as references for the discussion on character-driven writing. Even though I will describe how writing is different from movies, I find that movies make excellent examples for different character types and character drama.

These notes will also serve as a good “reading list” of various stories, podcasts and movies to check out for more examples of great character drama. I’m listing the names of the books and movies as well as the web addresses, where applicable.

Three Types of Story Focus

What drives the story forward? There are three points of focus in a story, or three different engines which drive a story forward. These are:

Plot/Action

Characters

Setting/Milieu

Stories will often use a mix of these three elements, which is actually preferable. I really enjoy character-driven stories, and most of my fiction tends to fall into that category, so that's what I will mostly be talking about in this discussion.

However, characters don't exist in a vacuum. They live in a world of the setting and are propelled along a path by the plot. I will discuss these elements along with writing characters.

Now let's look at those three elements in more depth.

Plot/Action

What is happening in your story? A story is not just random action. It will follow an arc from the beginning, going through conflicts or events, to the climax, ending and even dénouement sections.

Most plots have conflicts between characters as central themes and driving forces behind the stories. This will bring life to the characters and give a basis for the character drama I'll mention later. Stories need some sort of conflict or change that occurs in them to be interesting. To put it simply, stories need something to happen in them. Wish-fulfillment stories where the characters live nothing but happy lives, such as being rich, partying and finding the lover of their dreams, with no effort, are boring.

Think of the stories people tell when they went on vacation or a road trip. Sure, they talk about some nice sights they saw, but a lot of the stories which get repeated are the little accidents and adventures that happened on the way. The story about the couple almost missing their boat on a cruise and the mad dash to get to it is one that will entertain people at parties for years to come. It's the same way with written stories. Strife, drama and chaos lead to adventure.

If the story is only plot driven, it can be like an action movie, some fun scenes of eye or mind candy, but nothing to engage the reader. You want your story to be more interesting than that. Writing a story is different from just a screenplay of a cool movie in your head. It needs to be fleshed out with living and breathing characters.

There was a series of vampire-hunter fan-fiction stories I read years ago that fell into this trap. The story was written to show-case cinematic scenes of fights which might have been visually interesting on a movie screen, but were painfully boring to read.

The other problem with the story was that nobody important died. It was just scene after scene of random fights, where the hero would kill faceless vampires. There were no characters to care about and there was no sense of danger. Without that sense of danger there was no real interest generated by the story. There should be an element of risk in stories such as that.

Characters

There needs to be interesting characters in your story and they need to interact to not only move the story along, but also to give interest and drama to the story.

Characters get fleshed out and explain themselves and their relationships by dialog. Put the characters together in a situation and get them talking.

On the flip-side, if the story only consists of characters talking to each other, it can fall into the trap of too much exposition and be more like an overblown art film. So you need to balance plot and character.

Keep the dialog short and simple in small chunks for a short story, to balance plot and character. For a longer story such as a novel, you can have time to let the characters have longer talks together. You'll find that as the characters interact and talk, you'll get a better sense of them and they'll become more real for you, which will make them more realistic for your audience.

Setting/Milieu

What is the world like in your story? The more different the world is from ours, the more details and description you will need.

Some stories are heavily focused on the Milieu, where the writer wanted to experiment with a certain setting, such as historic fiction, alternate history, steam punk in Victorian times, a story set in the world of the Matrix films, technology built on magic or bio-engineering, etc.

The world can be fascinating, but it also needs some characters and a direction for the plot to go to really grab the reader.

Be careful about having too much exposition to explain the world. Devices such as a teacher giving a lecture on history can work, but need to be done delicately; otherwise the plot will get weighted down.

Instead the details of the world can be rationed out in little portions, along the way. Some parts of the back-story can be hinted at, instead of needing to be explicitly told; the old “show-don’t-tell” adage. Have the characters looking at the world and describe what they see, instead of a lot of explanation on how the world is made up.

This is something that you can take in mind for writing stories with anthro characters. You don’t always need long explanations as to why there are furries populating the world of the story. A quick aside from one of the characters about the anthros being aliens, or genetic constructs would be enough.

I personally don't like using the term "furries" in writing, as it's too self-referential. You can always just refer to the characters by their species type, or describe them as humanoid wolves for example. I've used the term "exotics" in a couple of my stories.

In "Faded Celluloid Dreams" which had a character of a vampire bat in it, I commented on them having been created by the entertainment industry to make the old monster movies more realistic.

In my novel "That Old Time Religion" I hinted that the exotics were genetic cousins from parallel evolution. It wasn't a central point of the story. It only mattered that there were anthropomorphic animal characters living along side of humans, so I didn't need to dwell on it.

You don't need to explain every last detail. The world of your story will work on its own internal logic for both the plot and the setting, so if it's not a crucial part of the story, you can leave something to the sideline where it can be noticed in passing.

Putting it all Together

You can and should have a mix of what drives the story. A story can have a main focus, such as character-driven writing, but you cannot totally ignore plot or setting if you want to tell an interesting and compelling tale.

The Network TV show “Heroes” is a good example of all three aspects of a story working together.

It has the creative, entertaining and interesting comic-book inspired plot and the milieu of the world where people can get these special powers, as well as the secret organization trying to control them.

Then it also has some really powerful characters and drama. The characters feel real and fleshed out and they have strengths and weaknesses. Everyone is in shades of gray too, instead of being all good or evil.

Our perceptions of several characters change as the series progresses, which keeps us guessing what people’s alliances are and makes for a very compelling story.

Coming up with Ideas for Characters

Sometimes a story or plot idea will come to you with hints of character types already sketched out. You may know your film noir inspired piece will require a hard-boiled detective who meets a femme fatale or a whore with a heart of gold, or some other variation on a dozen different themes.

You can take these outlines of characters and fill them in as you flesh out the story details in your mind. Characters are more than just basic types though, which we'll discuss more as we go along. They need to grow from these simple descriptions. They'll get more than a few simple traits, complex personalities and interesting back-stories.

If you have any experience with acting or role-playing, then you have some great resources at your disposal. You're already familiar with creating characters and working out how they'd react as they're put through different plot elements and interact with other characters. I've heard of some people who used role-playing game character sheets to start building characters for their stories.

I never could get into role-playing, I don't think fast enough on my feet to be that good at it, but one of the methods I use to create my stories is day-dreaming. By taking time for idle fantasy, you can let your mind give you all sorts of interesting ideas.

Many writers and artists refer to this as listening to your muse. It's a good description of it, as I've heard her whisper in my ear many times. You can take that seed of inspiration and roll it around in your mind until it begins to grow. You'll find that many plot and character details can sprout from that.

I'd like to mention the old adage "write what you know" here as it makes a good aside. I think it should be better expressed as "write what you've researched." When writing science-fiction or fantasy, we're often writing outside of our direct experience.

We can make things up as we go along, as long as the internal logic of the story stays consistent. We can research different topics to get ideas on space travel or genetics and then run with it. So it could also be said as "write what you've imagined."

Character Types

Let's look at the genres of action or high fantasy to start out with, since they give us two iconic figures, the hero and the villain.

The Hero:

The hero can fit into several different roles. There is the novice or the Chosen One, such as Neo in The Matrix or Luke Skywalker in Star Wars.

It's someone who is thrust into an adventure unwillingly. They need to find their strength even if they don't believe it themselves. They may also fight against their destiny. It should be remembered that for the character living it, an adventure is not as fun or exciting as it is for us in the audience watching or reading about their exploits.

I've heard adventures described as the hero being lost and cold in the dark woods and having a terrible time. That certainly rings true for the high fantasy genre and story structure. It is by facing adversity that the character grows into being a hero.

I'd also like to mention again that stories of this vein should have an element of risk or danger to them, or some kind of drama. Without any danger or drama, the story simply won't be compelling to the readers.

For a twist on the character of the hero, how about having someone who is trying to live up to family expectations, in the shadow of someone, or to prove themselves? They could be trying too hard and that could be a fatal flaw.

How about a hero who is arrogant and really not likable, even when he's doing the right thing? Or perhaps he does the right thing for the wrong reasons, or even does some morally suspect actions. These added dimensions of complexity will fill out both your characters and your plotlines.

The Villain:

Villains make for some very interesting and entertaining characters. However, you should take care to give them some depth as well as the hero.

Outside of comic-book stories, the villain shouldn't be completely one-dimensional. They should have some nuances. They could have something in their past which drove them on their course of action. They could have similar emotional baggage as the hero, but handled it differently.

The villain could have a back-story which explains their actions and motivations. This could be used for both dramatic and comedic ends. The animated Disney show "Kim Possible" is a great example of how comic-book themes of heroes and villains are deconstructed, as well as the world of teen dramas. The show is a comedy, but it has some very clever writing to it.

Dr. Drakken is a good example of the super genius who was picked on as a kid and turned evil. The villain from The Incredibles is another good example of someone choosing the wrong path because of a personal injustice.

We don't have to agree with the reasons the villain makes their choices, but we should be able to relate to them.

The villain could be very complex. Villains aren't complete caricatures of evil; they're made of shades of gray just like the rest of us. They will be nice to the people they care about and they won't go out of their way to hurt people if they don't need to. Villains are usually logical about what they do.

The character of Sylar from "Heroes" makes good points for and against this mold. He's a sociopath, so he's not always completely logical, but his mental sickness explains his behavior. He doesn't kill people just for the hell of it. He has killed people who got in his way or when he was threatened.

Most of the time he kills people to take their powers and because he believes he deserves them. He's also shown to have a Napoleon complex and is trying to prove that he's someone special. He's been shown as both cold and calculating and also looking for redemption in a couple of instances. He's a perfect example of what makes the writing for that show so good.

The villain could also be deluded into what they're doing not being wrong. Nicholas Cage's character in the movie Lord of War is a good example of this. He gets into the weapons trade as a business to make money, but he's in denial about the weapons causing bloodshed. He rationalizes it by thinking that wars will always happen and if it's not him selling the weapons, then it will be someone else. It's not until he's confronted with an African warlord who will use the weapons to slaughter innocent people that he has a crisis of conscience. There is some good drama which flows out of that scene and the repercussions of it.

What if the villain is the likeable character, instead of the hero? Or how about if the villain is someone you can identify with?

An example of such a character is Tony Soprano from the HBO series "The Sopranos." Most of the time he appears like a normal guy with everyday problems with his family and co-workers, but every so often he does something violent which shows how evil he could be. That makes the drama much stronger.

Like the hero, the villain thinks he's doing the right thing. People have wonderful ways of rationalizing their actions. For example, back on "The Sopranos," the guys in the mob didn't think they were really evil. One of them even mentions that he'll have to spend a long time in Purgatory, but he believed he'd eventually make it to heaven. The twist on spirituality there was very interesting.

Tony once told his therapist that he didn't whack anybody who didn't deserve it. Even though he was involved in all sorts of crime, such as theft, he believed that innocent people didn't get hurt from his actions.

Another example of a compelling villain is the current movie American Gangster. Denzel Washington's character of the head of a drug cartel in Harlem is likeable and suave. He's smart and resourceful and almost admirable in the way he sets up his business. He likens it to attaining the American dream.

He's a family man who looks after his own and cares for his family well. That's another thing, villains have families, just like heroes do, and they can be very caring towards them. They're not always mean and calculating.

As in "The Sopranos," Denzel Washington's character is only shown getting violent a few times during the movie, so that can be easy to forget and the movie can have you rooting for him.

On the flip side, the cops in the film are not very likable. The story shows the seedy world of police corruption in New York City in the 1970s, so most of the cops are sleazy and almost as bad as the criminals they're shaking down for bribes.

Russell Crowe's character of the cop who ends up taking Denzel Washington's character down is not a very suave or likeable character. He has a strict moral code which sets him against the crooked cops, but outside of the force his life is in shambles.

He's cheated on his wife and doesn't have time for his son. He's kind of a pathetic character, but his determination to be a good cop drives him to shine in the end.

That also demonstrates that characters can evolve throughout a story as they face challenges. Russell Crowe's character does make some amends toward his ex-wife as he learns how his actions have affected her and his son.

It is important to think about the relationships the characters have to each other, for both heroes and villains. These relationships will help drive and define the story. I've mentioned how the characters relate to their friends and family, and there's also how they relate to their adversaries.

There are also relationships of the master/student and the sidekick which could be explored here. The grizzled veteran and the wise mentor are two other standard character types seen in many stories.

Working with Archetypes and Stereotypes

Characters can be based on pre-conceived notions, but if that's all they are, they will not be very well realized. Instead they will be very one-dimensional and not as compelling for the readers.

That could work for a humorous story, to play with the stereotypes. You could also have a character that acts against type. For anthro characters there could be the cowardly lion, the submissive wolf, the prude vixen, or the evil unicorn. Other ideas could be the honest car salesman, the flirtatious librarian, the smart model or the dishonest knight in tarnished armor.

You can use that as a starting point, but if you want to write drama, you'll need to add more dimensions for your characters. When I started writing "That Old Time Religion," I decided I wanted to use Anubis, the Egyptian funerary god of the dead as one of the characters in the story.

I wrote Anubis as both a nod to and a bit of a parody of how he's portrayed in the fandom. I thought it would be interesting to take the character who's been shown in so many adult situations and have some fun with him. The neat thing about it is how he grew as a character.

Anubis started out flirty, but he also turned into an emotional character. By setting him as a god from a fallen dynasty out amongst modern-day people, he turned out to be lonely. I also borrowed the idea of the gods consorting with mortals from the Greeks and Romans, so I figured he would have had some human lovers back in the old days.

Finally, as he was in charge of funerary practices and ushering the dead into the afterlife, I figured he would have had more contact with humans and would miss their company more than the other gods. That gave him some good dramatic depth. He did have an emotional streak to him, but he also showed himself as being a warm and caring character.

Egyptian Mythology had Thoth, the god of magic, working with Anubis, so I paired them up as friends and sometimes lovers. I imagined Thoth being more focused and reserved, so the two of them made a nice odd couple and complemented each other well.

Characters should be nuanced and there can be subtle parts to their makeup. They can also have conflicting components.

Real people are even more complex and three-dimensional than anything we can write. Sometimes real people are too complex and you'll need to simplify things for characters in a story. However, don't be afraid to have a complex or disturbed character, if it works for the story.

Characters don't always have to be likeable. They can do bad things.

Listen to what the character tells you. Often times when you're writing a story, especially for a longer one, you'll get a hint of what the character is like and they'll let you know where they're heading and what direction they'll be pushing the story.

Once again, characters get fleshed out and explain themselves and their relationships by dialog. Put the characters together in a situation and get them talking.

Monsters: Scary, Exciting and Even Compelling

Just like with villains, scary and disturbing monsters can make for some interesting characters and they might have some good stories to tell.

We know how monsters are viewed from all of the old tales and standard stories, but what do the monsters and demons think about all of this? What do they feel? Are they sad and lonely like Frankenstein's monster?

Are they guilty for the horrific acts they've performed? Maybe they're misunderstood, or perhaps they like what they do. Either way that can make some good background for a story. As with the other characters, the monsters can be multi-faceted.

The horror podcast Psuedopod (www.pseudopod.org) had a great story "Brothers" (episode 51, August 2007) which examined the character of a monster. It had some nice character drama about a golem who had regrets and also a great story for referencing the horrors of the Holocaust.

What if a werewolf wasn't the evil killer that the stories say they are? What if they were misunderstood and wrongly feared, like wolves have been? It's then possible to show the werewolf in a positive light. The social structure of the wolf pack could be explored here, as the character begins to understand the nature of the changes they're going through. Perhaps a lonely character could find comfort in the pack, or a weaker character could find the strength of the wolf helping them.

The Jack Nicholson movie Wolf tried to do that, showing some positive traits, but they came with a price. It ended badly for his character anyway, as he lost his soul to the curse of lycanthropy in the end. An American Werewolf in London was a good film which showed a character having to deal with the horrors of the killings he did as a wolf. So these ideas cover both views of the Wolf Man.

For furry fiction, Watt's Martin's stories with his vampire bat characters were very interesting. They dealt with characters who knew it was their nature to take blood from other people and had to deal with that. His stories with Revar, "A Gift of Fire, a Gift of Blood" and its sequel "The Lighthouse" were both very compelling. Watt's stories can be found at this website: www.belfry.com/stories/watts/

Character Drama

I've been mentioning character drama throughout this discussion, so it's time to go more into what that is. I'd like to start out by first giving some examples of several sources of stories which featured compelling characters and dramatic interactions.

I've already mentioned "The Sopranos" and there are a couple of other shows from the HBO cable channel which make for good character drama. "Six Feet Under" and "Dead Like Me" both looked at death and mortality to tell their stories; the latter also used fantasy and dark comedy quite well in its writing.

Both series also showed how people dealt with loss in both positive and negative ways, and how relationships could be made stronger or damaged and torn apart by it. The emotions could get quite rough, but if you appreciate good dramatic writing, they're definitely worth checking out.

There's also the new network TV show "Pushing Daisies" which uses a similar fantasy theme of life and death. Unfortunately I've found it to be emotionally muted. It's written more as a modern fairy tale, so the characters reactions and emotions aren't as strong. They're shown, but more in superficial ways. It could be that more drama will grow out of it as it evolves, but for now it's also a good example an instance where character drama isn't the focus of the story.

The science-fiction and horror podcasts, EscapePod (www.escapepod.org) and Psuedopod (www.pseudopod.org) respectively are good sources for fiction and their weekly stories are great to listen to on the commute to work. Besides offering interesting stories over a wide range of their respective genres, they've showcased many stories which have had some great character drama to them.

And back to the furry fandom, Sofawolf Press' (www.sofawolf.com) "Anthrolations" series of magazines was all about character relationships and drama.

Character Relationships

Character drama is built from the relationships between characters. The ways they react with one another not only pushes the plot along, but it can create compelling situations and emotional responses in the reader.

People and relationships in real life are complex and mixed, so stories about them should reflect that. A story can show relationships both good and bad, or a mix of the two. Once again it's the added dimensions and nuances which make the characters and their relationships interesting.

Types of Relationships

Master and servant or any type of class-based society

Boss and employee

Military chain of command

Also relationships between peers in the above settings

Romantic relationships

Furry-Specific Themes

There are some relationships which are possible with furry characters which are different than in other genres. For example, using anthro characters allows the ideas of inter-species relationships. Examples of this could be predator and prey, normal versus exotic species, such as house cats and wild felines, mundane characters and magical mythic animals such as dragons, griffins or unicorns.

Furry characters have always been a good metaphor for stories dealing with issues of race and the meeting of different cultures. By using anthros you can diffuse some of the tension of a story about racism, though as I've mentioned before, you may want to use nuance and a light touch.

How does the world of your story view the anthro characters? They can be equals, second-class citizens, outcasts or aliens. Furies can be a way to show how society deals with The Other.

I've always been fascinated with human-furry interactions, so I've written a lot of stories in that vein, covering a wide range of relationships, from colleagues to friends and lovers.

I wrote a series of stories with furries as aliens with a race of felines called the Rrakith. I had a first-contact story where we first met them and a few follow-on pieces. There were some awkward moments, such as in the first-contact story when one of the human crew makes an off-hand remark about how the Rrakith are similar in some ways to non-anthro cats back on Earth. That of course is unintentionally offensive, the same way if someone referred to us as a monkey.

During the first-contact story, the Rrakith were revealed to be a race of hermaphrodites as well. I'd created them to do some thought experiments on gender and sexuality. I wanted to handle the Rrakith in an intelligent and thoughtful way. I'd meant them to be more than just a cheap kinky setup, though I had thought of some possible adult stories down the road. I never did get around to a romantic story, so there was nothing explicit about their different makeup. However, that difference made for some interesting interactions though, as they found our split genders just as alien and weird as we found them.

There were some other scenes of the two races getting to know one another. One story had a discussion of the races' different religions. That story fell into the trap of having too much expositional dialog and not enough plot, but it was still an interesting exercise. Given that the Rrakith were dual-gendered, their god had both female and male aspects to her, which was interesting to talk about.

Another story showed a human teenager trying to adjust to life after his family had moved to the Rrakith home-world. He was one of the few humans there, so he stuck out and was having a hard time fitting in. The gender differences came into play there, adding to typical teenage awkwardness, without becoming sexualized. I'd thought of an eventual scenario of a friendship becoming romantic, but never did get around to writing that.

Overall I had a positive take on meeting aliens, which is hopeful but also might be kind of naive. For an example at the other end of the spectrum, there is Larry Niven's shared-world collection of stories, The Man-Kzin Wars.

The Kzinti are feline aliens, but they're more like predatory cats. They're definitely not friendly and they've been fighting with humanity ever since we ran across them. The stories show a darker side of things, but they also portray realistic, if scary, ideas of feline traits in a race of anthro cats. There are a few stories which show the social structure which resembles a lion pride; even if they aren't snuggly, these felines are still fascinating.

Romantic and Erotic Themes

Romance and erotica are by definition very character-driven types of stories. Yes, it is possible to have an erotic scene without a lot of characterization, but it will not be as compelling as if the characters are people we care about.

Take your time getting to the romantic payoff of the story, let us get to know the characters first and have some romantic tension before they get together. This is true for erotica as well, think of it as the fiction equivalent of foreplay. The journey the characters take to get to know each other and fall in love can be filled with drama, excitement and comedy, as well as romance. The movie When Harry Met Sally is an example of that, though it focuses on the comedy aspects.

You can write stories with romantic partners that aren't specifically romances though. You could examine how spouses and lovers interact in all situations, not just in the bedroom.

One thing to remember about romance, which is true in life, that falling in love does not fix all of the other problems in your life. If your character is desperate to fall in love, then the relationship they get into might have some trouble ahead.

How does a romance look between lovers when it's just starting up as compared to long-term partners? The flames of passion may have died down, but there is a warmth of two people sharing their life together under the surface, even if it isn't always seen.

How do couples work together or against each other? How do they react in times of loss, devastation or adversity? Relationships can either be strengthened or torn apart by hard times. For example, in both of the shows "Six Feet Under" and "Dead Like Me" you had examples of people pulling together in times of crisis, but also examples of relationships with some cracks already forming that fractured under the strain.

Infidelity is another instance of strong emotions that could drive a story. How would characters react when faced with the knowledge that one of the partners in a relationship was unfaithful?

Don't be afraid of using darker emotions and themes in romance and erotica. Themes of sadness, loneliness and regrets can play into and against these genres.

I wrote a couple of stories which relate to these somber emotions. First there was "Searching the Shore" where a lonely character was out walking the beach at night. He meets up with a ghost, an apparition of a woman who'd died long ago but was still mourning and searching for her lost lover who had died at sea. He's scared of her and runs away, but later is touched with her sadness. He's haunted by the memory of her and he goes back to the beach several more times to try and find her, saying that she doesn't have to be alone, neither of them do.

The other story "Night Swimming" has a character visiting the old swimming hole where he'd go skinny-dipping with his first lover one night. The story involves bittersweet memories of love and loss and a romantic interlude which turns out to be only a fantasy of trying to recapture the past, which is not possible.

I like writing somber moods mixed with romantic ideas at times. There's a sad beauty to that. However, it doesn't have to be all darkness and despair. That makes for some good drama, but you can also have strong emotions on the happy end of the spectrum. You can show how characters find love and support amongst hard situations, or just the joy of love itself. If you take your time to set up the scene, the release of the built-up romantic tension will provide its own strong emotions for the story.

Business Settings

Business settings can be another good source for character drama, as you have relationships between peers, bosses and underlings and even business rivals.

“Talespin,” Disney’s animated series from the early 1990s, took some of the Jungle Book cast and set them in a 1940’s era world. Shere Kahn makes a great tycoon, putting the tiger into the jungle of big business. He is a ruthless businessman, but he is not evil. He has his own personal code of ethics. There are at least a couple of instances in the show where he finds out that workers under him are doing the wrong thing and abusing innocent people and he puts a stop to it.

“Talespin” was also another good example of how even an animated kids show could have some good drama mixed in with the comedy. Becky is the annoying Boss and Baloo is her lazy employee. There were some occasional bits of romantic tension between them, and they were also shown to be part of a makeshift family. They’d both drive one another crazy, but in the end they’d also show how they cared for one another.

Military Themes and Settings

Military dramas make up a lot of action movies, just look at Saving Private Ryan or any of the World War Two movies that John Wayne was in. They come ready made with plots with lots of action and the stakes are high, so you can also show characters working through the situation and their relationships as they try and survive.

With both military and political leaders, why did they get into the service and how has it changed them? Did they hunger for power or were they trying to live up to someone else's goals. Did the power corrupt them? You could have both soldiers and leaders trying to prove themselves or make up for past mistakes, that could lead to acts of both bravery and also people taking stupid risks which put people in danger.

What about accidental heroes in military battles? How do the soldiers live with the fact that people think they're heroes when they just got lucky and are haunted by memories of fighting wars. They could be haunted by survivor's guilt, or perhaps they don't think they're a hero, because they know how messy war really is.

Another idea for military settings is when the chain of command gets disrupted. Soldiers are used to having set protocols and they take their orders from people above them. When these lines of communication fall apart, it can cause confusion. It can also lead to situations where someone has to make a choice themselves, which could go against protocol. The idea of a soldier having to disobey orders to make a moral choice is a theme used in military stories, and it's a good conflict to build drama from. The back-story and philosophical makeup of the character will determine how they will react in this situation.

As a mental exercise, you can put your characters in situations such as these and see how they'll react. The more you've been working with them, the better an idea you'll have of what they'll do.

Legal Themes and Settings

I mentioned politics above, which could tie into all kinds of legal scenarios, both in law enforcement and the judicial system, but also the politicians who make the laws. There are many cases of politicians in reality who get worn down by the system after coming in as bright-eyed beginners. Even corrupt politicians believe they are doing the right thing, even if they are rationalizing it.

Lawyers and legal thrillers are another good basis for stories. How did the lawyers end up based on where they started? Do they have regrets? The recent movie Michael Clayton with George Clooney is a good example of this. It starts out with character drama of him regretting the choices he made from going from a defense attorney to becoming a fixer for a huge business firm. The movie then evolves into a legal thriller, while still having the solid character of Michael Clayton react to what's going on and we watch what choices he ends up making.

And how about the police? There are some people who become police officers for the power and the glory and like to use their influence over others. There are dirty cops who may have gotten corrupted from fighting crime and succumb to the temptations all around them. That would allow for some interesting dramatic characters.

For example, there could be a cop who works for the mob and knows he's letting drugs out on the street, but he tries to redeem himself by performing heroic actions where possible. There could be a cop who upholds the law but also holds prejudices against a particular race or group of people, which taints their actions.

It's all about karma, a mix of good and bad. People can do both good and bad deeds and you need to look at them as a whole, not just what they do.

You could also pair up a good cop and a bad cop as partners, and let that drive some of the drama and tension of the story. Keep in mind that there are also good cops, so you shouldn't need to have all the cops in your story be tainted

Be careful when writing about authority figures in bad light, especially if your story is politically motivated. It is fine to have your ideology and philosophy driving a story; that is one of the things art and literature does is to make us ask questions about the world. It should also make us feel strong emotions too, and if a story is too heavy-handed or obvious about this, it will not work as well. People will realize they're being manipulated and the audience doesn't like that. Instead you should handle the characters, plot and themes of the story with a soft touch. Nuance works much better here than obvious extremes.

As an example of a story that is politically motivated, I'll mention the Left Behind series by Tim LeHaye. I got the first book as one of a few different free audio-books when I joined up with Audible.com. I was curious about how bad it would be so I gave it a listen. It was an abridged book but that still didn't account for it being as dreadful as it was. It was a collection of badly written action scenes which were neither exciting nor compelling, broken up by long-winded sermons of religious exposition. The characters were cardboard thin and emotionless and barely reacted to the situations. It was very obvious that the characters and plot were only there to service the religious and political motives of the story.

On the other hand, the Narnia Chronicles by C. S. Lewis are a joy to read. They're wonderful tales set in a fantasy world full of magic and nuance. The stories read well on several different levels and speak to both children and adults. The religious allegory is obvious but not oppressive and the author cares about his characters, not just his message of showing the lion Aslan as another face for Jesus.

One story I wrote, "More than Just a Failure," dealt with a scientist putting down a fox-morph who'd been genetically grown in the lab. The fox was the first of his kind, the first experiment to create a living being. There were errors in the genetic coding, so the fox was extremely sick and was going to die, so the scientist decided to give him a quick and painless death to ease his suffering. It was a sad story, but I tried to be even-handed with it.

The story dealt with medical ethics, but I didn't push the point of euthanasia. I left it up to the reader to decide how they felt about it. Instead my focus was on how doctors and scientists need to remember that their patients are living and feeling beings and need to be treated with care. I let the scientist show his softer side to give balance to the story. The drama came from the loss of a life, but also the kindness the scientist showed to the fox as he was dying.

Religious Themes and Settings

And since I've mentioned religious themes in stories, that makes a good segue to talking more about the topic. Religious figures can make interesting authority figures and a character's religion and spirituality will determine how they react in the story.

Religious figures such as priests and clerics could have a dark side. They could rationalize bad behavior as being for a greater good, or they could be blinded in their quest to save souls that they do something they shouldn't.

A story from Pseudopod (www.pseudopod.org), "The Heart of Tu'a Halaita" (episode 60, October 2007) showed the arrogance of a priest going against the pagan god of a jungle tribe and he paid a heavy price for his actions.

A recent story from EscapePod (www.escapepod.org), "Immortal Sin" (episode 129, October 2007) dealt with someone who missed the point on Christianity and viewed the structure of the church as just a series of rules and that any sin could be wiped away by simply asking for forgiveness in confession, without really feeling any guilt or contrition. I found it a bit heavy handed in its execution, but it was an interesting idea and I didn't feel that it was an attack on religion itself.

Religion gets a lot of bad press in the media and popular culture today, so you should also remember all the positive aspects of religion and how it does help people. It is possible to be a pious and spiritual person without being intolerant and single-minded.

Father Roderick of the "Daily Breakfast" podcast is a good example of that. He's helped found a large collection of Catholic podcasts (www.sqpn.com). Some of the shows are very high church, but there are also shows which discuss theology and philosophical ideas in terms of popular culture. Father Roderick will go from discussing religion to his other hobbies. He's very much a geek and is always mentioning science-fiction and fantasy movies and he uses sound bytes from the Simpsons on his show. He goes against the stereotype of a stuffy priest to show that spirituality is only part of a person's life and like other aspects, it's not all that defines somebody. This is a good thing to keep in mind when creating characters.

Faith is a personal matter. I'm more of a lapsed Christian myself and I'm certainly not trying to push religion by discussing it here. However, even if you aren't religious, these religious themes and stories can still be relevant. There are a lot of references from the Bible in Western literature and art, so it's part of our shared culture. The understanding of those references, even from a literary and mythology standpoint can help inspire story ideas.

If you're writing a story with aliens, one way to flesh out their world and their beliefs is to discover who their gods are and what their spiritual beliefs entail. Just looking at comparative religions from the various cultures here on Earth is fascinating; just imagine how an alien might envision their god. And just as with all our different religions, some people are going to be more willing to accept a different theology than others will be. That in itself can give some good ideas for drama and intrigue in a story.

This is beyond the scope of the topic of character-writing, but for those interested there are several books written in the science-fiction and fantasy genre from a religion viewpoint. Here are a few of these for the curious. I have not read them personally, but they've gotten good reviews and certainly sound interesting and compelling.

The Sparrow and the sequel Children of God

By Mary Doria Russell

The books tell of a Jesuit expedition to a planet for a first-contact with an alien species.

Infinite Space, Infinite God

Edited by Karina L. Fabian

A new anthology of science-fiction stories from a Catholic perspective.

Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Jewish Fantasy and Science Fiction

Edited by Jack Dann

An older anthology from the 1970s.