

## Central Casting

A lot of these columns start with, “A friend said...,” or, “A colleague mentioned...” This is not a literary device. One of the main reasons I’m a member of CWC is that I love to talk about writing. So...

Recently another writer and I were talking about a novel in progress (his). He was bemoaning the fact that a character was a witness to an event, and that now he’d need to write a whole back-story to explain that character.

Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

The fact is, if you are writing a story, any moment represents the intersection of countless plot lines and characters:

Eighteen people are on a bus late at night. Which do you follow? When do you get off the bus? Why? These choices are what make you a storyteller, a writer. You can choose to focus on any of them. But, unless you’re Leo Tolstoy, you can’t focus on *all* of them.

So how do you choose?

Try ‘casting’ your story.

Here’s what I mean:

We’ll assume you have a plot, and a central character... and that you have a compelling reason to tell your story. (Meaning, you think other people will take the time to read it — and will feel rewarded when they do.)

Now, characters seldom exist in a vacuum. I mean, even a single-person story like *The Old Man And The Sea* had the sea — and let’s not forget that fish! Which other characters are important?

Let’s imagine you have to hire, and pay, actors to play each of your characters.

People who are just seen are *Background*. They get paid \$100 for each scene they’re in. People who say anything are *Extras*. They get paid \$250 for each scene. People we ‘get to know’ are *Players*. They’re under contract, but cost some money: \$3,000. People who are fully developed, who have back-stories, who engage us emotionally, are *Principals*. These are high-ticket folks: \$10,000 apiece. And then you have your *Star* (maybe, *StarS*. Can you afford more than one at \$100,000 each?).

(Those of you who are in Screen Actors’ Guild

can tell I am not. It’s the principle that counts.)

I am going to give you a budget of half a million dollars to cast your story. You can spend it on anything you want, and whatever is left over you can use for food, rent, and single malt scotch. Keep in mind that you’re going to have to pay for locations, props, and sets, so use a ‘sharp pencil.’

Now, this may all seem artificial and unnecessary, but it is a good way to approach the subject of how much detail to include. As a writer, you may have unlimited time and attention, but I can assure you, your reader does not. Every time you introduce a character, a location, an incident, you are giving the reader more to deal with. Mostly, this is exactly what you want — but only if it serves your story.

We started by saying that, “a character was a witness to an event.” So let’s see how important this cast member is:

We’ll start by postulating he isn’t a *Star* or *Principal*. If he were, we would be wondering about this. So he’s either a *Player*, an *Extra*, or *Background*. Let’s be as frugal as possible.

Will we encounter this person again? Will we want or need to know more about him? Or do we just cross paths with him this one time? Maybe we can save the cost of a *Player*.

OK. So he’s an *Extra*, or even better, *Background*. Does he have lines? Do we need him to tell us what he saw? Or is he merely the anchor for a point of view. (“Across the street, a homeless man looked up just as the car careened through the restaurant window.”)

The fact is, if he only represents a point of view, we may not need him at all. (“The car careened through the restaurant window.”)

I know every word you write is precious. But unless you’re getting paid by the word (and your editor isn’t paying attention), it’s probably best to err on the side of economy. (And single malt scotch isn’t getting any cheaper.)

Years ago I wrote an epistolary novel (a story told entirely in correspondence) called, “Letters To J.” I recently re-read it. At one point, the writer says, “... Elrich just came in. I’ll have to finish later.”

I did a word search. Elrich is not mentioned anywhere else. There is no explanation of who he is or why he came in. Just that he did. I found this charming. And it lent a wonderful sense of reality to the work.

The fact is, as readers, we are usually voyeurs — eavesdroppers. (Yes, yes. There are exceptions. Shut up, you!) If we are sitting in a restaurant, and we overhear someone say, “Margaret told me the juiciest thing about Sean...”, we don’t expect the person to stop, turn to us and explain that Margaret is her second cousin, and Sean is Margaret’s son by a previous marriage.

As with perfume, sometimes a whiff is better than a bath.