

DEVELOPING SECONDARY CHARACTERS

By Dr. Lin Stepp

Characters are one of the seven major components of a story. A site on creative writing from Dakota State University lists these seven components as: *character, plot, setting, dialog, point of view, theme, and style*.

Different writing guides tend to categorize the characters in a book in different ways. Usually they are broken into two groups – *Primary* characters and *Secondary* characters. Primary characters in a romance include the hero and heroine and, sometimes, other major characters integral to the plot. The leading, primary characters in a book are often further identified as Protagonist or Antagonist. Protagonists are the proactive and positivist characters in the plot. They are usually likable and the story revolves around them. In most cases, in a romance, the hero and heroine are the primary protagonists. Antagonists are the negative, disturbing, and hindering characters in a story. They create conflict and represent the opposition that the protagonists must contend with. Antagonists do not have to be villains – they can just be characters that misunderstand, rival, wrongly judge, betray, or get in the way of the goals of the hero or heroine. How protagonists deal with the antagonists is often the central focus of a story.

There seem to be a lot of sources that discuss creating believable, vivid, compelling Primary characters. Because these characters are central to the story, authors spend an extensive amount of time developing the heroes and heroines of their books.

But what about the Secondary characters? Aren't they important, too? The answer is *Yes, Yes, Yes*. And, often, it is in the development and use of secondary characters where writers show weak skills.

As Primary means '*fundamental – standing first in importance*', Secondary means '*subordinate – coming next in rank*.' Being one-step removed from first place doesn't imply lack of importance. Secondary characters in all avenues of life are also memorable and often acclaimed. We give awards for best supporting actors and actresses. Silver and bronze medals are presented to second and third place Olympic athletes. Vice presidents, administrative assistants, sales staff, and other subordinate players in business organizations are often more well-remembered by us than the CEO.

Nick Vernon wrote that there is no story to tell without the main or Primary characters – readers read to find out what happens to them. However, I believe a good writer can also hook the reader's interest - and keep readers engaged and involved – with good secondary characters. Think of it in a psychological sense. It has often been written that 'we are a composite of all the people we have known and all the people who have impacted our lives.' Also, 'we are known by the company we keep.' Your secondary characters help to enrich and define your primary characters. And this can be done in several ways.

Secondary characters can be long-time friends, neighbors, associates, or family members that your primary characters have known for much of their lives. Because these secondaries know your primary characters well, they can be artfully used in dialog to reveal aspects of the main characters' personalities and backgrounds that the reader might not be privy to otherwise. Secondaries can define weaknesses and strengths in your primary characters that their point of view alone could never reveal.

In addition, secondary characters can be new individuals the primary characters are just coming to know – in a new home or work setting, through a move or life change, in the places your primary characters often frequent. Secondaries, in this sense, are true supporting cast to your hero or heroine. They can champion and aid your primary characters, help them to grow and change, or block and hinder your main characters in their ongoing growth and progress. Think of the host of people that fall into these categories in your own life: the work associate who is a pain in the ass; the negative, disparaging family member; the calm, logical friend you can always rely on to see things sensibly; the drama queen friend who rides every wave over-reactively on her emotions; the chatty gossip; the faithful sidekick. The list is endless.

In developing side characters keep in mind the ways in which they help to reveal your main characters' personalities and further your plot. Secondary characters should not be stuck in at random and without purpose. Debra Dix wrote that if secondaries are not contributing to the main characters or the plot, they should be removed.

As you research and plot your novels, spend quality time developing both your Primary and your Secondary characters. Think out the part your secondaries will play in helping to develop your story and in helping to enrich and develop your main characters. Be careful not to develop plastic, colorless stereotypes for your secondaries. You want real people as secondaries – their character, physical appearance, and lives well-developed. Your secondary characters, just like your hero and heroine, should have unique physical looks, expressions, gestures, and posture that speak of them whenever they appear. They should have well-planned lives and backgrounds that impact how they act, talk, believe, and respond. Secondaries need distinctive quirks, idiosyncrasies, habits, ticks, and mannerisms that make them memorable. They can grow along with your primary characters or they can provide consistency and remain the same, adding balance to your story.

Secondary characters can add color and life to your novels. They can be eccentric, humorous, riddled with problems, short-tempered, biased, pesky, foils to your main characters in looks and temperament. Unlike your hero and heroine in the book, they can come to a bad end. They can die or be killed; they can have a just fate for their failings.

In film, supporting actors and actresses are not supposed to upstage the main characters. This means you need to keep your secondary characters in a secondary role and not let them take over your story with problems and conflicts that are too intense. A good example of a novel with wonderful secondary characters is J. K. Rawlings' *Harry Potter*. Can you imagine the story without Ron and Hermione? Harry is consistently primary but his interactions with his two best friends in Rawlings' novels give continual opportunity for dialogue, drama, action, conflict, and plot development. As a reader of Rawlings' novels, you become (almost) as attached and concerned about what will happen to Ron and Hermione as you are about what will happen to Harry. The two are perfect foils in personality and temperament to Harry, the driving character.

In a romantic sense, consider the supporting roles developed in the film *You've Got Mail*. The viewer learns a lot about the heroine Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) through her interactions with her shop associates, Christina, Bertie, and George. Likewise, the viewer sees a softer side to aggressive businessman Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) in his interactions with his niece and nephew Annabel and Matthew.

This film also offers an excellent example of how impacting single, supporting, Secondary cameo appearances can be to a story. Remember the stalled elevator scene in the film? If you don't, rent the movie and look for it as you watch it again. Four characters, one primary, one secondary, and two cameo-secondaries, reflect on their lives as they are stranded in an elevator. Their reflections touch you as a viewer – and this scene deeply impacts the hero, Joe Fox, before the scene is finally played out.

Strong secondary characters often make the difference in a good book or a bad book. Strong secondaries, well-developed and well-used in a novel, send a good story to new heights. At the end of your book – you want your readers to hate to say goodbye to the characters you've created, to be left wondering what might happen to them next. You want the characters you've created – both the primary and the secondary characters – to linger on in your readers' minds. Apply equal effort to developing both effectively.

Dr. Lin Stepp is a native Tennessean, a businesswoman, and an educator. She is on faculty at Tusculum College where she teaches Psychology courses and a Research writing sequel. Her business background include over 20 years in marketing, sales, production art, and regional publishing. She and her husband, J.L, began their own sales and publications business, S & S Communications in 1989. The company publishes two regional fishing and hunting guide magazines and has a sports sales subsidiary handling sports product and media sales in East Tennessee. She has editorial and writing experience in regional magazines and in the academic field. Currently, Lin is writing a series of linked, contemporary regional romances set in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee. The first book in the series, entitled THE FOSTER GIRLS, is being published this spring by High Country, an imprint of Ingalls Publishing.