

The Importance of Backstory

by Linda Rohrbough

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If I had to point to one thing I've learned from the best-selling novelists I know, it would be the importance of backstory. I've heard novelists say the characters write the story. But when you're a new novelist, that doesn't make sense. How can the characters write the story when you don't know who the characters are yet?

There are the standard ways to work a story. Create conflict by putting two people together who have nothing in common. Have your main character face what they're most afraid of or lose what they want the most. Start the story at the point where the character's life changes forever. But all this means you know your character(s).

I've heard a lot about character sketches. These are those sheets of questions that ask you for names, descriptions, and then offer fill-in-the-blank questions about your story people. Once you pass the basics, the questions can get useless. Like what kind of ice cream do they like? What's their favorite color? You get the idea.

For me, a laundry list of stuff doesn't help me know what my character wants or what they're going to do in a situation. The real answer is to know their backstory. I've decided this is why the big names in fiction often write series novels. It isn't just because we enjoy a series. I think the pros write series books because it's efficient: the backstory work is already done after book one.

So what is backstory? I see it as the novel before the novel. The authors who coach me work out an entire story of things that happened before the story they're writing starts. The previous story explains that character carries a rabbit's foot in his pocket. Or

why a character always sets his watch ten minutes early. So when they write the current novel, not only do they know the story people, they can hook the reader with mentions of past events to bring in that element of mystery readers love.

And when I'm talking about backstory, I'm talking about those events, locations and people that shaped the character emotionally, molded them into who they are today. The backstory is some incident or event where the character made a life changing decision about how the universe, their universe, works. The richest stories are those with lots of backstory. And while we may not be told all of it, we know it's there.

In the great stories, we don't usually come in when trouble starts. Trouble has been brewing for years. Take *Silence of the Lambs* where both Hannibal Lector, psychiatrist and psychotic killer, and Clarice Starling, FBI agent, each have considerable backstory revealed as the story progresses. In a critical plot point, Starling reveals her vulnerability to enlist Lector's help catching another killer when she confesses a childhood memory of when the lambs stopped bleating. Which also gives the book its name.

Obviously Thomas Harris, the author, has done considerable work on the backstory. Note *Silence of the Lambs* is the second book featuring Hannibal Lector, the first being *Red Dragon*. It is revelation of the backstory which makes the mesmerizing plot question: will this obviously vulnerable and attractive young woman get the information from a brilliant, manipulative killer without risking her own life and sanity?

What I've found writing my own novels is if I do the backstory for each character as early as possible, the writing goes faster and easier. It can be painful at times to lay this groundwork. But when I get stalled writing, it's often because I have a backstory question

I must find an answer for. I will say, if you want a list of questions to answer about your characters, there are better questions to ask than the ones on the average character sketch list. Ask questions that have an emotional punch and figure out the tale behind the answer, such as what are they afraid of? What is in their medicine cabinet? What would they be embarrassed for you to find in their purse or car glove box?

Backstory work also offers the added benefit of enriching the novel with meaningful details. Suddenly quirks, setting tidbits, and small events are not just miscellaneous stuff—all of it has a reason. I believe the richness of weaving these details into the story for meaning on multiple levels is part of the craftsmanship and beauty of a well-done book.

So get into the history and resulting emotional baggage of your characters. Then you'll have your backstory and it'll make your work richer and the writing go faster.

Sidebar:

Backstory Tips

1. Make up incidents in your character's past where they made a decision about how life works.
2. Make sure the backstory has an emotional impact your character(s) carry coming into your book.
3. Time spent on working out your character's past will speed the writing of your story.

Biography:

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books and numerous awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Linda's newest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo, March 2008). Visit her website: www.LindaRohrbough.com.