

Meeting Your Character

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Sometimes when you sit down to write, a big snarling beast shows up. You start with a great idea for a character—a really cool one. You want your character to jump off the page so readers can picture this person. But then—*ROAR*—here comes the beast that clamps down on your head and stops the flow of your thoughts. You feel stuck. You feel blocked. Well, you have to shake that beast loose. Here's one idea to get your brain a-ticking again. Interview your character. Let him or her tell you what he or she looks like, talks like, and acts like.

See how one writer did it. He sat down with only a name and idea and came out with a whole sketch for a story.

Writer: Excuse me, Mr. Portipher? Can I talk to you for a minute or two, please?

Mr. Portipher: For you, sir? Of course. What can I do for you?

Writer: Excellent, thanks. Have a seat. So I was just wondering ... I'm writing this story about you, but I am still a little vague about your distinguishing characteristics.

Mr. Portipher: I am flattered, sir! What is the story about?

Writer: Well, it's about you, you see. Your life and how you lived it. Specifically, it focuses on the time when you were courting three ladies at once.

Mr. Portipher: You know about that? How could you possibly? Was it Brigitte who squealed?

Writer: No sir, not your wife. It was me. I created you all.

Mr. Portipher: Well, this is news! I suppose I should be outraged, but really I am just ... thankful to you. If my life is in your hands, you have done well, sir. But yes, I do look in the mirror sometimes and fail to see my face. I know my history well, through and through, but I do tend to wonder at what I actually look like.

Writer: Perhaps we can help each other. I'm not always great with details, but just having you here, sitting beside me, is very helpful indeed. Your visage is beginning to show through the haze.

Mr. Portipher: Yes, I see it more clearly now too. Wait ... I am British! Ha!

Writer: Yes, you are!

Mr. Portipher: And right now I am in my late 40s. My dashing rascal days are behind me, but the laugh lines have remained on my face and I still have a spark of danger in my heart.

Writer: Nice.

Mr. Portipher: Even though I am settled down at long last, my penchant for adventure still blooms.

Writer: Yes, yes, yes, that is all well and good, but you are talking about ideals—intangible things. I told you, I know who you are on the inside. Now I want to see you face-to-face.

Mr. Portipher: You're the writer, bub. I'm just the subject. ... But I can tell you one thing: I have always longed for a handlebar mustache.

Writer: Brilliant! It's yours!



Mr. Portipher: But not a sinister one. Too many villains have those sinister handlebar mustaches. They are constantly tweaking the ends to emphasize their dastardly deeds. No, I would like my handlebar mustache to be thicker than those of villains, and longer. Think of those bulked up twin heavyweights from those old Coney Island posters. Do you know who I mean?

Writer: I know precisely who you mean.

Mr. Portipher: Once you have my moustache perfected, you can build me around it. Go soft on the eyes. I have seen a lot of beautiful and terrible things in my lifetime, but my eyes are still as baby blue and genuine as the day I was born. In fact, I also have long eyelashes to shield the pain from my eyes, the windows of my soul.

Writer: Holy cow, you're a poet!

Mr. Portipher: Of course I am a poet! How do you think I managed to woo three women at once? With charm? Ha!

Writer: Go on. Tell me about the cane.

Mr. Portipher: Oh! I did not see that there. Bravo, sir. It is made from a great oak that my father cut down in our backyard when I was just a boy. I have never been hobbled or otherwise afflicted of the legs so that I would require the use of my cane. I just love its style. One of my favorite pastimes is to take a stroll down by the lake and twirl my cane, just so.

Writer: And your fancy clothes?

Mr. Portipher: Would you call them fancy? Funny, I never thought of them as such. I suppose I do come from money, but I try not to flaunt it. Do you think my pocket watch, chain, and fob are too much?

Writer: No sir, I think they suit you handsomely.

Mr. Portipher: And my top hat?

Writer: You could do without the top hat.

Mr. Portipher: Very well, I tend to agree with you. ... What's that? ... Oh. I hear my fair Brigitte calling for me. Suppertime, you know. It was a pleasure to meet you, sir. And I thank you once again for giving me this zealous life of mine. It really is a dandy.

Writer: You look marvelous, Mr. Portipher. Keep shining.



Tips for Capturing Real People In Your Writing

Become an expert on human behavior. Start by observing the people around you.

- Listen to the way people speak. Consider lending distinctive phrases and speech patterns to your characters.
- Look for telling details: facial expressions, clothing styles, and anything that makes the person unique.

