

**CHARACTER IS KING:
Five Essential Techniques for Making Yours Unforgettable
SAN FRANCISCO WRITERS CONFERENCE
February 15, 2014
DAVID CORBETT, INSTRUCTOR**

Imagine a woman in a grocery store at 10 A.M. dressed in evening wear: a cocktail dress, bolero jacket, opera gloves, a string of pearls, patent leather pumps. Her makeup is subtle and tastefully done, her hair neatly combed. She reaches for a can of peaches on a top shelf, straining, unable to get a grip. Glancing around, she sees no one able to offer assistance, stares once more at the unnerving peaches, then suddenly hikes up her skirt, notches the toe of her pump on a lower shelf and starts climbing as though up a rock face. Tongue between her teeth, reaching as far as she can, she wiggles her fingers, finally nudges one of the cans—it totters. Then falls. Several others tumble down with it. She jumps back down, shields her head from the avalanche—she may be hurt, but before anyone can get to her she very slowly drops to her knees, picks up two of the cans, clutches them to her chest, and begins to sob quietly.

There is no description of what this woman looks like beyond what she's wearing. We presume she's short, but her age, race, weight, height and so on are all unstated. But it's unlikely anyone who reads the previous paragraph will not form a distinct mental image of her.

What are the most important things that make that visualization and engagement possible—that make the depiction compelling?

- The character *needs or wants something*.
- She is *having difficulty getting what she needs or wants*, and comes up with *a plan for overcoming that difficulty*.
- She exhibits a seeming *contradiction*: she's dressed in evening wear at the grocery store at midmorning.
- Something unexpected happens (she makes a mistake), which renders her *vulnerable*. (She may even be hurt, enhancing this impression.)
- Her sobbing suggests there is more to her predicament than meets the eye—a *secret*.

More than any of the other considerations, these five concerns are key to any compelling character.

That doesn't mean we've uncovered the secret crazy magic formula, or that by methodically running down this checklist like the good student you no doubt are you've done all that's required to make a character leap off the page. Characters can't be crafted from a grab bag of traits, no matter how clever or interesting. That's a recipe for an idea, not a character.

That said, these five considerations can provide a touchstone as you work. Either while conceiving the character, writing the initial drafts or polishing a later edit, as you're evaluating the character you may ask yourself if any of these five qualities is missing, or underdeveloped. If so, consider providing such a trait, or bringing one already in existence into greater focus, to see if it resonates with the story, echoes other aspects of the characterization you've already developed, helps clarify or intensify interactions or conflicts with other characters, or in some other way enhances your depiction.

In doing so, try to explore more deeply your understanding of the following five issues:

- the nature and quality of desire—specifically, how pursuit of an external objective speaks to a deeper, inner yearning
- how profoundly frustration of one’s desires distorts the personality
- what it means to be wounded
- the curse and crutch of secrets
- the inescapability of contradiction

From that foundation you can move on to a more detailed examination of the physical, psychological, and sociological aspects of your character’s nature and the world she inhabits.