5

CREATING CHARACTER

Love all your characters.

There is no "story" if readers don't care about your characters. Before a reader will care, you need to feel passionately loyal to each and every one of your characters. Even a character who abuses and hurts others needs to be loved enough to be understood.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* Cholly Breedlove is the perfect example of a despicable character who is rendered compassionately. Drunk, alienated, overwhelmed by his own self-loathing, Cholly rapes his daughter. Confusing the image of his daughter's foot with a happier memory of loving his wife, the horrible, incestuous touch occurs. But his *motive* was to touch her tenderly.

Even as readers hate Cholly, hate the brutality of his actions, they also feel sympathy because Morrison, in prior scenes, has *shown* Cholly, as a child, abandoned by his mother and later rejected by his

father; *shown* Cholly being forced to perform sexually under the flash-light glare of racists who damage his innocent first love; *shown* how money worries, falsely romantic movies, and a punitive religion drove a wedge between the love he and his wife once shared. Cholly, a "burnt-out black man," can't "breed love" because society, over a lifetime, has poisoned his life's soil. He has no nurturing, sustaining love left to give. When Cholly rapes, we won't, don't excuse his actions, but we do mourn for him as well as for his daughter. Because Morrison cared enough about Cholly to understand him fully, she reveals him with powerful empathy.

Human behavior *is* complex; it is the writer's journey to explore the human heart and in doing so you have the pleasure of discovering more about your own heart and revealing your insights through characters. It is this fundamental sharing between writer and reader—of thought, feeling, and action—which gives fiction its power and force.

Zora Neale Hurston's Janie, in talking of her dying love for her husband, Jody, says *"she wasn't petal-open anymore with him."* Characters may love, hate, be spiteful with abandon, but a good writer always remains "petal-open." If you no longer "love" your characters or feel compelled to write about them, then stop. Without love, you are almost certain to write flat, one-dimensional characters.

MY BEST ADVICE

Approach your characters as human beings.

Black people are subject to the same human foibles as anyone else. If you're writing about a strong, wondrous black woman, be certain to shade her with vulnerabilities, weaknesses. Characters, like people, are never consistently "strong," "nice," "evil," "considerate," "beautiful"—all the time. In *Voodoo Dreams,* Marie Laveau—a gifted, spiritual leader, a woman who could walk on water—struggled with self-pity and doubted she was lovable. Because I didn't want Marie to be a "character type," a one-dimensional being, I overdid her vulnerabilities. Three hundred pages later, to my dismay, I had a novel about a pathetic, victimized young woman. I revised, working to give Marie

back her glory, her affirmations of self. Ultimately, there were many Maries: the warrior Marie; the spirited, questing Marie; the battered, weeping Marie; the vengeful Marie; the shy Marie. I hope my Marie expresses, often like quicksilver, as many human emotions as she could credibly hold.

Historically, in American literature and popular culture, African Americans have been presented as variations of key stereotypes: the Brute Negro, quick to violence, desirous of white women; the Mammy, nurturing, loyal to her white family, and seemingly without emotional needs of her own; the Black Matriarch, emasculating and domineering; the Tragic Mulatto, vulnerable, victimized, and more virtuous because of her white blood; the Sambo, childish, unintelligent, interested only in singing and dancing; and the Uncle Tom, obedient, desirous of emulating whites, and disinterested in the plight of his people. Stereotypes are one-dimensional characters and are a blatant attempt by society to dehumanize and oppress.

We've all heard the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In my mind, this rule applies to literature. No person should be dehumanized. An evil character, regardless of color, created with compassion is infinitely preferable to an evil character created without understanding and without potential for change.

Unfortunately, two hundred years of racism and acculturation have had their effect. Color prejudice within the black community is a result of slavery's legacy and an early literary tradition which fostered the belief that the light-skinned, straight-haired Negro would always be more tragic than her darker cousin. Likewise, standard English versus black dialect became a code by which to judge people's intelligence both in fiction and in life.

Be conscious of your characters' appearance and speech and make sure you aren't responding to outdated, harmful images. As a writer, you choose to describe characters as you see fit. The key word is "choose." Unfortunately, it's the unconscious insidiousness of racism and American schools' historic disregard for ethnic literature that force writers to be on guard.

White American writers in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and (let's be frank) twentieth centuries would announce color as though

"brown," "black," "yellow," "amber," "ebony," "coffee," "café au lait," "chocolate," "cinnamon" explained all you needed to know about a character. If a color adjective was left out, then, of course, the character was white.

When I wrote my first story for a fiction workshop, classmates chastised me: "Why didn't you tell me your characters were black?" They had wanted a page one, paragraph one clarification!

Character is much more than an announcement of skin tone, and color should never be confused with cultural identity. My cultural identity is African American, but it doesn't exclude or bar me from writing about my larger human family, which is a spectrum of myriad colors.

Like jazz artists playing with variations, African American authors took the singular dimensions of stereotypes and debunked them by re-creating and replacing those images with multifaceted characterizations.

Characters are created by situations and responses, by a writer's willingness to engage in complexity. Muhdear in Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways* fits no simplistic pattern of motherhood; J. California Cooper's mothers in the short stories "Friends, Anyone?" and "I Told Him" are living, breathing, hurting, "trying to get by" women. Ernest Gaines has a glorious record of presenting complex women—sometimes outspoken, sometimes taciturn—surviving as best they can and often far better than racism wants to allow.

Black writers have transformed the image of singing, dancing, happy slaves into musicians whose artistic power can plumb the depths of pain, as in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," or praise music as joyful liberation from Western cultural aesthetics, as in Langston Hughes's "The Blues I'm Playing."

Indeed, matriarchs and musicians have a special resonance in our literature; they can be called "stock characters." Stock characters (not to be confused with stereotypes) are characters who reappear throughout black literature, uniquely drawn and reimagined by successive generations. Drawing from our oral tradition, authors have made tricksters, preachers, and badmen/outlaws familiar stock characters. It is okay to use stock characters—all cultures have them and create them

to embody cultural themes and concerns. Minor characters, in particular, can be rendered efficiently as stock characters. However, as a writer, it always pays to add complexity to as many characters as you can to avoid stereotypes.

Slaves told tales of how tricksters outwitted their masters and upset the balance of racial power. In 1899, Charles Chesnutt created Uncle Julius, a trickster, who in a series of tales subversively criticizes slavery's horrors. Ishmael Reed's *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) features PaPa LaBas as a voodoo trickster detective. Some of the earliest tricksters were animal characters—Bruh Rabbit, Anansi the spider, Lizard—who survived via oral folktales and folk literature throughout Africa and the Americas. These animals, usually small and sly, used combinations of magic, wit, and cunning to outwit larger, more powerful animals. In the African American literary tradition, these animal tricksters developed into human stock characters who defended themselves against slavery's and racism's ills. Today, almost any black character who outwits the system, trumps the "master," is, in a sense, a descendant of the trickster.

The folk hero Stackolee (also known as Staggerlee, Stagolee), sung and talked about since the 1890s, is a badman who hates and lives outside conventional norms. Because he lost his Stetson hat while gambling, Stackolee kills a man. In differing tales and songs, the sheriff refuses to capture him, or the judge refuses to convict him, or the hangman refuses to hang him for fear Stackolee will get even. The badman becomes an "antihero" because he is *"anti-," against, trying to live outside a society which typically oppressed black men.* Though their actions aren't always laudable, badmen can be envied for their audacious moments of power and control. Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is a quintessential badman. He lives outside societal norms because a racist society has made so little space for him to be a man. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* shows the societal anger and self-hatred of a "badman" but also shows the courageous transformation of a black man re-creating himself and a space within the world for him to become the man he desires.

Preachers are often infamous stock characters, satirized for immorality, sexual promiscuity, and lack of Christian compassion. Nella

Larsen's *Quicksand,* James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place,* all have examples of preachers who don't live Christian principles or who use Christianity to encourage passive acceptance of prejudice. These stock characters become powerful tools to remind us that faith needs to be sincerely lived.

The ancestor is another familiar character in African American literature. This moral and spiritual guide can be either a man or a woman, but quite frequently in our fiction, an elderly character, a ghost, or a spirit from an African or long-ago past gives critical advice to confused, struggling characters. Baby Suggs in *Beloved* encourages black people to love themselves. McMillan's Ma'Dear is a wise old woman with good advice about life, love, and paying the bills. The grandmother in Mildred Taylor's classic *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* always supplies comfort and nurturing support to the family struggling to maintain itself in the 1950s South.

You can't always develop all characters equally, but you should try. Inexperienced writers tend to make all their characters one-dimensional. Be bold, experiment, create characters who will live always within your story and, most important, within your readers' minds and hearts.

Sometimes a character walks in the door as a gift; most times they tantalize. You have to spend enough time to know your character. You'll need to draw upon your self, your memories, your observations. Selecting a character for a story is one of the most important choices you'll make.

Who intrigues you? Aunt Sarah, who never comes to family gatherings?

Whom do you feel passionate about? The ex-lover who disappeared without a goodbye?

Whom do you imagine? The Howard student who stumbled upon a senator's body at K Street and L?

Sometimes the best characters are composites based upon people you know. But don't try to model exactly a real person (that's how lawsuits are born). A fiction writer's job is to tell great lies which make a great story. Even a real person has thoughts and feelings which you must imagine.

Remember: The stuff of your imagination is probably more promising than reality.

EXERCISE 1

DUST INTO FLESH

In your journal, select a name for a character you'd like to write about.

For example, Anita. An Anita is different from a Barbara, a Lorraine, or an Elsa. A Jerome is unlike a Terrence, a Bobby, or a James.

A name makes a character real. So does history. Write down details about your character's past: When and where was she (or he) born? What are her parents' names? Was she a wanted child? Is she the only child, eldest child, or baby of the family? What are her parents' attitudes toward raising children? How much schooling does she have? Who was her first love? First enemy? What was her greatest fear growing up? Her best talent?

Write down details about your character's current life: Is she married? Does she practice a faith? Where does she shop? What's her profession? Her hobbies? Is she a mother? An activist? Is she inside or outside a network of friends?

What is a typical day like? Chances are you'll be writing about an untypical day, so decide what your character normally does. On Thursday, does your character eat at Jones's Deli? Work a night shift at the hospital? Or meet with a women's group to discuss books? What are her daily rituals? Rising at dawn for coffee and Frosted Flakes, then a bus ride with three transfers to work? Or does she sleep late, making the kids ready themselves for school, then awaken in time for aerobics and lunch with her friend Martha?

What does your character look like? You needn't list details as if you were writing a police report or printing a driver's license! Instead

think of physical details which make your character striking and unforgettable. It may be her elegant hands, the way she moves or doesn't move through a crowded room, the slope of her neck or a rose-shaped birthmark on her shoulder.

What clothing does your character wear? What does she want it to say about her? That she's rich, stylish? What does it actually say about her? That she's a rich wannabe buying top-of-the-line Kmart instead of designer fashion? Colors and patterns can indicate moods and suggest fashion attitudes—black fabric has a different appeal than purple-striped silk or an indigo-and-gold batik.

Clothing tells a lot about your character's income group, self-esteem, and style, but it can also delightfully deceive. *Pierce Watson is affluent but prefers to wear Keds sneakers, Levi's, a Pirates baseball cap, and a torn green sweatshirt.*

Consider physical habits too—how your character smiles, laughs, tilts her head when she's angry. Does she sleep on her stomach? Eat her food item by item, starting with the vegetables?

Take thirty minutes and complete a character sketch.

Reread all the information you've written about your character so far. Would you know her if she walked into a room?

While all the details you've written are important in helping you visualize and understand your character, not all of the details will be directly used in the story. Using a highlighter, mark those details which might be critical to the plot—to what happens to your character in the story. For example, your character's love for exotic travel may not matter as much as her small (but, she believes, disfiguring) mole on her left cheek and her hatred of her daily ninety-minute commute on the D.C. subway (where she believes everybody stares at her and mocks her).

EXERCISE 2

BREATHING IN THE SPIRIT

Characterization is only half done until you've breathed spirit, soul into your character. Characters must have an interior life: desires, dreams, needs, fears.

What does your character desire? Love? Money? Friendship? Revenge? What does your character dream about? What are his fantasies and daydreams? What dreams are repressed? What nightmares wake him? What does your character truly need? Literacy? Freedom from self-doubt? A kind word?

Write at least two pages about the emotional, inner life of the character you sketched in Exercise 1. Pretending you are the character, you can begin with strong "I" statements or else begin with the character's name. This exercise will allow you to really feel, breathe, and experience the character.

Anita wants [I want]____________________

I need____________________

I fear____________________

I dream____________________

Desires/dreams/needs can and do overlap. But characters can also desire and dream about one thing only to discover they need something else. For example, in Alice Walker's story "The Wedding," a single mother is marrying, fulfilling her dream to give her children respectability and security. But what she desires is love and equality. During the wedding service, the character realizes her marriage will be repressive, patriarchal. What she needs is the courage to free herself from the relationship. But she can't.

• • •

Circle the overlapping desires/dreams/needs you see in your character sketch. Then underline any emotions which are at odds with each other. For example, a character dreams of being a musician but needs cocaine. Or an abused character may believe she has no desires, that she is "a speck of nothing," only to discover she needs to dream in order to survive.

Desires/dreams/needs give your characters depth and complexity. Your character's interior life will shape her motivations and how she might respond to choices and crises within your story.

Review all the information you've written about your character. What needs does she have that you're sympathetic to? Are you challenged by similar insecurities, dreams, hopes? What is your emotional stake in writing about your character? Why do you feel compelled to write about this character as opposed to any other?

In your journal, write at least a paragraph (preferably more) about how and why you connect with your character emotionally.

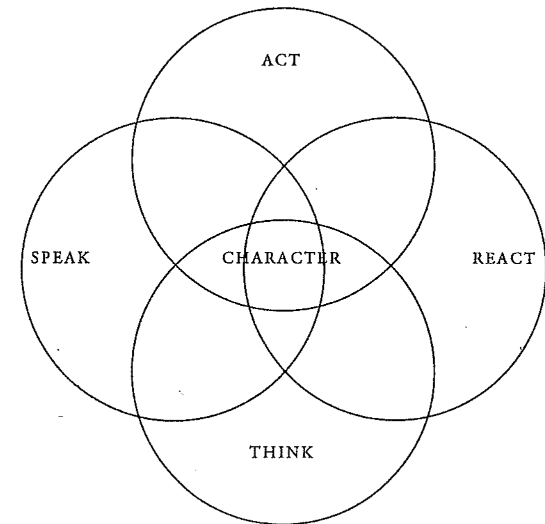
Name, current life and past history, appearance, feelings and desires all create the foundation for great characterization. Add in your emotional bond and you'll breathe life into your characters, making them memorable, transforming them from "dust to flesh."

EXERCISE 3

MOVING SPIRIT AND BONES

Now that you've birthed your characters by giving them a history and an appearance (flesh and bones) and a spirit (an emotional life), you need them to move, to "express themselves" in order to be fully realized and alive.

CHARACTERS
ACT—REACT—THINK—SPEAK



In *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine,* Bebe Moore Campbell creates a vivid portrait:

> The tall younger man hit him, a heavy open-palm slap that struck against his head. Armstrong fell down in a daze. "What did I do?" he asked. He tried to get up, but his legs seemed to lock and then buckle. When he finally regained his balance and was able to stand, the man knocked him down again and began kicking him in his stomach, his chest, his head.
>
> Nobody said anything. Armstrong repeated, "What did I do?" He began to cry, but the yelping dogs, their barking growing louder and more frenzied, drowned out his sobbing. He curled up like a baby, trying to avoid the blows. . . .
>
> What could he do to make them stop? What did they want of him? Armstrong remembered bullies in the Chicago schoolyard where he had attended grammar

school and thought of the bloodless scuffles over lunch money. And then he remembered the two ten-dollar bills in his pocket. "I have some money," he said weakly.

". . . You got money, nigger? You think that makes you good as me?" . . .

Armstrong tried to say no, to mouth the word, but his lips were so sore and swollen he couldn't move them. They were going to kick his ass, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. One, two, three . . . By the time I count to a hundred, he thought, they'll be gone and Grandma will be here and she'll fix me up. Four, five, six . . . The moonlight revealed something shiny in Floyd's hand. A gun. I'm seeing things, he told himself.

The air around him was completely silent; the dogs, the crickets, the wind, were all still. He couldn't hear himself breathing; his tears suspended, as though his sobs were dammed up in his chest, rolling around like furious ocean waves. "Please, mister," he managed to whisper. When he looked in Floyd's eyes he saw pain, rage, and loathing, but no mercy. "Mama," he cried.

Because Armstrong is a child, his actions are limited. "I have some money" is his bid to change his destiny, his act of survival. If Armstrong were an adult, if he truly was "arm strong," he would perhaps fight back. But Armstrong's bewildered actions are consistent with the survival response of a child. He begs for mercy, cries for his mother, wishes for the comfort and care of his grandmother, and he counts, believing counting might magically make his reality fade. Armstrong is not transformed by superhero powers, nor does he suddenly find the strength, mentally or physically, to outwit his captors.

Remember: well-drawn characters must always be consistent and credible within the range of who they are.

Unlike actions, which have the potential to effect change, reactions are more passive. Most of all, Armstrong *reacts:* he falls, curls up like a baby, sobs. Even his dialogue: "What did I do?" is passive and

questioning, rather than a bold, assertive fact: "I didn't do anything." Armstrong's thoughts: "What could he do to make them stop? What did they want of him?" underscore his naive innocence. An adult might disclaim guilt, but a child always suspects himself to be guilty of something.

Reread Campbell's excerpt again. With a pencil, cross out Armstrong's thoughts. How significant is the loss? Does Armstrong seem less vulnerable? Less real? Next, delete Armstrong's dialogue. How vivid is Armstrong when you can't hear his voice? Next, cross out Armstrong's actions, his reactions. The scene no longer makes any sense. Armstrong has disappeared, his spirit and bones have fallen apart; the character we care about no longer lives.

Using a character created in the previous exercises, imagine a scene in which your character is responding to a specific event or person. Because you already know your character's history, appearance, and emotional life, you are much more likely to "breathe life" into your character in a credible, consistent manner.

Write a two-page scene emphasizing your character's actions, reactions, thoughts, and speech. Do these aspects have to be created in equal measure? No. Sometimes a character may *not think* but impulsively respond. Speech can be limited during a bank heist or tender love scene. A prisoner, arms and legs chained, may only be capable of limited actions/reactions to a sentencing. However, characters will be more vivid if you use as many character-building techniques as you can.

Remember: characters **act, react, think, and speak.**

Reread your scene. Revise it, imagining how a reader first meeting your character might respond. What other actions/reactions would make your character more vital and distinct? Can you add any thoughts/words which would reveal desires, secrets, needs? Which would encourage empathy? Which would make the character seem so real a reader could recognize her walking down the street or in a crowded lobby?

. . .

Invite your characters into your life. If you let them, they'll guide you to shape better stories.

Character is the essence and foundation of fiction.

CHARACTERIZATION STUDY

EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S "NEW YORK DAY WOMEN"

Read the following story. Take out your journal and record your reactions to the characters. Try to express what you think Danticat did as a writer which made the characters alive and three-dimensional.

TODAY, WALKING DOWN the street, I see my mother. She is strolling with a happy gait, her body thrust toward the DON'T WALK sign and the yellow taxicabs that make forty-five-degree turns on the corner of Madison and Fifty-seventh Street.

I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering into Chanel and Tiffany's and gawking at the jewels glowing in the Bulgari windows. My mother never shops outside of Brooklyn. She has never seen the advertising office where I work. She is afraid to take the subway, where you may meet those young black militant street preachers who curse black women for straightening their hair.

Yet, here she is, my mother, whom I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house.

Would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat? In this state of mind, I bet you don't even give up your seat to a pregnant lady.

My mother, who is often right about that. Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times, I don't. It all depends on how pregnant the woman is and whether or not she is with her boyfriend or husband and whether or not *he* is sitting down.

As my mother stands in front of Carnegie Hall, one taxi driver yells to another, "What do you think this is, a dance floor?"

My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the street.

In Haiti when you get hit by a car, the owner of the car gets out and kicks you for getting blood on his bumper.

My mother, who laughs when she says this and shows a large gap in her mouth where she lost three more molars to the dentist last week. My mother, who at fifty-nine says dentures are okay.

You can take them out when they bother you. I'll like them. I'll like them fine.

Will it feel empty when Papa kisses you?

Oh no, he doesn't kiss me that way anymore.

My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on Channel 11 without ever having played the numbers.

A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage, and your father could stop driving that taxicab all over Brooklyn.

I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts. Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building.

My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone.

If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.

My mother, who talks to herself when she peels the skin off poultry.

Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermine.

My mother, who makes jam with dried grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam. My mother, whom I have always bought household appliances for, on her birthday. A nice rice cooker, a blender.

I trail the red orchids in her dress and the heavy faux leather bag on her shoulders. Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet.

As she heads toward the Plaza Hotel, a bicycle messenger swings so close to her that I want to dash forward and rescue her, but she stands dead in her tracks and lets him ride around her and then goes on.

My mother stops at a corner hot-dog stand and asks for something. The vendor hands her a can of soda that she slips into her bag. She stops by another vendor selling sundresses for seven dollars each. I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size. I think to myself, Please, Ma, don't buy it. It would be just another thing I would bury in the garage or give to Goodwill.

Why should we give to Goodwill when there are so many people back home who need clothes? We save our clothes for the relatives in Haiti.

Twenty years we have been saving all kinds of things for the relatives in Haiti. I need the place in the garage for an exercise bike.

You are pretty enough to be a stewardess. Only dogs like bones.

This mother of mine, she stops at another hot-dog vendor's and buys a frankfurter that she eats on the street. I never knew that she ate frankfurters. With her blood pressure, she shouldn't eat anything with sodium. She has to be careful with her heart, this day woman.

I cannot just swallow salt. Salt is heavier than a hundred bags of shame.

She is slowing her pace, and now I am too close. If she turns around, she might see me. I let her walk into the park before I start to follow again.

My mother walks toward the sandbox in the middle of the park. There a woman is waiting with a child. The woman is wearing a leotard with biker's shorts and has small weights in her hands. The woman kisses the child good-bye and surrenders him to my mother, then she bolts off, running on the cemented stretches in the park.

The child given to my mother has frizzy blond hair. His hand slips into hers easily, like he's known her for a long time. When he raises his face to look at my mother, it is as though he is looking at the sky.

My mother gives this child the soda that she bought from the vendor on the street corner. The child's face lights up as she puts a straw in the can for him. This seems to be a conspiracy just between the two of them.

My mother and the child sit and watch the other children play in the sandbox. The child pulls out a comic book from a knapsack with Big Bird on the back. My mother peers into his comic book. My mother, who taught herself to read as a little girl in Haiti from the books that her brothers brought home from school.

My mother, who has now lost six of her seven sisters in Ville Rose and has never had the strength to return for their funerals.

Many graves to kiss when I go back. Many graves to kiss.

She throws away the empty soda can when the child is done with it. I wait and watch from a corner until the woman in the leotard and biker's shorts returns, sweaty and breathless, an hour later. My mother gives the woman back her child and strolls farther into the park.

I turn around and start to walk out of the park before my mother can see me. My lunch hour is long since gone. I have to hurry back to work. I walk through a cluster of joggers, then race to a *Sweden Tours* bus. I stand behind the bus and take a peek at my mother in the park. She is standing in a circle, chatting with a group of women who are taking other people's children on an afternoon outing. They look like a Third World Parent-Teacher Association meeting.

I quickly jump into a cab heading back to the office. Would Ma have said hello had she been the one to see me first?

As the cab races away from the park, it occurs to me that perhaps one day I would chase an old woman down a street by mistake and that old woman would be somebody else's mother, who I would have mistaken for mine.

Day women come out when nobody expects them.

Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about Ma's age.

My mother, who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me.

I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen.

My mother, who had me when she was thirty-three—*l'âge du Christ*—at the age that Christ died on the cross.

That's a blessing, believe you me, even if American doctors say by that time you can make retarded babies.

My mother, who sews lace collars on my company softball T-shirts when she does my laundry.

Why, you can't you look like a lady playing softball?

My mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was in school.

You're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me? I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt.

Clearly Danticat loves both her characters: the mother and the daughter.

Like a fine writer, the daughter in "New York Day Women" is an excellent observer. Through her observations, we come to "see" and "know" her mother.

In your journal, answer the following questions:

- What does the mother look like? Why doesn't Danticat give us all the physical details at once? What is gained by giving these details gradually?
- What do we know about the mother's history? Her memories? Her habits?
- Buying hot dogs, sewing lace collars on a softball uniform, watching the lottery drawing but never playing, never visiting her daughter's work, all mean something. What do these actions say about the mother's character? What do her reactions to the bicycle messenger, the white child, the taxi drivers say about her?
- Though the mother doesn't speak directly in the story, Danticat nonetheless lets us hear her voice. *"Oh, no, he doesn't kiss me that way anymore." "Many graves to kiss when I go back."* Examine the mother's dialogue. How do her comments deepen her character? Tell us more about her?

The daughter is an interesting character. Her main action is following her mother on her lunch hour and near the story's end she decides to give up her seat on the subway to a pregnant lady or someone about her mother's age. What does this decision mean? How is this decision based upon the daughter's reactions to her mother? Reread the story, paying careful attention to the daughter's reactions, thoughts about, and speech with her mother. What do you learn about the daughter?

Danticat's story *shows* us a great deal about the mother and daughter in a brief amount of time. What is the history between the

two women? How far apart is the Haitian immigrant mother and her Americanized daughter? How close are they?

The more typical mother/daughter actions/reactions are absent. The daughter doesn't walk up and say "Hi, Mom." Instead, the daughter is, literally, spying on her mother and the two women never once meet.

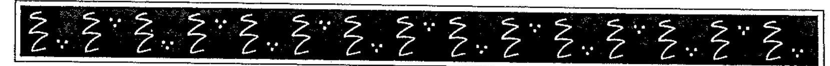
Danticat's characters are neither typical nor stereotypical; they are complex, multidimensional people with actions, reactions, thoughts, and speech captured on the page.

In your journal, write a paragraph about what you have learned about characterization reading Danticat's story.

Revise the characterization you wrote in Exercise 2, adding and developing other qualities of your character.

Readers *want* to become involved in characters' lives. Readers *want* thoughts and feelings. Readers *want* you to create successful stories about what it means to be human.

Celebrate your new understanding of characterization!



6

CREATING PLOT

Character drives plot.

Plot happens; it is the action, the sequence of events in your story. Action disconnected from character is bound to fail. An erupting volcano, while interesting, becomes terrifying when readers fear for the young boy trapped by it. A moonlit romantic evening is insignificant without star-crossed lovers. High school rituals lack comedy if we don't care about the too tall girl anxious about college, her latest outbreak of acne, and finding a date for the senior prom. Once readers care about characters, they'll want to know what happens to them next.

The best plots never run smoothly. As a writer, loving your characters also means, paradoxically, putting them at risk. Risk is generated by plot conflict—specific obstacles, trials, challenges to your characters' emotional, spiritual, psychological, and/or physical well-being.

Sexual conflicts, family conflicts, cultural conflicts, money con-