John Brown – the author's official site » Blog Archive » The Key Conditions for Reader Suspense Part 2: Character

In the last part in this series we discussed the idea that readers don't want your characters to be happy. They want them to hunted, stressed, threatened, freaked, and nigh unto some horrible fate for 90% of the novel. At that point, after all that trouble, readers want the characters to pull victory out of the jaws of defeat, exhale a big sigh of relief, and enjoy a Slurpee . . . until the next book in the series.

All through the big worry, readers don't want to know what WILL happen. They want to know or suspect what MIGHT happen and HOPE and FEAR about those possibilities. And then they want a cathartic resolution of all that hope and fear, all that dramatic tension they have felt.

But our readers won't hope and fear for just anyone. They will only hope and fear for those characters who evoke sympathy and interest. And so the second set of Pareto factors focus on the things, the conditions that do this.

Pareto Factor 1: Troubles

Sympathy starts when we see someone in trouble. That's not the only thing that's required. Some people who are in terrible trouble only evoke pity or even antipathy. So there's more to this than trouble, but trouble is where sympathy starts. So what kind of trouble are we talking about? I like the categories James Scott Bell uses. We feel sympathy for people who are:

- In jeopardy or experiencing hardship
- Are underdogs
- Are vulnerable

When someone is in jeopardy, it means some significant aspect of their happiness is being threatened. Hum, sounds suspiciously like the first type of story problem I discussed in the last post, doesn't it? That's because it is. We have sympathy for people who are being threatened with death, slavery, drudgery, etc. We're just wired for it. Likewise, we feel for someone experiencing a hardship. And a "hardship" is simply someone having to deal with a lack, the second type of problem we discussed. So we begin to evoke reader sympathy by just giving our characters significant problems to deal with.

And you can pile the problems on so that not only does our hero have to deal with the central problem of the story, but maybe he's also broke and has nothing but one box of macaroni and cheese in the cupboard, or his car just got repossessed, or he's just been

dumped by his girlfriend, or he and his daughter are estranged because his ex-wife is pouring poison in her ear, or he breaks his arm, or he works in an awful job.

Do you remember Peter Parker in Spiderman 2? He gets fired from his pizza job, has no money, is losing his girl. Lots of hardship. And lots of reader sympathy.

But giving characters problems is not quite enough. Because if you recall, the readers want to fear for our characters. Nobody fears too much for someone else if we know that they can easily resolve any threat or hardship that comes their way. And so we need to stack the odds against the character. They need to be underdogs.

This means that the opposition starts off two steps ahead. It means they have more power, more resources, or more information. This is why strong antagonists make strong stories —they help the reader to fear for our protagonists.

Who worries about a Superman who is a hunk of burning love? Nobody. Unless he's actually Clark Kent in other matters and stands to lose something like Lois. Or, when he is Superman, someone hangs kryptonite around his neck and turns him into a dweeb.

In this same vein, our characters need to be vulnerable. This means they can be squashed at any time. They can be shot, killed, ruined. Until the very end, the reader must know the characters can lose big. In the previous post, I said that problems have to be hard to solve, otherwise readers don't worry. The things that make problems hard to solve are character limitations, ongoing and increasing troubles, conflicts, and surprises. All of those factors make characters vulnerable as well.

So, threaten your characters will all sorts of things, give them hardships, make them vulnerable underdogs, and we'll feel sympathy for them.

Or will we?

There are some characters with problems who we don't want to root for. Instead, we hope they fail. Villains, for example, have problems, but we root against them with vigor. In our minds, these folks deserve to fail. So you can't rely on problem alone. There's another quality that your characters must evoke if we're going to hope and fear for them.

That other quality is deservingness.

Pareto Factor 2: Deservingness (likeability)

All of us have an automatic scale of justice inside of us. We can't turn it off. Nor can we ignore it. It's very simple. If someone's bad outweighs their good, then we think they don't deserve good things. Conversely, if someone's good outweighs their bad, we think they should be happy.

Don't believe me? Fine, let's test it.

A boy breaks his arm and he whines, whines, whines about it all day long. Tells his teachers he can't do his school work because of it. Mopes at home in front of the TV. Steals his sister's money to buy candy because he has this awful injury and he deserves it. Maybe he makes all his friends listen to him talk about how hard it is, and he just goes on and on and on.

You know exactly what you're thinking. You know exactly how much sympathy you have for him, which is none.

Another boy has a broken arm. But this one doesn't whine. In fact, when his dad falls ill, he goes out and with the one good arm, and in pain, mucks out the horse stalls. He does this because his dad was going to lose his job if he didn't. Then the boy comes back in and cleans himself up and doesn't say a thing.

You like that second boy? You want good things for him?

Of course, you do.

Problems aren't enough. They're only half the equation. For us to root for someone, we have to feel they're deserving. Or if you like the term better, you can say they need to be "likeable."

So what makes someone deserving or likeable?

That's going to be slightly different for each person because our moral codes are all slightly different. If you feel it's a sin to kill animals, you might feel conflicted reading a story about a rancher who needs to get his cattle to slaughter. If you feel unions do nothing but harm, you might throw down a book that's about a union boss trying to force a corporation into compliance. Nevertheless, there are many virtues and vices that people hold in common. Usually, we feel people are deserving if they weigh more on the one side of the table below than they do the other.

Deserving / Likeable	Not Deserving / Unlikeable
- Unselfish, do nice things for others - Stand up for little guy - Funny - Sacrifice for someone else - Good-humored, don't take themselves too seriously - Courageous - Hard-working - Actively trying to fix their own problems - Hopeful - Etc.	- Selfish - Bully others - Dull - Whining - Cowardly - Take themselves too seriously - Sanctimonious and self-righteous - Lazy, only want to snivel or groan about their problems - Sad sacks - Etc.

We tend to like people more who show the characteristics on the left side. We tend to dislike people who show the characteristics on the right side.

Now, this doesn't mean our characters have to be paragons of virtue. Remember that this is a scale. Just as long as the characters tip the scales one way, we will feel they're deserving. Likewise, if they cross the line the other way, we'll turn against them.

For example, let's say your lead character is a thief who steals money from retired folks. But in your story she's trying to save a kid from being kidnapped and sold into the sex slave trade. Yeah, our character may be a thief, but what she's doing outweighs the bad, and we're going to root for her.

Now let's make our lead a child molester. He's trying to capture a brutal drug cartel murderer who has just escaped prison. Along the way he has his will with a few children.

Who are you rooting for this time?

Yeah, me too. I hope the murderer finds the child molester and offs him. Or at least alerts the authorities to his crime and ties him up in a neat package for them to pick up.

So you don't have to have perfect people as your leads. In fact, it's sometimes more interesting to have someone with foibles just like the rest of us. But when those foibles turn into things we find despicable, we'll turn against those characters.

And vice versa. For those of you who have read or watched *Pride & Prejudice*, did you notice how you rooted against Mr. Darcy when we interpreted his actions as smug condescension? The moment he changed, and we learned of it, we cheered for him. It was all a matter of deservingness.

If we want to hope and fear for our characters, they need troubles. But they also need to weigh in on the deserving side of our scale of justice. When they do, they become admirable, likeable, heroic.

In fact, heroes, the ones that make us stand up and cheer, are those people that put their own happiness at risk to do the "right" thing. They're the very embodiment of deservingness.

So make your characters admirable in some way, if only just a little bit.

Still, we're not done yet. We might have characters who are completely deserving, but they are so boring we can't muster any interest in them. And that brings us to the third Pareto factor.

Pareto Factor 3: Interest

We want to hope and fear for a character for 90% of the novel. But will you stick around if

the characters are utterly boring? Probably not. So you want to make your characters interesting. Heck, sometimes we don't need much of a problem, but will read about someone just because they're so dang interesting. Character interest is a key factor in a reader's enjoyment of your story. It one of the things that have the biggest bang for the buck.

The question is: what makes a character interesting? The answer: the same things that make real people interesting.

You'll want to make your own list because what rocks you might not rock me, but I'll share the types of things that spark my interest in other people below.

Your characters don't have to exhibit all of the traits listed, but you might want to think of giving them at least one or three of them.

Power

People who have power draw our interest. That power may be one of many varieties:

- Wealth. They might be super rich like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett or the Queen. They may drive the coolest cars and have the most luxurious houses or clothing.
- Position. Someone in a powerful position like the CEO of a big company, the general of an army, or the leader of some gang. But it doesn't have to be huge. A single cop draws attention. As does an IRS agent on your doorstep. The foreman of a crew has some power. The character might not even be the one to hold the reins of power but be a spouse or counselor of someone else who does.
- Physical strength. They may be fast or strong or just huge individuals. Maybe they have been trained to be deadly weapons or at least use them.

Ability

People with extraordinary skills or talents draw our interest. It's why, in fantasies, we're so interested in those that can actually practice magic. In fact, ability is a type of power. And just like those with the other types of power, these folks evoke wonder, respect, and sometimes awe.

The skills and abilities you're interested in may differ from mine, but we are fascinated by those who can do things well or have some gift. Maybe they are expert at selling, or making money, or framing a house, or painting, or doing gymnastics, or reading, or hacking into computers, or skydiving, or firing weapons, or riding horses, or hunting, or getting people to like them, or making pancakes, or a thousand other things. Maybe, like Edna Mode in *The Incredibles*, they have the ability to design amazing super-hero outfits.

Even though your characters have limitations that prevent them from immediately solving the problem they face, you can still give them some kind of an ability that makes them admirable to us. Some gift or talent. And maybe it helps them solve the problem in the end.

Extraordinariness

People who are uncommon in some way draw our interest. In fact, if you think about those with power and ability, you see that they possess this quality as well. However, you don't always need power and ability to be extraordinary.

Maybe you're a normal guy in an extraordinary job. You're a CIA officer, a smuggler, or a spy. Maybe you raise wolves or are a bounty hunter. Or you hunt bears with a pack of dogs and a horse. Or maybe there's some other uncommon hobby.

You might argue that these are special skills. They are. But who says my categories can't overlap? Still they don't have to be extraordinary in that way. Maybe you simply have extraordinary experience. You fought in a war, escaped prison, were a bank robber at one time. Or maybe you're just outrageous, bizarre, eccentric, odd, or have some exaggerated quirk.

Maybe you're a loud-talker, a mumbler, a guy who takes his three parrots with him where ever he goes, a farmer who loves pies. Maybe you're super thin. Or a cab driver with glasses so thick his passengers immediately wonder if they'll arrive alive. Maybe you have squeaky shoes. Or are always dressed to the nines and smell of lemons. Maybe you're one of these people that walk around in their sleep or hold loud conversations with ghosts. Or you're a coffee freak and drink a pint of black mud each day. Maybe you just have an uncommon name like the folks in the Netherlands who surname is, no lie, Born Naked.

Sometimes these extraordinary things affect the plot. Sometimes they don't. The point is that the extraordinary captures our attention. When you're inventing your characters, add something extraordinary. You'll be surprised at how much more interesting they are to you.

Beauty

People who are beautiful capture our attention. In movies we see a million bits of information at once. We can see the beauty and respond. But we can't do that in text. And so we have to evoke the image of beauty in the reader's mind. A few key details and the way others react to them should be enough.

Now you might think beauty is a superficial method for generating interest, but I think it's a manifestation of something else more fundamental. If you think about a lot of the interest factors we've discussed so far—having special power, wealth, ability, or beauty—they all have a common element running through them. That element is wish-fulfillment.

Wish-fulfillment

We cannot help but be interested in characters who are, do, or have things we want. In fact, this is one of the main draws of fiction—experiencing something wonderful or cool, even if

it's vicariously. Phyllis Pianka states this so well in *How to Write Romances*:

> "You cannot write an engrossing romance novel until you create a heroine the reader **wants to** identify with and a hero the reader **can fall in love with** . . . they are *idealized*; the heroine is someone women **would like to** emulate: nicer, prettier, thinner, more intelligent, though not necessarily all of those things. She will have a flaw but it will be a minor one . . . the hero is **the ideal** lover and husband and father . . . Above all, he must be the man with whom every woman **would like to** fall in love [bold font added for emphasis]" (30).

A lead you'd like to be like in some way. A hero you could fall in love with. Or at least feel attracted to. Remember, readers are hoping and fearing for the characters. How can readers hope for a woman to enter a committed relationship if the readers feel the man is completely unattractive, physically or emotionally? How can we males root for the man if we feel the same about the female character? It doesn't mean they have to be perfect. Wish-fulfillment, like many things in writing, slides along a scale. But we'll be more interested as readers the more we can participate in the same attraction and desire.

Someone might be thinking this is just for love stories, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. What's one of the reasons why James Bond and all the other action heroes are so popular? Among other things, it's because so many of us would love to live the adventures those heroes do. We would love to be the types of guys who know how to fight like Jack Reacher and get to use all the high-tech the gizmos and drive the deluxe cars. How many YA stories are about characters finding fairies or dragons or aliens? How much of fantasy is about having the powers magic grants? Wouldn't it be cool! Of course. That's wish-fulfillment.

So when developing a character, we can think of things we'd like to be, do, or have and give those things, or the opportunity for them, to our characters. Make them admirable or desireable in some way. Of course, this doesn't mean you can't give your characters flaws, or that you can't write about someone we wouldn't want to be like. Our readers don't have to want to be like our characters in every way, but a little bit of wish-fulfillment helps. It's something to consider.

Also, as with anything, what's desireable to you might not be what's desireable to me. Maybe I'm interested in anyone who has served in the armed forces or lives with some kind of risk and adventure. Maybe you can't stand that and are enthralled instead with horses. Maybe you'd like to fly airplanes, but I'd love to fly dragons. One guy is drawn to those with happy marriages full of laughter. Another is drawn to the freedom of single life. You write your stories, and I'll write mine. But we can both make our characters more interesting by adding, when it fits, some element of wish-fulfillment.

Humor

We love humor. Love to laugh. And so anytime you can create a character that does this to the audience, they will be interested in them. It might be our characters have witty lines or comments. Maybe they're humorous types or find themselves in humorous situations.

One note. Don't make the mistake of thinking that making a character interesting will make them deserving or admirable. Humor, just like beauty, can be given to characters we root against. Maybe the character is funny, but it's a cruel funny. Maybe the character is mind-stealing beautiful, but they use their beauty for terrible purposes. Sympathy and interest are different things.

Danger

Anyone who poses a threat demands our interest. This is one of the reasons why Darth Vader is so interesting. Criminals present threats of all sorts, which is why we're always interested in them. Recall, however, that many aspects of happiness can be threatened. It doesn't have to be a threat to life, limb, or property. For example, someone may threaten my relationship to my wife or my belonging to a group or community.

We're also interested in those who are in danger. This ties back to the first story element of problem. In fact, the problem might be so interesting and threatening that we could cast anyone in the role and readers would go along with them. Do you really remember the leads in *Jurassic Park*, for instance? There's nothing fundamentally wrong with a plain vanilla character. In fact, that might be exactly what your story needs. However, I would still see if it doesn't improve things to make your character interesting outside the context of the story problem. If you do, you just might end up with an Indiana Jones.

Secrets

We love mysteries. And so sometimes it's wonderful to give characters secrets. It might be they present a bit of danger or have something to hide as Aragorn does when we first meet him in *The Lord of the Rings*. Or maybe they have a past they don't like to talk about. Either way, we love to wonder about them and then have our questions answered in surprising ways. We like it even better when these secrets affect the deservingness of the character or our understanding of the situation the character faces.

Surprise

We are intrigued by characters who play against type, if only a little. So maybe you have a plumber who quotes Shakespeare or William Blake to his customers. Maybe you have a mixed martial arts fighter who is a woman with three kids. Maybe the hero has a fear of spiders. Or the villain is a magnificent artist or tends lovingly to his bees or his daughter. Maybe the super rich businessman secretly goes to poor neighborhoods to find folks to help. Maybe the bearded and tattooed biker carries around a Book of Mormon and reads it during quiet moments. Maybe, like Michael in the series *Burn Notice*, the super spy loves

yogurt. Anything that runs against, or just doesn't fit, our expectations of the type.

Cast Variety

Finally, because we almost always deal with a cast of people in our stories, we need to make sure they're interesting as a group. You will increase reader interest if you give each character some memorable and interesting trait, but you'll get the most bang for the buck if you make those traits different.

For example, let's say you have a team of characters who need to go behind enemy lines to find and dismantle a radar station. If every one of those team members is exactly the same —let's say they're all wise-cracking blond farm boys from Oklahoma—we might find it funny and odd at first, but it will soon lose its appeal as they all say and do the same things. Compare this to a group where one is a silent-but-deadly farmer, another is a metaphysical mechanic, a third is a short woman's man, the fourth is a wise-cracking American Indian. Maybe one joined the ARMY because he's got first person shooter games dancing in his eyes, another because his father was a military man, another is there to conduct some kind of criminal heist, the fourth because he's poor and needed help getting through college and supporting his wife and kid.

I know, I know, you women are probably saying the tall blond farm boys might not be all that bad. But after you finish oogling them, think of this: your readers might not all be into farm boys. Did you ever wonder why boy bands have a variety of types—the serious one, the good one, the bad one, the cutie? It's because it broadens the appeal to a wider audience.

But it goes beyond that. Variety also avoids the problem of diminishing marginal utility. This is simply the idea that the more you experience something, the less power each experience provides. For example, the first time you hear a great joke it may be gut-busting funny. By the time you've heard it ten times the joke has probably lost its appeal. Imagine eating a meal that's nothing but salmon or broccoli or fried okra or ice cream. Eventually, after twenty dishes of cheese, you will go blind. The same thing occurs with characters. This is why it's always more powerful to have one villain instead of a hundred of them. One wise-cracking American Indian is awesome. Fifteen of them only water down the effect so that none of them are as powerful as the one could be all by herself.

And it doesn't end there. There's an even more important reason for giving your cast variety: it opens up possiblity for more conflict, surprise, and story. Maybe one of the lead's team members turns traitor. Maybe one of the bad guys is thinking about doing his boss in. With some variety, you can not only write about the main problem, but you also add in subplots—a love story or a redemption plot. And both can complicate the central problem.

Vareity adds interest. Develop your characters—the major, minor, and bit roles, folks that

help our lead and others who hinder or oppose them–but also develop them with an eye towards the effect of the cast as a whole.

Characters you want to hope and fear for

Our readers want to hope and fear for our characters. They want to feel sympathy. But they also want to be delighted and awed by them. They want to feel admiration for them. They want to laugh at and with them. These are some of the key joys of the experience they come to us for.

The way we deliver this is by giving our characters troubles, letting them demonstrate they deserve to be rooted for, and making them interesting.

But we're not done yet. Right now we've only talked about the problem and the character. That's just the beginning. Remember, readers want to hope and fear and then feel a cathartic release. But you can't feel catharsis if your worries don't build up to a certain point, if they aren't extended.

Form follows function.

Think about the itch deep down in your cast that builds and builds and builds over days. It's amazing when you finally scratch it. Think about the time you couldn't drink or eat for a day or two and how hungry or thirsty you were. Think about how good it felt to finally satisfy that tension. The experience of eating after a fast is so different from the one when you eat when you're still mostly full.

You need to make your readers hungry for a release. They want to be hungry. And that takes time. So while a six-hundred word piece of flash fiction can evoke some emotion, it's nothing compared to the emotion and experience a 100,000 word novel can deliver. Because 100,000 word novels allow you to build the reader's hunger, their tension, their hope and fear, to a sharp point.

You build this tension with plot. And that will be the next post in the series.

In the meantime, if you think of other things that make characters interesting or sympathetic, specific examples of the factors I've talked about, or have questions, please post them in the comments.

The Series: 1 – Problem | 2 – Character | 3 – Plot | 4 – Structure (coming soon) | 5 – Scene | 6 – Development Tips

More great reading

A lot of the factors listed above that make characters interesting have to do with them being larger than life. If you want to read more on this, Orson Scott Card devotes a whole

chapter to it in his wonderful book *Characters & Viewpoint*.

For those interested in exploring the factors that lead to sympathy, let me recommend Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. That link will take you the wiki about the book. At the bottom of that wiki are links to the actual text.