

A Different Approach to Defining Character

by: Jo Sparkes / Sparkes Productions

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Robert Day, a wonderful writer and a great teacher, once said (and I paraphrase horribly here) nobody really wants to see dams break or buildings blow up. What makes all of that riveting is the people involved.

Without the characters, it's just a science project.

I've struggled with defining character.

Actually, I struggled with jotting down a great character – someone who would leap off the page, and grab the reader's attention. To me, movies are an entertaining ride, a roller coaster for the audience. We must journey through the emotional ups and downs, being forced to hang on for dear life.

Character is the cart in which we journey.

What I needed was a method for finding my character.

I read books urging me to write down every physical aspect. How old was he, how tall? Was he born in east London or rural Mississippi? The problem was that this path seemed a long one to arrive at the key points.

Besides, in scripts this led to bad habits. The current trend in a film script is not to spend too much time on the physical traits of our character. Richard Walter, UCLA, reminds us that Shakespeare described Hamlet with all of three words: Prince of Denmark. It is left to others – the producer, director, casting director, and the actor – to define the physical aspects.

Film characters are really defined through their own actions – and reactions. To watch that thug with skulls tattooed across his back rescue a caterpillar from the highway intrigues us. It tugs at our emotions.

That's a real character – to engage our emotion.

It finally dawned on me to discover my characters by defining their reactions to other characters. How does John feel about Suzy? How does he feel when she marches for gay rights? When he discovers her brother is gay? Meets her brother now living with her ex-husband?

What does John see as her strengths? Her weaknesses? What exasperates him about her? What garners his grudging respect?

If the town is about to be devastated in a plague, what are his reactions going to be? And how does he feel when Suzy steals his handgun to force her way through the barricade, uncaring about exposing the rest of the world?

I find myself interviewing characters – even having them debate. I love finding what they share in common, and where they violently disagree. It is in these exercises I really find their motivations. What John wants out of life is a good thing to know, of course. But what does he REALLY want, and what does he think he wants? Why hasn't he already succeeded? How far is he willing to go? And in what circumstances do his desires disappear in a cloud of dust?

It really isn't a question of a better method – just a tool that works for me.

[Jo Sparkes](http://JoSparkes.com)
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