

Building the Purrrr-fect Hero

Article 2

BREAKING CHARACTER

By Jenna Kernan

Authors need to set up a character's personality and show the reader what they would do in a given situation. Their character needs to be well established BEFORE you allow them to break character. The scene where your protagonist breaks character are often among the most powerful in the story.

Donald Maass calls this the BIG TRANSFORMATION, not just character growth but the moment when the character is changed forever and will never be able to go back to who and what they were before. He calls this: "deep-down, soul-shaking, irreversible transformation for good and always."

So what does that look like exactly?

Example 1: Jenna Kernan's March 2012 release, THE LAST CAHILL COWBOY, Book 4 in the CAHILL COWBOYS series.

Set-up: Fearless Gunslinger doesn't care if he lives or dies and has never hesitated to draw and shoot, except here:

Chance drew his gun and kicked open the door at the same instant he heard the shot. The door flew off the hinges to reveal Whitaker, his gun drawn and smoking. Van Slyck crumpled to the floor as the deputy swung the pistol in their direction.

Chance acted on instinct, everything slowing as it always did in that last critical moment, but instead of reaching for his gun, he reached for Ellie. His dive carried them past the doorway and into the hall. He covered her with his body as the rush of fear crashed over him like a thunder clap. The second shot sounded, striking the adjoining door, followed by a third. Chance imagined Ellie, there in that exact place only an instant earlier and felt his insides ice over.

Chance has just discovered something he cares about and that makes him vulnerable. As a result, he'll never be able to go back to the hardened fearless character he was a moment before.

EXAMPLE 2: Jenna Kernan's March 2012 release, THE LAST CAHILL COWBOY, Book 4 in the CAHILL COWBOYS series.

Respectable daughter of wealthy hotel owner has a habit of blending in with the furniture and guards her reputation closely because she wants to wed a proper man, except here:

She lifted her hands and pressed them to his chest. Suddenly, he couldn't move. Chance felt a cold sensation down his spine, like an icicle skittering on frozen ground. Chance had a nose for mischief and a way of always ending up in the center of it and Ellie, he realized was the one who had often led him right into trouble. It seemed Ellie was more like him than anyone knew.

"Ellie? What are you up to?"

She stepped back into the darkness of his room and moved to his bedside, lighting the lamp and turning up the wick so the flame burned brightly. Then she turned to him, a perfect welcoming smile touched her lips.

"Chance, I don't want to be invisible anymore." Ellie lifted her trembling fingers and began to unbutton her blouse. She kept her eyes pinned on his. "I know you can see me Chance. You're the only one who can."

This scene brings Ellie to the point where what she need is more important than her initial goal. Ellie believes that she must protect her reputation in order to wed a proper man, but all that fades compared with her need for Chance to see her for what she is, deep down, below the surface.

Afterwards, she will be too changed to go back to the way she was. As a result, she has lost the chance to achieve what she thought she wanted and does not yet know what she really needs. This sets the character adrift and makes them question things they always took for granted.

Another way to push your character to decide what is most essential is to force a devil's choice. Make the protagonist pick between her dreams and the man she loves. A variation of this is creating a choice between the protagonists dream and the dream of the man she loves.

They cannot have it all. They must lose something they cherish to earn what they need. By forcing the choice, you make them discover what they value most.

Example 2: Gold Rush Groom, September 2011 by Jenna Kernan

Poor Irish stamperder wants to make her fortune by singing in the Dawson City because her difficult childhood has made her desperate

to escape her crushing poverty except when Jack's business venture is dashed for lack of investors and then she gives up all her savings to protect his dream.

Example 3: GHOST STALKER – TRACKER SERIES by Jenna Kernan

Jessie Healy, a Dream Walker, would never shelter and protect an enemy shapeshifter until she does just that because she believes a greater enemy threatens her people. As the proverb says: “My enemies enemy is my friend.” Choosing to step over this line and break the laws of her people will change her forever.

In the book's conclusion, the resolution often includes the restoration of the protagonists dream in an unexpected form or with a twist that is satisfying but different than the reader expected. To give the protagonist what they originally wanted, when they have changed so much would be a disappointment to them and to the reader.

Conclusion: Characters have to be well conceived with a rich background that the author knows but every detail of which does NOT end up in the story.

The protagonists seem to have outwardly divergent goals and/or believe that choosing the other would ruin any hope of obtaining that which they believe to be of most importance. But their opposite is the only person who truly sees who they are and they connect at this level, seeing past appearance to the essential characteristics others never perceive. By choosing each other, they both pay a terrible price.

Equally important is that the protagonists is missing something at the story's beginning and are forced to grow and change by the experiences they encounter in the story and are forever changed as a result.

****This article was adapted from the workshop: Building the Perfect Hero, given in New York on June 28th 2011 at the national conference of the Romance Writers of America. Jenna spoke with Debra Mullins and Susan Meier. This workshop was recorded and is available through the RWA website.**

*****View my funny movie on Romance Writing at Xtranormal @ <http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/11117239/how-to-write-the-perfect-romance-hero>**

