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When the World Turns to Shit, Why Should I Care?

Character Arc in Dystopian Stories

by Raymond Obstfeld

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- Laurie Lamson, Editor

Raymond Obstfeld is the author of more than forty books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry as well as more than a dozen screenplays, most of which have been optioned. He recently collaborated with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on a *New York Times* best-selling children's book *What Color Is My World?* (Candlewick) and a middle-school novel *Sasquatch in the Paint* (Hyperion-Disney). He recently completed a YA novel "*The Time-Reaper's Tattoo*", and Hallmark has bought his script *A Little Christmas Con*.

When the World Turns to Shit, Why Should I Care?

Character Arc in Dystopian Stories

by Raymond Obstfeld

Dystopian fiction is all the rage. The *Hunger Games*, *Battle Royale* (wait, are they the same story?), *The Walking Dead*, *WORLD WAR Z*, *The Stand*, and all the others that seem to tap into our giddy fear about (and secret desire for) the End of the World. These works are especially popular in the young adult market because tweens and teens don't have an emotional stake in the world as it is. After all, this is the world that tells them what to do, what to think, and who to be. Why would they champion a society that "oppresses" them? No wonder they crave a world gone topsy-turvy in which one will be judged not by the color of one's letterman jacket but by the quality of one's crossbow skills.

I created such a world in my Warlord novel series (written as Jason Frost, the hunkiest name I could come up with). In the series, an earthquake separates California from the mainland, a radioactive dome from the destroyed nuclear plants keeps people from escaping or entering the island of California, and all civilization has broken down to the point of people just scrambling for survival any way they can. Plus, the protagonist carries a cool crossbow.

Better writers than I will tell you how to create those worlds. What I'm going to deal with is how to make us care about the people in those worlds. I'm going to do this by providing a worksheet that will help you understand how the dystopian world and the adventures they face affect them. Knowing this keeps a novel from just becoming a series of familiar action scenes that are ripped off from other similar stories. When that happens, the story becomes tepid, a pale photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy.

The danger of dystopian stories is that the writer becomes so enamored with the details of creating this world that she ignores the characters that inhabit it. Remember that the world is only the setting to highlight the protagonist's arc, not the purpose of the novel.

Most stories are about the protagonist changing as a result of the plot of the story (also known as the Character Arc). What elevates a pure action story into a more memorable story is our emotional commitment to the protagonist. This commitment is increased by making the protagonist's goal more than just survival, but about becoming a better, happier person.

EXERCISE

Building the Character Arc

First, we have to figure out what kind of protagonist we're dealing with. Is she likeable or unlikeable? Is he skilled and knowledgeable, and will he use those skills immediately to distinguish himself as a leader? Or is he weak and unknowledgeable and therefore the story is about him learning how to become stronger and smarter? The Character Arc depends on answering the following questions:

1. *Who is the protagonist outside the circumstances of the dystopian world?*

The big mistake that many beginning writers make is defining a protagonist's emotional state by a major flaw. That means that they select one characteristic and beat us over the head with it in every scene. Maybe

she's sad because her father died or abandoned the family. Maybe she's painfully shy because of some childhood trauma. Whatever this characteristic is, it is used to elicit sympathy (making her likeable) and to give her an obstacle to overcome. So far so good.

But characters are more complex than that. If you're writing a YA novel, you can usually get away with more superficial characterization. If you're writing for sophisticated teens and for adult readers, you will need to create more nuanced characters. How? By imagining who the character was before the dystopia. What did she do in her daily life? What did she read, eat, listen to, watch on TV? What did she do right before going to bed? Eat ice cream, read poetry, text her friends? By telling us some of this, you will be creating a contrast between what she had and what she now has. This loss creates stakes and makes us care more about her.

If the dystopian event (the disaster that caused society to go bad) has already happened, you can suggest the way the world used to be through objects, memories, flashbacks, etc. If it hasn't happened yet, and is a part of your novel, the scenes that come before the event will show us who she was and what she will need to become.

2. *What is the protagonist's main character strength?*

Character strength is about character qualities they possess (not physical attributes). In this case, pick the main one: compassion, intellect, leadership, etc. This strength will be the key to making plot choices because you will need to construct scenes in which the character strength

is challenged and the character will have to dig deep to use it to overcome obstacles.

3. *What is the protagonist's main character weakness?*

Select the main weakness of character. This does not mean superficial things such as he talks too much or his jokes aren't funny. This is about a character flaw that prevents him from achieving fulfillment and happiness: lack of discipline, inability to judge people for who they really are, a need to be liked by everyone, etc. This weakness will also guide plot choices because you will need dynamic scenes in which this weakness causes the protagonist to occasionally fail. These failures increase suspense because the reader then isn't sure whether the protagonist's strength or weakness will triumph in the climax.

4. *What is the protagonist's main practical skill?*

Usually, the protagonist should have something he is good at. There are several reasons for this:

(a) It shows he has a passion for something. Characters that are passionate about something are more likeable.

(b) It adds depth to the character because it allows you to provide a back story about how he got caught up in this passion. This story is an excuse to tell us about other relationships, traumas, struggles, and so forth in an interesting way. This provides a more active scene to give us information and therefore avoids the ominous "info dump" (in which the writer stops the momentum of the novel to dump background information.)

(c) It creates suspense because we know that whatever this passion is, it will play a key role later in the novel. The more seemingly useless the object of the passion, the more interesting and clever its use can be. It doesn't really matter what it is, as long as you make it seem interesting. Comic book collecting? Guitar playing? Toad racing? They're all equal in this world. The first TV Movie of the Week was called *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*, starring a young Robert Wagner. In this story, Wagner played a spoiled, talentless, jobless playboy who had one skill: He could hold his breath for a long time. It's a joke in the film because it's used to amuse his partying friends around the swimming pool. But later, when his life is threatened and he's being gassed in an elevator, this ability saves his life.

5. *What is the protagonist's main practical weakness?*

Sometimes a major physical weakness hampers the protagonist's ability to successfully complete the adventure: out of shape, bad knee, weak eyesight, etc. This physical weakness sometimes reflects the characters' psychological weaknesses. For example, does he use the physical weakness as an excuse not to try harder? In the film *Young Adult*, Charlize Theron plays a once-popular girl who's grown up to have a terribly depressing life. When she goes back to her small hometown, she encounters a dumpy guy she ignored in school. He'd been beaten by a group of kids that thought he was gay (though he wasn't) and the beating had left him with permanent injuries of his legs. Since high school, he's

worked crappy jobs, brews whiskey in a still in his garage, and glues different parts of action figures together to make hybrid figures. He's used this injury—and the injustice of it—as an excuse to turn his back on such an unjust universe and justify his alienation.

6. *Is the protagonist likeable? If not, what is her “redemptive quality”?*

Sometimes a character arc starts with a character who is demonstrably unlikeable. The suspense then is whether or not the character will ever change to become a likeable character. The problem the writer faces is making readers care enough about an unlikeable character that they want to stick around to find out what happens.

This dilemma is resolved by giving the unlikeable protagonist a redemptive quality. The quality implies that there is something good inside the person that, given the right circumstances, can emerge to save the protagonist from a life of being a jerk.

In the novel and film *A Clockwork Orange*, protagonist Alex is a violent, remorseless thief, rapist, and murderer. Why should any of us want to stay in this character's company? First, because he's a compelling and unpredictable character with a strong narrative voice. Second, because he has a redemptive quality: his love of Beethoven's music. The reader believes that this quality reveals a spark of human goodness that if fanned into flame, will consume the deplorable Alex to leave the good Alex to rise up out of the ashes.

Building the Character into the Story

Now that you have defined the protagonist, you need to construct scenes that show these qualities and flaws in dynamic ways. Avoid just telling us about them. Instead, reveal them in an active way, showing the characteristics in action rather than in passive talking heads or monologue scenes.

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