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Scott
Myers



Apr 22

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Writing and the Creative Life: Think Psychologically

What makes a story resonate
emotionally with a reader or viewer?



This post is a tale of two online articles. One is a serious piece of journalism from the New York Times. The other is a seemingly frothy listicle from BuzzFeed. First, the serious stuff. The New York Times article, “Cool at 13, Adrift at 23”:

At 13, they were viewed by classmates with envy, admiration and not a little awe. The girls wore makeup, had boyfriends and went to parties held by older students. The boys boasted about sneaking beers on a Saturday night and swiping condoms from the local convenience store.

They were cool. They were good-looking. They were so not you.

Whatever happened to them?

“The fast-track kids didn’t turn out O.K.,” said Joseph P. Allen, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia. He is the lead author of a new study, published this month in the journal Child Development, that followed these risk-taking, socially precocious cool kids for a decade. In high school, their social status often plummeted, the study showed, and they began struggling in many ways.

It was their early rush into what Dr. Allen calls pseudomature behavior that set them up for trouble. Now in their early 20s, many of them have had difficulties with intimate relationships, alcohol and marijuana, and even criminal activity. “They are doing more extreme things to try to act cool, bragging about drinking three six-packs on a Saturday night, and their peers are thinking, ‘These kids are not socially competent,’ ” Dr. Allen said. “They’re still living in their middle-school world.”

As I went through the article, I

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realized the core description of this hypothetical emotionally adrift young adult male was a character we have seen in many movies such as:

Knocked Up Trailer



A few days later, I hit on the BuzzFeed thing: “21 Signs You’re Woody From Toy Story In Your Group Of Friends”. It includes these observations:

- 1. You’re always the one in charge of making plans whenever you guys go out:*
- 6. You hate it when one of your friends steals your thunder:*
- 9. Sometimes you can be a little overdramatic when things don’t go your way:*

I realized each of these 21 items is a description of a personality trait.

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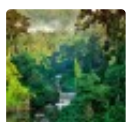
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That's when both articles clanged together in my mind to remind me of this basic fact: *One key to creative success in our writing is to think psychologically.*

Now I could do a whole post on how we — as writers — need to be aware of our *own* psyches, but that's not the point I want to focus on today. Rather, what I think is critical, even imperative is that we think psychologically about our story characters.

What makes a character the way they are?

Why do they think what they think and feel what they feel?

What are the key dynamics at work in their psyche?

What events in their lives have had a direct influence on their personalities?

Are they introverts or extroverts?

What do they want?

What do they need?

What excites them?

What do they fear the most?

What is their shadow?

Each question like these we ask of our characters is a tool to dig into their psyches, down to their Core Essence, to help us understand what makes them tick and how they interface with the story universe.

Every movie has a physical journey, events that happen in the External World, things we can see and hear.

But every movie, at least good ones, also has a *psychological* realm, the Internal World of intentions and subtext, feelings and emotions. And our characters embark on a psychological journey as well.

This is hugely important because it is the psychological journey that gives a story emotional meaning, providing the events that occur a personal context, something to which we, as moviegoers (or script readers), can relate, thereby sharing in the experience vicariously.

So when this happens:



Or this:



Or this:



We *feel* something, the events have meaning forging an emotional connection between what's transpiring on the screen and the

viewer, the book and the reader.

Why? Because the physical journey has a concomitant psychological component to which we can relate.

This is why I like to work with character archetypes — Protagonist, Nemesis, Attractor, Mentor, Trickster — because they help to clarify and focus the respective narrative function of each character as well as the interrelationships between them.

Whatever story you are working on, delve into your characters. Dig deep. Ask penetrating questions. Ponder each character and their psyches.

Your creative insights about your story will abound...

If you think psychologically.

Writing and the Creative Life is a weekly series in which we explore creativity from the practical to the psychological, the latest in brain science to a spiritual take on the subject. Hopefully the more we understand about our creative self, the

better we will become as writers. If you have any good reading material in this vein, please post in comments. If you have a particular observation you think readers will benefit from and you would like to explore in a guest post, email me.

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