



Start writing fiction

Characters and genre

Narrator:

Creating characters. Here, writers discuss how they develop their fictional characters using a mixture of methodical research, accident and empathy. The speakers are Tim Pears, Monique Roffey, Alex Garland and Louis de Bernieres.

Tim Pears:

My first book was written from the point of view of a thirteen year old girl, and I never felt when I was writing it that I had to make some kind of special effort, you know, to get into the mind of a female, or a young person whatever. I think I just thought how I would think about things, and with a little bit of sympathy, empathy towards somebody else, and that was it.

Monique Roffey:

I think it's very much a mixture of accident and design. I think your characters find you in the same way that your ideas find you. I think they settle on you - snatches of people you've seen in the street sometimes or snatches of someone you might have met, someone you might have, you know, have had a brief encounter with, and they tend to kind of morph, they tend to kind of mix. You'll have somebody's hairstyle with somebody's height and somebody's vanity with somebody's nose, you know, so you kind of have a mixture come to you, but once that's happened I then absolutely treat him, treat it in a research like, a sort of scholarly way - I use a character outline and I work on, on that and develop and, so that I've got sometimes 7, 8, 9, 10, 15 pages, so that I know everything about that character, I know what his, what the character's grandmother's maiden name was, whether they're good at dancing, whether they like Marmite, you know. I know everything about that character by the time I've worked on it. So I use both, I use conscious and the unconscious to sort of, to make someone.

Alex Garland:

Characters came from all sorts of different places. There's this gangster in *The Tesseract* called Don Pepe who was sort of based on a guy I ran into in a very remote part of the Philippines who came from Spanish ancestry and had never been to Spain but was obsessed with Spain and he'd lost all his money, he didn't have a hacienda or anything, but he still somehow clung on to that colonial past even though it was a long, long time ago. And there was something about that that just interested me and I kind of lifted him out and dropped him in there and some you just invent.

Louis de Bernieres:

There seem to be two different types of character. There's the type that just turns up at your shoulder like a ghost and insists on being written, it's rather spooky, it's a bit like being a medium. The other kind of character is the sort that you, you invent more or less from scratch or create as a composite of various people that you've noticed or come across. And the one thing that does happen though is that as soon as the character begins to become real is he or she starts misbehaving, and they don't do what you tell them to do. You often find yourself altering the story to accommodate your characters. Your plans always go wrong. It's partly good old fashioned empathy, with a certain amount of effort you can imagine what it's like being somebody else. If these characters are conveniently nearby you can always go and ask them and listen to them talking. And quite often with a character, all you've got to do is start them talking, like yakking in your head - it's a bit like being a paranoid schizophrenic but it's under control, you know, you've got all of these voices going on in your mind - you just let them talk. And, and they develop quite happily on their own.

Narrator:

And now Alex Garland talks about ways of handling a large cast of characters.

Alex Garland:

I did have a problem with some of the minor characters of losing track of them. I remember when I was copy editing the book, finding that people switched nationalities half way through, and having to sort of make a little list, you know, this guy's from New Zealand, this one's from Israel. But I think in the case of *The Beach*, often what I did was a kind of cheap trick in a way which was, you pin a particular characteristic on a character so there's this guy, Bugs, who is the boyfriend of the woman who runs the camp and his thing was that he's stoical but he's also a bit of a bullshitter, that stoicism is his thing that he gives out an impression of being a terrific stoic but actually he's not, and then everything just follows from that. Yeah, you find a little peg to hang them on and leave them on it.

Narrator:

Genre. First listen to Patricia Duncker and Alex Garland talking about the pleasures of subverting genre.

Patricia Duncker:

Thinking in terms of genre is important because writing within something that's immediately recognisable, you raise certain sorts of expectations in the reader, and you need to know what you're doing with those expectations. So whilst I would say, I'm not a genre writer, I write with a very intense awareness of genre, because it's something that I want to play with, it's something I want to have fun with. The book that I've just brought out is a book called *Seven Tales of Sex and Death*, and the genre that influenced that book were the late-night B-movies in France that I enjoy watching, and most of those are very violent, they're horror movies, and that particular genre had its own laws, its own traditions in a way, its own traditions of badness to some extent, because it was packed with really lurid clichés. But I became interested in the lurid clichés.

Alex Garland:

I love genre. I like watching it and I like reading it, and I like working within it. From the point of view of work, I think genre's a kind of free gift. It gives you all sorts of things you can subvert and if you're unsure about where you're going with something, genre will tell you where to go and if nothing else, what genre can do is it can provide you with a structure. I think that you then are likely to end up subverting it, really just to keep yourself entertained because otherwise you will just be re-treading stuff that other people have done a lot before and probably more successfully than you're doing as well. But personally I think that one of the big tricks to writing is to keep yourself from getting bored, to keep yourself motivated and interested and so you have to move away just to keep yourself entertained, keep yourself fired up about it in some kind of way.

Narrator:

Now you'll hear Abdulrazak Gurnah and Louis de Bernieres describe two very different genres - the realist novel, dealing with contemporary social issues, and the magic realist novel.

Abdulrazak Gurnah:

Well fiction quite often tells us things, gives us news, tells us about things. Sometimes you'll find people saying things as if this is an inferior function of fiction. But I don't think so. I think when I read fiction, I look for many things, and sometimes you get more this than the other, but one certainly of the things I look for, one of the things that gives me pleasure in reading is knowing things I didn't know as a result of what I'm reading.

So there is, to some extent there is simply this, to say there are experiences which people have gone through and you should know about them, we should all know about them, but in the case of asylum and refugees, there is an even stronger reason for saying we must know about these things because they're to do with the way we live, they're to do with how and where we live and of course every day in the case of asylum and refugees, every day this is an issue in a kind of public discourse in the way that people speak and the way that the Government functions.

If I can write about it in my fiction, as well as write about other things, one of the beauties of novels is that they're not about one thing, but they're complex things and they're about different matters but they're also different things happen in them, the writing itself; the gestures that it makes, what it suppresses and what it releases and so on. So all kinds of interesting things happen in novels, but one of the things that I'm interested in doing is always raising the question of what has all this to do with how we live.

Louis de Bernieres:

There are lots of different kinds of magic realism which I could go on about for a long time. Gabriel García Márquez says that his kind of magic realism is to do with taking literally what people believe. So if somebody believes that being disrespectful to your parents will wither your arm, then he would have someone in a story who has a withered arm because they were disrespectful to their parents. Whereas there are other magic realists such as Isabelle Allende - she's a good example, who really does believe in coincidences and prodigies and ghosts, and all of these supernatural things and levitation, so when these things happen to her characters, because she really does believe in all of that stuff, other people do it more ludically, you know, it's playing with narrative, where you have the feeling that they're doing it mostly for fun and I think Laura Esquivel is in that category.

I think I'm more of the Marquez type myself, and I got ultimately fed up with magic realism because it made plotting too easy, you see, if anything can happen then anything does happen, and you can use it as a deus ex machina to get yourself out of sticky situations and so on. I began to feel in the end that it was cheating. But what was particularly marvellous about this magic realism which, which actually should have been called marvellous realism in the original phrase, what was marvellous about it was that it liberated the narrative. You know, you were longer confined to kitchen sinks and families squabbling with each other and all that kind of thing. It was a sort of liberation back into the world of fairy story and I think every literature in the world has a magic realist streak. We have our own in Britain and it's obvious to me that the legends of King Arthur are magic realist.

Narrator:

Finally, Monique Roffey talks about how she made magical elements of her novel Sun Dog convincing.

Monique Roffey:

It's a very slow book and very dreamy and it's a book of interiors and I think right from the beginning you're very much inside August's head. You're not just with him, you're in him, you're under his skin. And so I felt that right from the start the reader is almost August himself, I'm hoping that you can look out through August's eyes so when things do start to happen to him, I feel because you're so close and you're so sort of, you've got a great sense of what's going on with him that, when a bud pops between his fingers or, you know, a twig sprouts out of his ear, you're totally with him, you don't really, you know, you're absolutely happy to accept anything happening to him.