

A.C. Merkel's Guide to Character Development

Let's talk about the people who live in the worlds you create between the pages of your novel!

I'm always delighted when I receive praise for my characters, and even my critics have good things to say about my characters! It is imperative to me that I do them justice. They are, after all, quite real to me. That's not me being insane... okay, maybe a little. Some of the things I come up with border on the brink!

So, let's talk this out. Let's meet some of my characters and talk about my creative process.

Let's begin with the title character from my novel, **Her Name is Murder**, the talented **Murder LaVoe**. Instantly the question becomes, "Why is that her name?" I reached deep into my psyche for this character. And yes, it's a bit of a self-insert. And yes, I feel like that can work.

She's everything I wanted to be musically and fell short of. She's a virtuoso. She's kind, talented, but at first, we find her to be slightly self-absorbed. She's wealthy, proper and can be a bit of a know it all. She also has a genuine kindness deep inside. She has a fantastic life.

The situation she's put in is one where she might have to give up the thing she thinks is her most essential and unique quality. Her immortality.

And sure, living for hundreds of years is how she sharpened her many talents. It's more skill at this point. Practice makes perfect. The stakes are kept personal. The world is not at risk, only her life, the lifestyle she loves so much, and the happiness and contentment of her friends.

She's also on a bit of a mission to prove to herself that she isn't shallow. She can't help but realize that in many ways, she is. She's also ready to stop running and make a stand in a way she hasn't before. This may be her most endearing trait. She has doubts right up till the end.

Let's talk about Levi. Tasked with being a "Protector", the snarky and loveable best friend is also finding himself at an impasse. Levi is calm and reserved and would rather hang back in the shadows. He's spent hundreds of years worrying about his charge and her life. He's beginning to want something of his own, something that has nothing to do with her. Finally, he's falling hard for a man. Not someone to play with but someone he can love. Too bad he might be the enemy.

Levi is the opposite of his claimed sister, who is now donning a mask and a stage name to seek fame.

Let's talk about Grant. Grant has a bit of a polarizing effect. He's the straight man to these extravagant and flamboyant immortals. One critic said he might have been fine for a detective novel. For me, that was exactly what I wanted him to be! While it was a criticism, it also told me I had done what I intended.

Characters themselves are nothing without the impact they have on each other.

I have pages of conversations that could have happened between Murder and Levi that I wrote before starting the book. The world won't see these.

Take your characters for a spin! Sit them down and have some conversation.

I took the time to think about how Murder might behave in certain situations. There is an encounter with a ghost where she asks if the spirit's dress designer is still alive, because she needs it in her collection. A conversation with a friend who has gotten old and weary and seeks a painless way out. Levi chiding Murder for being careless is a common thread. How does Murder react?

I don't think I can stress this enough, hang out with your characters!

You don't necessarily have to write it all down. Just get to know them. For example, Murder is vegan and I know why, but it's not in the book. It can, however, be derived through context.

What is your character's favorite food? What do they like to read, or watch on TV?

You won't share all of this in your book. It would likely bore the audience to death. But, the more *you* know about your characters, the better.

Grant has proven, overall, to be popular with my readers. Despite a few who questioned what the gifted immortal woman saw in him. I do wonder, if he could have been more universally accessible if I had spent more time with him before writing the novel?

Don't fret, nothing is going to please everyone. It took me time to get that through my head as well!

Have fun! To this end, if you are on twitter, some accounts ask character questions. Look for these! You don't have to answer the questions in public, although it might be fun for your followers!

I think if you treat your charges more like real people, they are sure to reward you!

I'm of the opinion that we should talk about who our characters are. We should explore outside ourselves and write different types of people into our worlds.

I have no interest in telling a story without LGBTQ+ representation. The world I see contains people of so many types! The bisexual musician Murder LaVoe isn't precisely an *own voices* situation for me. I'm not a beautiful woman (Please feel free to groan. I did).

Tress, who is Trans, on the other hand, is a good bit away from who I am. She is informed by my feelings of self-doubt, and my perceived need to hide my true nature at times. She was also a chance to use magic in a fun way I hadn't thought of before. Dysmorphia isn't pleasant (while not gender-related, I have had a bit of that as well).

Although my personal disdain for perceived gender roles was an asset here, I still needed to read and research. Sensitivity readers are great, but I had a limited network at the time of writing the book. I haven't had complaints just yet about the portrayal of the transwoman and enchantress. Although I'm sure, at some point, it could happen, I'm definitely not infallible. If you write from a place of love and respect you should do fine!

Using the above information and my own process, I put together this Character Development list:

Appearance: you've heard, "the clothes make the man?" Murder, for example, almost exclusively wears green dresses. Tress is a 'white-out' Goth. Levi has a knack for looking good and also like he didn't try. Casual but cool. Grant learns the value of a properly tailored suit. (Not quote kicking and screaming but he wouldn't go shopping for fun on his own.)

Personality: are they dry? Witty? Reserved? Talkative? Levi hangs back and uses his words sparsely. When he does interject into the conversation, it is pointed and often humorous.

History: where and when are they from? How does this affect their skills and traits? After 483 years, Murder can play the violin like no one else. She grew up in France. Small tweaks to vocabulary make this age all the more believable. Colloquialisms can be your friend.

Relationships: we all have them. Does your character have a few close friends or many light acquaintances? Social butterfly? Introvert?

Motivations: what does your character want from life? Murder intends to keep living but also lay down some roots, she's tired of running. Tress wants to confirm her gender physically and permanently without magic.

Growth: I have read that your character should wind up in some opposite state of where they began. It makes sense. The point of their journey is to follow them to some climactic end. Whether you make opposite one thing or a few things, this is an important step.

For example, Grant begins our story as kind of a lonely guy. He is an orphan who has a single remaining grandparent who doesn't have much time left. By the story's end, he gets some of his former police friends back in his life and gets absorbed into a new "found family".

The plot is important. Craft is important. But CHARACTERS are essential!

Thanks for spending a few minutes with me and my friends from my book!

Maybe something I have said here will help you create your new best book buddy!

A.C. Merkel is the author of [Her Name is Murder](#), released February 2020. The Sequel, **London Calling**, is set for release in October of 2020. He is a founding member of an Author Alliance known as [Queer Indie](#). Queer Indie offers a growing directory of books by both LGBTQ+ authors and allies.

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