

Simon Stephenson's Writing Tips

You have to love your characters, even at their worst.

Empathy, empathy, empathy! If you don't care about your characters, nobody else will.

Action is character.

It's easy to think of characters as just being what they physically look like or the things they say. But all of us are primarily the things we **do**, both the big things and the small things. And that is there right from the beginning *Of Mice And Men*.

One of the first thing we read about Lenny and George is that they have walked down in a path in single file. And then, when they reach the clearing, they continue walking one like that. What does that tell us? It tells us that their relationship isn't of two equals, and that the one in front is somehow in charge.

Then, they reach the pond, and what do they each do? George adjusts his hat, whereas Lenny drinks like a horse.

So, nobody has uttered a word but we already know so much about each of them, and their relationship to one another.

Keep it real!

When I went to Cannery Row I was shocked to find I could find my way around. Everything - every street, every building, every streetlight - was exactly where it was in the book. So Steinbeck wasn't imagining something new. He was painting a portrait.

Likewise, Steinbeck worked on Californian ranches when he was about your age and I wouldn't be at all surprised to find out there was once a real life Lenny and George.

How does this help teenagers in Hong Kong write about 1920s Californians? The trick is this: all us writers are magpies, and humans are more or less the same everywhere. That means you can take little details from your own world and give them to your characters.

Does your Uncle chew in an irritating way? Give it to Lenny! Does your nervous aunt have a habit of clinking her change in her pocket? Give it to George!

Nobody is perfect, not even Superman or George

Let's go lowbrow and talk superheroes. I love Batman, but Superman bores me to tears. Why?

It is because Superman is so perfect, you always know what he is going to do: he is going to do the good thing. Now, of course in life, that is exactly what we'd want in a superhero. But in a book or a movie, it is - as well as being implausible - too predictable.

Now, think about Batman. Batman is dark and mysterious and you never know if he is going to save you or kill you. Because he has flaws. And that makes him more interesting to watch.

And guess what? John Steinbeck knew all about this. George takes care of his friend, Lennie, and a lesser writer would make this all just very pleasant, and George would be a hero and Tom Hanks would play him in a movie. But Steinbeck doesn't go that route. Sure, his George takes care of Lenny, but he is also frustrated by him and endlessly complains and grumbles about him.

And George tells the story of how he told Lennie to jump in to a river and Lennie almost drowned.

Does this make George a bad person? No, it makes him a real person, and a real person is a great character.

Our relationships define us.

We understand the most about George by the way he interacts with Lenny, and vice versa. Likewise, even meeting Curly and Curly's wife each help us understand why the other is so awful. So, look at your character's relationships. Who is it that they love? Who is it that they hate? Why?

Everybody wants something....

Think about what your character wants, and how they are attempting to get it. Steinbeck uses this throughout *Of Mice And Men*, so we have....

George wants to protect Lenny.

Candy wants to be with his old dog.

Crooks wants some company.

Curly's wife wants to be a movie star.

Lenny wants to retire to a nice farm.

...But it is most dramatic if they get its very opposite.

So, instead of Steinbeck giving his characters what they want:

George has to kill Lenny.

Candy has to kill his dog.

Crooks has to throw them out of his room.

Lenny has to get shot in the head.

Curly's wife has to get killed.

So, create a character your reader will care about, and then do terrible things to them.

Location! Location! Location!

Place can tell us a lot about character: where they have to be, and where they wish they were. (You are in school right now, but where do you actually wish you were today? And what would somebody learn about you if they knew where you wanted to be?)

When we first meet the George and Lennie at the water hole, we learn a lot about them by their surroundings. We learn that they feel at home here in the open country, and so much so that George chooses not to go to the ranch yet. By contrast, the claustrophobic ranch makes their dreams of escape even more urgent.

If you get stuck, try thinking of it as a movie.

Sometimes if I get stuck when I am writing, I think of things as a movie and see if I can imagine what the next line or scene would be like. Who would be in your of Mice And Men? I think I'd cast Robert Downey Junior as George, and the Rock as Lenny. Can you imagine the Rock and RDJ back in Weed? Or as kids with Aunt Clara?

Say the dialogue out loud!

All screenwriters spend half our lives talking to ourselves. It is the best way to get the dialogue right. Say it out loud. Does it sound right? Adjust it, and try again it until it does.