

# #EditorChat

*Transforming stories. Inspiring better writers.*



## Kelly Rigby on writing characters with agency

Character is the start and end point of novel writing. The reason most people read fiction is to find a cast of characters they care about and want to follow and see what happens to them in the story. Therefore, it is true that without character, we have no story.

Some genres are heavily plot dependent – like crime – and part of the reading experience is that we enjoy the dark twists and turns, and the who-dunnit mysteries. However, even in these books, I would argue that we still don't care about the story unless we care about the characters. Without character, the plot is empty and meaningless and readers do not emotionally invest. This is especially true in romance writing, where the relationship between the two main characters is what the book's primary plot is about – will these two people get their Happily Ever After?

Knowing who your protagonist is, their weaknesses, strengths, their past, what drives them in the action of the story; all of this ensures the plot will have purpose. Similarly, all books require an antagonist who is equally as strong as the protagonist. Someone who targets the core weaknesses of the

protagonist and puts pressure on them, forcing them to change in order to get what they want.

So, all we have to do is think up interesting characters, right?

Unfortunately, no. It takes more than that. And more than some cool plot twists too. What is important is more than their personality; it's how the characters behave in the story and why. What motivates them? An active protagonist is a main character who is not merely affected by the world around them, but affects that world too. The best characters in fiction make choices and those choices are what affect the plot and where the story goes. You cannot separate the two.

To write characters with agency – characters who intrigue us, who pull us through the pages just so we can find out if they'll get what they want – we must:

### 1. Accept that writing a novel is writing about change

Without change, nothing happens so why bother reading. We need to see changes in the plot and action of the story, and also changes in the main characters. Seeing characters battle themselves and each other to attain something they are so sure they need to be happy, or even to survive, is what makes readers stay up till all hours of the night just to finish the book.

To ensure you have real change in your novel, ask yourself:

♥ What does your protagonist care about at the very beginning of the story? I don't mean internally; what is important to them in a practical sense?

♥ How does this change by the middle of the story?

♥ What do they care about and value by the end of the story? Make sure this has changed.

Make them battle for their change and experience it internally from chapter to chapter. This is how we chart the character journey, which ideally should be tied to the theme of the book. It's not only about the protagonist's circumstances changing as the story evolves. She must change how she feels too. What we want to see is a gradual emotional awakening where our Heroine and Hero evolve from who they used to be before they met, and now they see and experience the world differently.

### 2. Know your protagonist and make sure they have a concrete, measurable external goal/need

A protagonist doesn't have to be 'nice' or overly likable but they do need to be interesting and relatable in some way. They can have a dark side, as long as we have a degree of empathy with how they got that way. Some starting questions you must know about your protagonist to ensure they are active and engaging through the novel are:

♥ What do they want?

♥ What do they fear?

♥ What are they willing to do to get what they want and avoid what they fear?

Give your Heroine a secret or a deep shame. Have her torn between conflicting core values on the book's pages. Maybe she wants to marry a soul mate but she is 35 and running out of time to have kids, which she wants just as much.

Should she settle for good enough so she can have a family? These kinds of questions are what make for emotionally powerful reading.

Consider the ghost that haunts her. Something from her past, her childhood even, something that has shaped the woman she is today. Even better, if you can tie this ghost to her core weakness – that trait which always gets her into trouble, that is the bane of her existence, the one thing holding her back from being the person she wants to be. If our Heroine hates confrontation and will do anything to avoid it, for example, then imagine how much more powerful this would be if this weakness is connected to a ghost where she had a massive fight with her brother on the same night, he was killed in a car crash? Somewhere in her psyche, she now connects confrontation with deep loss.

All of this will give you, the writer, a lot to work with in putting pressure on the Heroine so that she is compelled to change by the end of the novel.

### **3. Have a strong opponent who also has their own external need/ goal that conflicts with those of our protagonist**

In the romance genre, the antagonist is often the male lead or Hero, which gives writers the extra tricky job of how to create conflict and interest on the page with these two butting heads, while simultaneously lusting after each other.

It doesn't have to be the Hero as the main opponent; however, the adversary might be someone both the Hero and Heroine have to fight, or even another competitor for the affections of the man your Heroine wants. Whatever the case, in any novel, you have to write a strong antagonist for our protagonist. Everything you need to know about the Heroine, as mentioned above, you need to know about the antagonist.

There is also the fact that the secret of a successful romance novel is creating a male lead (Hero) who is sexy but flawed, takes action to get what he wants in the story, and reacts against the Heroine in a way that makes sense for his backstory and personality, but through all his highs and lows, the reader can't help but fall in love with him at the same time as your Heroine. He frustrates us as he does her. He compels us as he does her. We want what she wants. This is how you make us yearn for your Hero and that HEA.

### **4. Conflict and Stakes**

This must be at macro level in the story and at micro level in the scenes. The inciting incident and some key structural points of the novel, like the Midpoint (50% of the way into the book) and the Surrender (just before the Battle) must set up situations where your protagonist is forced to dig deep and make a life changing choice. Plot points like the protagonist facing her worst nightmare, amplify the pressure and force the character to make the kind of impossible choices that keeps us turning pages so we can see how they will cope and where they will go next.

Crafting an active protagonist is all about making sure they are contributing to the action and story at every level. Each scene should contain action that relates to the character's goals and conflicts; and emotion – to keep readers invested in the story. This means we need the protagonist to not only care about something, but TAKE ACTION to get it. This means giving her external goals that she believes will meet some deeper internal need. And this active solving of problems and seeking to satisfy goals must start at the opening. You can't save all conflict until after the 'inciting incident' or the 'meet cute'. We need to see our Heroine take action to solve her problems from page 1. Passive

characters who complain and ruminate and don't take action are boring as all hell.

Conflict is also distinct from stakes. We need both. In every scene.

Conflict can arise from any two characters having opposing interests, but what engages the reader is conflict where the Heroine has something to lose. Stakes are what happens if the protagonist doesn't reach their goal or if their fears eventuate in their reality. Stakes can be physical (they have a breakup and are now alone), emotional (they lose the man they love) or philosophical (they may never love again). Stakes imbue the protagonist with the fear and fear motivates them to take action. Stakes are also how we feel the tension in the book. We fear for our characters.

Writing characters with agency is a topic that can always be explored in greater depth, and it's impossible to separate it from other elements of writing, like scene craft, plotting, story structure, writing tension on the page, and infusing your story with deeper themes. I could go on and on, but I'm sure you all have places to be and I can't take over the whole issue of *Hearts Talk!*

The one message I'll leave you with is: write realistic characters we can root for, who all think they are the Hero of their story, and then have them do whatever it takes to get their happy ending. That will give you a strong start towards writing your own best seller and getting your own HEA.

♥ [Kelly Rigby](#) a freelance editor, creative consultant and writing coach passionate about helping writers tell their stories, find their style and polish their words. The writers Kelly has worked with have gone on to land publishing deals, be long-listed for the Richell Prize, win Varuna fellowships and RWA awards, and achieve success in independent publishing.